

IT DOESN'T MAKE ANY SENSE:” SELF AND STRATEGIES AMONG
COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents Paul and Caroline Arceneaux.

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There are several other people whose encouragement and support I would like to mention.

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ABSTRACT

Even though there has been increasing awareness of and accommodations for college students with learning disabilities, many of them still face various forms of stigmatization from instructors and peers. In this research project, I exam the ways in students with learning disabilities are stigmatized in academic and nonacademic settings, how they responded, or accounted, for their disability when questioned by others, and the strategies which they used to cope with problematic situations. This research is based on qualitative interviews of twenty-three college students with learning disabilities. Although the respondents viewed their learning disability as a minor issue, they did report problematic and embarrassing situations during their college career. Individuals with LD were concerned about the negative perceptions that others had of their LD label. To cope with stigmatization, college students with learning disabilities strategically performed tasks in order to minimize the negative reactions from peers and teachers. They also developed a series of accounts to neutralize the questions of their actions or their disability status.

For this dissertation, I use Goffman's concept of impression management and information control to examine how college students with learning disabilities strategically use the performance of reading, writing, and other tasks associated with learning to present a positive self-concept. This dissertation looks at college students who are successful in managing the stigma associated with LD. While other learning disability narratives emphasize the all-encompassing, this study focuses on how individuals with learning disabilities attempt to control the effects and the significance of LD in everyday life.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

“Okay, how do I need to write this so that this supports this statement. And if this statement is true, where does it say that? And how can I pull that together. And then you just start shifting through endless amounts of readings and so on. To pull it off so you can just go about supporting your argument. And then filling in. And then writing stuff that is blatantly and saying find this site. Find this information somewhere. And so some points I think that I am doing a needle-in-a-haystack approach. But at other times you can stop and just say you know what. I need to get something else in here. There’s an off-shoot that should be mentioned. And I’ll just put ... Run with something. And I’ll just slap it down. And I’ll re-read it. I’m like, “Wow, that reads really poorly.” That doesn’t make any sense. It makes sense to me because I know what I am talking about. But it is not going to make any sense to anyone else who is ever going to read this. It’s almost like it’s. When I do that it’s a lot like looking at footnotes. Not footnotes. Shorthand just to my brain that no one else can really read. For the big paper I’ve been working on. The first outline I had to turn in to my professor. I turned it in. And she handed it back. She’s like, “That’s not an outline. That’s not anything. It doesn’t make any sense.” I think it make perfect sense. I know exactly what that means. It’s.... you just want an outline that you understand. And that’s the outline I’m working with because it’s basically my notes to myself. (Second year law student with a learning disability)

John is a twenty-four-year-old second-year law student diagnosed with a learning disability. His troubles with learning started in elementary school and have been with him throughout his education. Although he was able to get an undergraduate degree and was accepted into law school, his struggles with writing papers and taking tests were always issues in school. But he was able to make it to law school. In law school, his problems with writing became more profound. After a year in law school he was at risk of “flunking out” because of the difficulty he had

taking long written exams. At the end of his first year he faced a crisis and the possibility of having to quit law school.

After receiving unsatisfactory marks during his first year, John was given a second chance. He was able to stay in law school for another year. He got tested for learning disabilities and was diagnosed with a type of attention deficit disorder. He had severe trouble focusing on written tasks or on other tasks where as he explains it, “my mind just blanks.” After getting tested, the law school gave him extra time on tests. John’s case is an example of how individuals with learning disabilities experience and cope with their academic problems in academic and non-academic settings.

Writing is a task that many people find difficult. Yet, when written material is presented to others there is an expectation that the text be polished. For some individuals the task of writing a text free from spelling, grammatical, or mechanical errors is a lot more difficult than others. A person with a learning disability can often find the routine tasks of reading, writing, and doing math difficult. Accompanying the difficulty of reading, writing, and math is the reception that one’s work receives. Simple mistakes can become sources of embarrassment and can become threatening to one’s self-concept (Stone and Gross 1964). Finding things to say, organizing the material, finding the right way to put things and dealing with stigma are common experiences with individuals with learning disabilities. Having a learning disability is one example of the personal troubles that individuals are at risk for in modern society.

Contemporary American society is marked with a whole host of personal troubles that plague the individual's health and well-being. Conditions that were unheard of a few years ago have become part of the popular lexicon. People are bombarded with information about possible problems with their body and mind. This information is accompanied with messages of hope usually in the form of drug advertisements or expert help. The labels of adult attention deficit disorder (Adult ADD) and social anxiety disorder (SAD) are two recent examples of a phenomenon referred to in the sociology of deviance as the medicalization of deviant behavior (Conrad 1976). These terms are more than just well-known problems but a means to mark one's self. Each one of these conditions has the potential to become the basis upon which the "sufferer" or "survivor" draws his or her identity and behavior.

In this dissertation, I will examine the lived experience of college students with learning disabilities. It examines how individuals with learning disabilities are confronted with difficulties when performing tasks that others considered to be "simple" or "easy." It looks at how college students successfully manage the stigma associated with being learning disabled. This dissertation also examines how individuals with LD tend to minimize the impact of the condition on their identity. While other studies and narratives of learning emphasize the all encompassing nature of LD and its stigma, many of the informants in this study claim that LD is limited in scope. For them, learning disabilities matter in only a few situations but not all.

Discovery of Learning Disabilities

The concept of learning disabilities was first “discovered” in the 1900s. Learning disability was originally assumed to be caused by a brain injury in early childhood. It was not until the 1960s that the concept of dyslexia attracted the attention of educators and parents (Carrier 1987). In the 1960s, the concept of learning disabilities gained popularity among middle-class parents as an explanation for learning difficulties among their children.

The first national legislation for the disabled was the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 forbade the discrimination of employment for individuals with disabilities in programs that received federal funding, including schools. The next major piece of federal legislation on disability was the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (P.L. 94-186). The name was later changed when it was re-authorized to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990. IDEA is credited with giving children with learning disabilities access to public education and allowing more individuals with disabilities to attend post-secondary schools (Vogel et al 1998; Trammell 2003).

One of the most important pieces of legislation for students with learning disabilities is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Under IDEA students with disabilities are entitled to a free education in the least restrictive environment. By least restrictive environment, the intention was to place children into the classroom with other students. The practice, called mainstreaming, was meant to give children equal access to education and to reduce the stigmatization of children with handicaps.

Individuals with learning disabilities increasingly are participating in postsecondary education. Vogel et al (1998) describe several factors that have allowed individuals with LD to attend college. The legislative landmarks of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, IDEA and the Americans with Disabilities Act have given individuals more access to public institutions. More information about programs offered by colleges is more readily available to help students with LD make decisions about attendance. There is also an increased awareness of LD among college faculty and administrators. Also, students with LD have greater aspirations and a belief that a college education is attainable.

Although learning disorders have official recognition, there is still controversy surrounding their origins and interventions. At the college level, the interventions in place to cope with learning disorders are of particular concern to some instructors, administrators and other students. In 1996, Boston University was sued for discrimination by several students under the Americans with Disabilities Act. Boston University had a new provost named Jon Westling who challenged the accommodations and the documentation of students who were participating in the learning disabilities program.

One of issues of the case was the right of a university to set academic standards versus the students' right to receive reasonable accommodations. Jon Westling, the provost of Boston University, gave a speech about a "Somnolent Samantha" a fictitious student who required several academic accommodations for examinations and note-taking and might fall asleep in class. The title of his speech was the "culture war" goes to school framing the issue in terms of a larger debate

about “political correctness,” the abuse of disability laws, and a threat to the university’s ability to set academic standards for students. The *Guckenberger* case became a cause for those who feared that the Americans with Disabilities Act and other disability polices were too broad in their reach (Shalit 1997). The criticisms of policies for students with learning disabilities were expressed by Sternberg in an editorial in the *New York Times*:

Image an educational system that subverted the goal of education—one that discouraged students from discovering their strengths and instead encouraged them to get ahead based on their weaknesses. When it comes to learning disabilities, that is what the American educational system has become.

The way federal law has been interpreted, students with certain diagnosed learning disabilities are legally entitled to take high-stakes standardized test without time limits and in enhanced environments that allow them, for example, food and drink or assistants to record their answers. They are entitled to extensive free tutoring in school, help with note-taking and explanations of test questions. (Sternberg 1997)

The quote above expresses the concern that including learning disabilities in with other disabilities will lead to numerous problems in enforcing academic standards in higher education and will lead students making unreasonable requests for accommodations.

The case of *Guckenberger v. Boston University* ended with the judge ruling that Boston University violated the Americans with Disabilities Act for requiring students with LD to be retested on a yearly basis. The judge in the case ruled that colleges have the right to set their own academic standards. The case demonstrates the difficulties in getting institutions of higher education to recognize the needs of students with learning disabilities.

The Educational System and Learning Disabilities

Learning disabilities are an important sub-field in the American educational system. While most of the attention on learning disabilities has been on children and adolescents, there has been a significant body of literature that focuses on how learning disabilities affect college students and adults. The number of students with learning disabilities (LD) enrolled in colleges and graduate school is increasing (Cottrell 2003). In a longitudinal study of college students with learning disabilities from 1985 to 1990, it was estimated that 2.2% to 8.8% of all students in higher education are learning disabled (Heiman and Precel 2003). The graduation rate of college students with LD is 3.6% compared to 62.1% for college students without LD (Heiman and Precel 2003). Adults with LD outside an educational setting also face many of the same difficulties with reading and writing in their workplace and home life (Murphy 1992).

Since the ability to understand and use language is an important part of life, difficulties in this area put a person at a significant disadvantage. In modern societies, written communication is an important aspect of everyday life. Although textual media are pervasive in society, some situations place greater importance on the ability to read, write, and calculate. Specifically, schools and office environments require competence in these areas. Failure in these areas can lead to sanctions that range from mild embarrassment to poor grades to dropping out of school. Any of these sanctions can threaten a person's social role and sense of self worth.

Being learning disabled can have a profound effect on an individual's life chances. A learning disability may not only cause problems with academic

performance, but may also create profound social and psychological problems for an individual. According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* the school dropout rate of adolescents with LD is 40% (1994). Research has also looked at the existence of a link between LD and juvenile delinquency. Children and adolescents with LD are more likely to suffer from poor self-image and increased anxiety than those without LD (APA 1994; Cohn 1998; Matthews 2003; Hewitt 1998). Students with LD feel especially negative about their ability in specific subject areas particularly those that require reading and writing (Hieman and Precel 2003).

The paradox of learning disabilities is that many successful and gifted people are dyslexic (Vespi and Yewchick 1992; Carrier 1983), and many of those will credit their dyslexia as a reason for their success. Many famous historical figures such as Winston Churchill and Albert Einstein are reported to have had a learning disability. In a 2002 article in *Fortune* magazine, several business leaders with LD such as Charles Schwab and Sir Richard Branson credit their business ability and creativity to their failure to perform in conventional ways (Morris 2002). Self-made millionaires are four times more likely to suffer from dyslexia than the general population according to a study by Tulip Financial Research (Gill 2003). Associations for the learning disabled feature celebrities or accomplished people as speakers (Goffman 1963) for the cause of dyslexia.

Learning disabilities are a collection of problems that interfere with an individual's ability to perform what is considered commonplace in a literate society. Learning disabilities are defined by the discrepancy between what one achieves and what one is expected to achieve given the person's intelligence, social background,

and personal history. Learning disabilities are labeled as both an educational and a medical problem by experts in the fields of neurology and educational psychology (Carrier 1987).

Individuals with LD find themselves forced to develop strategies for coping with the academic and social difficulties associated with the condition. All students, learning disabled or not, have a set of strategies they use to cope with the requirements of academic life (Albas and Albas 1984; Bernstein 1976). Learning is a situation in which individuals approach with an awareness of what is needed to succeed adequately. Individuals enter into learning situations with the knowledge of how to conduct themselves, make judgments on how much effort to put into their performance, and mostly likely have some sense of how well they did. For individuals with LD, the main difference is the anxiety the learning situation provokes. For students with LD, their awareness of their difficulties with comprehension, writing, paying attention, or memorizing may make them more aware of their own learning strategies than students without LD.

The difficulty one faces in situations will, of course, vary from person to person and place to place. An individual may not experience his or her learning disability and may not even have a set of strategies that specifically addresses their disability. Another individual may deliberately approach classes and studying with a set of coping strategies developed over time. In some cases an individual may try to resist a disabled identity and avoid the use of strategies or accommodations in order to blend with the crowd.

There are many different types of strategies students used in academic settings. Some strategies are more instrumental in that they focus on a particular goal. Most students develop their own set of strategies for studying, writing a paper, or taking an exam (Albas and Albas 1984). Students are also required to employ expressive strategies in their academic lives. Students often engage in impression management when in academic settings to convey a particular image, one that displays competence and/or intelligence but not too academic or overly conformist. Albas and Albas (1988) describe the social interactions and impression management techniques of students during the exam process. Students with learning disabilities also have to cope with the stigmatizing effects of their disability.

Sociological Studies of Learning Disabilities

Being learning disabled¹ is a problematic condition that has become common in American society and throughout the world. A “specific learning disability” includes many different conditions that interfere with one’s ability to learn. Dyslexia is one of the more well-known conditions. Other conditions such as attention deficit disorder (ADD) and attention deficit with hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are also types of learning disabilities. The American Psychological Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* defines a learning disorder as any condition that affects one’s perception, ability to read, write, or do calculations.

¹ In this dissertation, I will use the phrase “college student with learning disability” as opposed to learning disabled student because the former is considered the polite form. It is common to place the condition after the person in order to prevent the person from being defined only by the condition.

A learning disability is defined as a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations (Matthews 2003). Specific learning disabilities include perceptual disabilities, minimum brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia (Matthews 2003). In addition to specific learning disabilities, other conditions such as attention deficit disorder and hyperactivity are included in the realm of LD because of the impact they have on one's ability to learn. One criterion for the diagnosis of a specific learning disability is the discrepancy between intelligence and achievement. According to the discrepancy definition, a person with LD is one who has average to high intelligence but low achievement and without any external factors affecting one's ability to read, write, or calculate. Many call this the paradox of learning disabilities. This paradox is especially significant for specific learning disabilities such as dyslexia (Shaywitz 1998; Levison 1984;). The paradox of LD is that a person who is considered smart or bright but cannot do simple tasks such as read out loud without mistakes or spell words correctly. Teachers and parents view the student with LD as being lazy or defiant. Academic failure is seen as a character flaw in individuals with LD because of the lack of a readily apparent cause for the failure such as low intelligence or low socio-economic status.

Realist View of Learning Disabilities

A learning disability is considered a neurological disorder that affects one's ability to learn. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (DSM-IVR) defines a

learning disability as reading, writing skills, or mathematical ability to be substantially below what is expected given the person's chronological age, measured intelligence, and age-appropriate education (APA 2004). The disturbance in reading, writing skills, and mathematical ability significantly interferes with academic achievement or daily activities. The final diagnostic criteria for any of the learning disorders is that no other factors can be attributed to one's difficulties in reading, writing skills, or mathematical ability. The DSM-IVR is considered the "bible" of the medical and psychological community when diagnosing mental health problems.

The official definition of learning disabilities has been codified into law through the government committees and legislation. The definition of learning disabilities as defined by the United States Interagency Committee of Learning Disabilities is as follows:

Learning disabilities is a generic term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, reasoning, or mathematical abilities, or of social skills. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual and presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction. Even though a learning disability may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (e.g. sensory impairment, mental retardation, social and emotional disturbance), with socioenvironmental influences (e.g. cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction, psychogenic factors), and especially with attention deficit disorder, all of which may cause learning problems, a learning disability is not the direct result of those conditions or influences. (U.S. Interagency Committee of Learning Disabilities 1987)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 defines a learning disability as follows:

The term "specific learning disability" means those children who have a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may

manifest itself in imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The term does not include a learning problem which is primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbances, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

This definition of learning disabilities mirrors the pathological, or medical, model of disability. The pathological model of learning disabilities places the origin of learning problems within the individual. These definitions cite the causation for learning disabilities in “neurological” or “psychological” forces within the individual. An original phrase for learning disabilities was “minimal brain dysfunction” which emphasizes the problem within the individual and has realist assumptions behind it. These realist assumptions see learning disabilities as a “real” phenomenon that can be observed and measured by medical experts. Part of the realist assumption is that psychological and educational tests can be used to determine if someone has a learning disability or not. Another realist assumption is that learning disabilities occur in the brain. By locating the cause of learning disabilities in the brain, doctors and others can make claims about the nature of the disability. Another aspect of the realist assumptions regarding learning disabilities is the genetic origins of LD (Shaywitz 2004).

Another aspect of the medical model, or realist position, of learning disabilities is the persistent nature of the condition. A disability, as opposed to an acute illness, is typically conceptualized as a permanent condition that restricts one’s ability to perform an activity that is considered within the range of normal for human beings (Weitz 2004).

Once a person is dyslexic, he is dyslexic for life. Accordingly, there is no reason for college students to be retested once they have been diagnosed in childhood—unless there has been an extraordinary change in their symptoms or life circumstances. Not only is retesting not helpful but it may be harmful, placing unnecessary psychological and financial burdens on an already overwhelmed dyslexic student (Shaywitz 2004: 164)

Neurologist Sally Shaywitz points out that dyslexia is a condition that a person faces throughout his life time. Despite changes in one's academic career, the disability is still present.

Labeling of Learning Disabilities

One perspective on learning disabilities is the labeling approach that comes from the sub-field of the sociology of deviance. According to labeling theorists (Becker 1963; Kelly and Clarke 2003) deviance is not inherent in the act itself but stems from the reaction and definition of the situation by others. From the reactions of others the individual is pushed or engages in activities that confirm the suspension (Lemert 1951; Tannabum 1929).

The labeling perspective examines how individuals are labeled by agents of social control and others through a variety of means such as the bureaucratic processing of medicine (Goffman 1961), and the criminal justice and educational systems (Kelly 1984).

Labeling students with a learning disability has been examined previously. Riddick (2000) argues that the labeling of children with dyslexia is assumed to be bad and leads to negative experiences for children and adults. Individuals who felt that dyslexia was a negative trait were less likely to disclose information about their disability. Higgins et al (2002) created a stage model in the individual's acceptance

of a learning disability. Stage one is the recognition of differences in academic and non-academic situations. Stage two is the labeling event with the recognition of problems by others and the official diagnosis. Stages three and four are characterized by the negotiation of and resistance to the learning disability label. The final stage is characterized as the transformation of the learning disability label as a positive aspect of one's life.

The learning disability label can also be considered a positive label. The definition of a learning disability can be negotiated to construct a more positive image of a person. The diagnosis of a learning disability allows one to get the help one needs to become successful. Margolin (1993) examines the ways in which the label of "gifted" serves as a means of positive social control.

Learning Disabilities as a Social Problem

The issue of learning disabilities demonstrates one of the ongoing debates in the nature of a social problem. One perspective in the debate is the objectivist approach to social problems. The objectivist perspective approaches social problems from a set of realist assumptions. This approach assumes that there is a reality that can be perceived through the senses and the instruments of medical science. The constructionist approach of social problems places more emphasis on the work of human activity in the definition and understanding of a problem.

Previous studies of learning disabilities and attention deficit disorder focus on the constructionist approach in social problems literature. Under the constructionist approach individual problems become defined as medical problems. This is

commonly referred to as the medicalization of deviant behavior (Conrad 1976; Conrad and Schieder 1980). The medicalization thesis focuses on the historical path in which a condition falls under the control of medical experts. The individual has to seek the help of experts in order to cope with the problems associated with a troubled condition. In addition to giving advice on how to cope with the difficulties faced by individuals with learning disabilities, experts also give a person an understanding of the nature of LD.

Marxist Approaches to Learning Disabilities

Critical approaches to learning disabilities also examine the ways in which the problems of reading, writing, and math are constructed into a medical problem. Carrier (1987) argues that learning disabilities are a socially constructed category of school problems that are used to establish class boundaries. In the case of dyslexia, the original meaning of dyslexia was a result of a brain injury or slight dysfunction in brain activity referred to at the time as minimal brain dysfunction. Prior to the 1960s this category was used to diagnose school failure in minority and lower-class students. After the 1960s the concept of dyslexia changed and more middle-class parents embraced the category for their own children. Instead of having their children labeled as “failures” they were labeled with a disability. They were not unable to learn but required extra assistance to help them succeed in school. Class boundaries were established to keep children who failed academically in the middle class while also keeping out the poor and the children of ethnic minorities.

The Social Construction of Learning Disabilities

The social construction of learning disabilities is based on the idea of a deficit in the individual. The structural components of American schooling are based on individual merit (Dudley-Marling 2004) in which the person is measured in terms of his or her achievement. As an individual problem, learning disabilities are viewed as psychological or biological pathologies and need to be corrected under the control of medical authority. Under the medicalization of learning disabilities, the problems associated with LD are understood to originate in the individual's brain and individuals are believed to be treatable through medical knowledge. One of the issues with medicalization is that with the focus on the individual's physical problems there is a failure to attribute cause to social structure or social policy (Erchak and Rosenfeld 1989).

Conceptual entrepreneurs (Hewitt 1998) are professionals who promote an understanding of an issue in terms of their field of knowledge. Similar to Becker's moral entrepreneur (1963), the conceptual entrepreneur is engaged in claims-making activity about problematic conditions. The claims made by professionals in the field of learning disabilities focus on the biological (and neurological) foundations of the disability. Learning disabilities are caused by neurological processes that interfere with one's ability to perceive and to perform. Since the etiology of the disorder is neurological, the condition is considered to persist throughout one's life. Dyslexia and other disorders are commonly referred to as childhood problems but their effects persist into adulthood.

Learning disabilities are an example of what Conrad and Schiedner (1980) call the medicalization of deviant behavior. According to the medicalization thesis, behaviors or conditions that were once considered criminal or a bad habit are redefined into a medical problem. By defining a condition as a medical problem, people approach it in a specific manner. As a medical condition, the problem falls under the jurisdiction and control of medical authority. The creation of learning disability as a diagnostic label was also followed by the creation of its own helping profession.

The definition of learning disability is based on the clinical (medical) model of disability. The clinical model is based on a realist assumption in regards to the social world. This assumption views that the external world exists outside the individual's mind and can be perceived by individuals. The clinical model of LD exempts individuals from responsibility for school failure and other problems. In the quote below, a mother of a dyslexic daughter discusses the difference between viewing the LD as a neurological disorder rather than a psychological disorder.

When these dark moments of self-doubt come, there is one extremely important thing a mother should bear in mind, and it is this: learning disabilities are a *neurological* disorder, not a *psychological* disorder. In other words, LD is a biological condition. It cannot be because a mother didn't love her child enough time playing with her child. Some psychological issues such as low self-esteem may eventually arise as a result of the child having learning disabilities—but the psychological issues are not the cause. (Ford 2003, p. 39)

One of the themes of learning disabilities is the importance of personal learning strategies in coping with the difficulties associated with the disability. Learning disabilities are a condition to overcome in most cases. This plays into the

medicalization thesis in which the definition of the condition influences the consequences of the problem. In his work on hyperactivity Peter Conrad discusses the consequences of medicalization. One of the first aspects of medicalization is that the phenomenon becomes the aspect of expert control. Expert control means that only a few individuals with training and certification are allowed to diagnose and recommend a course of treatment. Specific learning disabilities are diagnosed with a series of tests administered by a clinical psychologist. For both of the research sites, documentation from state-certified psychologists were required in order to receive accommodations.

Another consequence of the medicalization of deviant behavior is that the problem falls under the jurisdiction of medical authority and medical social control. Medical authority has the ability and the wide approval among people to tell individuals what to do to solve their problem. Failure to follow medical social control can lead to further problems and further labeling such as being non-compliant or in denial. One of the issues with accommodations for learning disabilities at the college level is getting students with LD to seek out and accept accommodations. Many avoid getting accommodations because of the fear of stigmatization.

The consequence of the medicalization of deviant behavior is the individualization of social problems. In the case of learning disabilities, the cause of the problem is located in the individual's brain. Therefore, the focus is on correcting the individual rather than the academic environment.

Stigma

In addition to the literature on medicalization and social problems, the literature on social stigma also plays an important role in a discussion of learning disabilities. Stigma is described by Goffman as any characteristic of an individual that is discrediting in the eyes of others. Goffman (1963) states that stigma can be physical, character, or tribal (based on group membership). Link and Phelan (2001) conceptualize stigma as having four components. The first component of stigma is the recognition and labeling of human differences. Many aspects of human beings are unnoticed but a few become the focus of people's attention. The second component of stigma is the association of human difference with negative attributes. In the case of disability studies, being disabled is associated with deficiency and loss of potential, which needs correcting. The third component of stigma is the separation of different persons from the rest of the population into an "us" and "them" structure. The final component is the treatment that stigmatized individuals experience in terms of status loss and discrimination.

The notion of agency is an issue in the discussion of stigma. Human agency is the capability of individuals to make their way in the social world despite external forces. For stigma, the idea is that the conditions and negative treatment are imposed on the person and he or she is passive in the situation. Goffman (1963) talks about how the discreditable person engages in numerous attempts at "information control" in order to prevent stigmatization. Controlling possible damaging information about one's self is a means in which to protect one's self from sanctions, discrimination,

and ridicule. Studies on stigma have discovered a variety of techniques in which individuals can manipulate information about themselves to their advantage.

For individuals with learning disabilities, the issue of stigma and stigma management has been studied only on a limited basis. Murphy (1991) describes some of the ways in which individuals cope with learning disabilities. Passing is a common stigma management strategy that has been described in the literature on students with LD.

Many stigma management strategies are individualistic. The conceptualization of the problems associated with LD is one that is rooted in the individual's inability or failure to meet social expectations (Dudley-Marling 2004). The cause of the problem is based on an individual's biology, psychology, or actions rather than the social context in which the problem is perceived. The stigma management strategies of passing or covering focus on how the individual is perceived to be or has been perceived in the past. The individual manipulates his or her behavior and appearance to conform to what others expect. Correcting one's problems, or at least giving the appearance that one is correcting the problem, gives the rationale for the strategy. These stigma management strategies focus on how an individual copes according to his or her own personal interests and stake in a situation.

In contrast to the individualistic strategies, another set of strategies are used to cope with stigma. These stigma management strategies turn the focus away from the discredited person and towards another. Instead of hiding or covering discrediting information, the person embraces it as something worthy. The transformation of

viewing a condition as stigmatizing to viewing it as good happens through collective action and by the acceptance of a collective identity. Numerous social movements have advocated this approach to understanding and dealing with problems such as the gay and lesbian movement, people with disabilities (Anspach 1979) people with AIDS (Sandstrom 1990), deaf culture (Lane 1994) and the fat pride movement (Martin 2000). These types of stigma management strategies stress the importance of disclosing information and embracing information about one's identity. "Coming out of the closet" is viewed as an important step in the process. Not only do individuals disclose information about their discrediting characteristic; they redefine the characteristic as something positive and work to get others to accept that definition as well. An example of this strategy is to "bust the myths" regarding the condition. For example, advocates for people with mental illness challenge the myth that most individuals with mental illness are potentially violent. Another aspect of identity embracement is the notion that the stigmatizing condition gives one a special mission in life. Sandstrom described the educational and political work of gay men with AIDS as a response to their diagnosis (Sandstrom 1990). In the sociology of deviance literature the acceptance of a spoiled identity and challenge of social norms against the category are an example of tertiary deviation. These activities are aspects of identity politics (Anspach 1979).

There have been many studies on the process and responses to stigma. A few studies have examined the stigmatization of students with learning disabilities (Murphy 1991; Riddick 2000; Troiano 2003). These studies approach learning disabilities from a psychological perspective. They also assume that individuals with

learning disabilities experience LD through a stage-like model in which individuals reject and then accept the diagnosis of LD.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research project is to examine how individuals with learning disabilities develop and maintain a sense of self and a repertoire of strategies to cope with the problems they face in their daily lives. Persons with learning disabilities have difficulty performing tasks such as reading, writing, and spelling that persons without learning disabilities are able to do with ease and feel confident doing. The difficulty that individuals with LD face can lead to a number of psychosocial problems such as anxiety or low self-esteem (Cohn 1998). These emotional responses to LD become more intense and immediate for persons with LD in situations that require performing certain tasks. For a student, reading, writing, spelling, and other tasks are specific social norms of the student role.

This research project focuses on how individuals with LD create a self-concept. There are many alternatives available in the ways in which individuals use LD as an identity marker. Some people may stress LD as a central aspect of their identity affecting how they do and feel about things. On the other hand, individuals can choose to ignore the presence of a learning disability or deny that it has much of an affect on them. For this dissertation, I will examine how individuals make sense of their experiences with LD and how they use this LD identity to cope with problematic situations.

In this dissertation, I will use Goffman's dramaturgical perspective in the analysis of students with learning disabilities. This type of analysis differs from other

discussions of students with LD in that these studies focused more on the psychological consequences of LD and stigma. In this dissertation, I focus less on the psychological consequences of the LD and more on the interactional aspects of individuals with LD. Individuals with LD have a number of issues regarding psychological well-being and self-esteem, and many of these problems are the result of the social stigma that individuals with LD experience when they make mistakes in front of others.

Goffman's social theory is important in understanding students with LD in that they are in an interactional situation in which they are engaged in impression management. They have to impress upon their audience that they are competent members of society who can perform the way others expect them to. Their disability at times interferes with smooth interaction with other people. Making mistakes in writing, reading, speaking, or math are problems that many people, learning disabled or not, experience from time to time.

Theoretical Approach

The theoretical approach for this research project comes out of the symbolic interactionist tradition in sociology. The central themes of symbolic interaction focus on the meaning of social action and the intentionality of social actors within a specific social context (Hewitt 1997). The construction of learning disabilities brings one to focus on the actor, the context, and how the actor confronts problematic situations.

For this research project, I approach the concept of self as both a situated object and a biographical object (Hewitt 1997). As individuals enter situations they have to adapt to certain expectations. Students are required to perform certain tasks

and are expected to do so in a competent manner. In a classroom setting, a person engages in role-taking (Hewitt 1994) in terms of being a student. However, students with LD who have past experiences with failure and stigma enter into the situation with a personal history and personal identity. Although a person takes on the role of student, the success in the student role is challenged by his or her disability identity. The individual enters the classroom situation with a larger sense of what can happen because of his or her past experiences.

The use of vocabularies of motive (Mills 1949), disclaimers (Hewitt and Stokes 1977), aligning actions (Stokes and Hewitt 1976), accounts (Murphy 2003; Scott and Lyman 1969) and justifications and excuses (Scott and Lyman 1969) are the various ways in which individuals cope with problematic situations that threaten their personal identity. Erving Goffman (1971) also discusses the concept of remedial work as a way to protect the self during social interactions. These give the individual a means to understand the self and to interpret his or her actions. The troubling or problematic condition of an individual can become the focus of an individual's personal story and an anchor for his or her personal identity.

For the individual with LD the discrepancy between intelligence and performance presents a number of problems. Being learning disabled, they may be told that they are smart and/or have special talents, but their experiences in the classroom negate those images. But the experiences in the classroom become the dominant source for creating a sense of self. Many individuals with LD create a positive self-concept by stressing the "gifts" that LD gives them (Schmitt 1998; Mooney and Coles 2000). Yet another course for individuals with learning

disabilities is to deny the presence of a disability or to try to minimize its effects on them.

Persons with learning disabilities may develop their own interpretation of learning disabilities and use it to create a positive self-concept. Many individuals with problematic or troubled identities may view their situation in positive terms (Sandstrom 1990) or see positive outcomes from having a stigmatizing or troubling condition (Herman and Miall 1990).

Symbolic interactionists emphasize the importance of identity and definition of the situation as an impetus for action (Hewitt 1997). The motivation of an individual is rooted in social settings (Mills 1949; Hewitt 1997) and reflects its normative order. For students, depending upon their own identity allegiances, performing a basic task such as reading and spelling are expected. Identities that give individuals opportunity to gain some type of reward (such as academic success or positive image to other people) become more prominent than other identities an individual might have (McCall and Simmons 1978).

Symbolic interactionists also stress the importance of other actors within a situation as important in the construction of identity and the course of action. For individuals with LD teachers, parents, educational specialists, peers, and doctors have input into the ways individuals with LD develop a self-concept and use coping strategies. Becoming LD is itself a product of social interaction between the student, parents and educational authorities. The use of coping strategies can be altered by who is present when they are used.

Individuals when faced with problematic situations create coping strategies that help deal with the risks embedded in the situation. In the school setting, both students with and without learning disabilities regularly confront problematic situations throughout the course of their student careers. One such problematic situation is the exam (Albas and Albas 1984). Exams are used to test a person's knowledge and ability to perform in a limited period of time.

When confronted with a problematic situation, individuals can adopt a number of strategies to manage the way they present themselves to others (Anspach 1996; Sandstrom 1990; Siegel, Lune and Meyer 2003). There is a wide variety of stigma management strategies available to individuals with LD. One common way of managing a stigma is to "pass as normal" by hiding evidence of the discrediting trait (Sandstrom, 1990; Schneider and Conrad, 1996). *The Pretenders* (Guyer, 1997) and *Faking It* (Lee and Jackson, 1992) are titles of books about successful students with LD. The significance of these titles is that most people with LD feel their personal identity does not match with their social identity. Specifically, the self they present to others is somehow unauthentic and they are undeserving of their success. This can be easily accomplished with LD in non-academic aspects of one's life. However, this specific type of stigma management strategy may not be an option when the student is asked to perform a task such as reading aloud or handing in written work in a class or job situation.

In summary, with other types of problematic conditions, persons with LD face a number of situations that cause trouble for their self-concept. Persons with LD develop accounts to help explain their experiences and the actions they take. Like

other types of troubled identities, individuals with LD find ways to minimize the difficulties with their disability. These coping strategies are one part of the identity formation of persons with LD. The narrative of the self becomes a way of prescribing and describing the ways in which the individual manages the disability and the stigma associated with it.

The self-conception (Turner 1968; Gecas 1982; Rosenberg 1979; Weigert and Gecas 2003; Zurcher 1977) is the individual's sense of a continuous, unitary view of personhood. The self-image is the identity that individuals impose on a person in various situations. Individuals have numerous identities in which they possess in various situations. Social identity typically refers to the group membership that individuals have. Social identities, according to Goffman (1963), are ones that are imposed on individuals by having them placed into categories by others. Personal identity are the unique characteristics that set a person apart from others. Instead of being lumped into a group category, the individual's personal history and identifiers are viewed as important means to construct one's identity. "The picture which the individual sees at a given moment, like the photograph that records one's appearance at an instant of time, will be called a self-image. The picture that carries with it the sense of 'the real me' – 'I-myself as I really am' – will be called the self-conception." (Turner 1968: 94)

When an individual develops a self-concept, he or she is working with a set of personal goals and values that function as an ideal person he or she wishes to be seen as. But the self-concept that is formed by the person's experiences and actions oftentimes comes into conflict or spoils his or her ideal image.

“Each person’s self-conception is a selective working compromise between his ideals and the images forced upon him by his imperfect behavior in actual behavior.” (Turner 1968: 94)

The self-concept is described as the compromise between the ideal image and a person’s real behavior. Turner mentions that the self is “that object which is held responsible and assigned credit.” (p. 100) But the individual pursues the best image of him or her self to maintain a positive self-concept (Snow and Anderson 1986). For individuals with LD, this compromise between a positive, ideal image and the negative images is an important aspect of the LD experience.

Plan of Dissertation

In Chapter 2, a description of the method and data used in the study is given. For this dissertation, I conducted a qualitative study of college students with learning disabilities. In this chapter I will explain the data and the selection of data that was used for my analysis.

In Chapter 3, the interactional problems of students with LD are discussed. There are many problems that individuals with LD face when interacting with other people. Problems arise when the mistakes are made in the performance of what others consider as routine, simple tasks. In society, there are norms governing the actions of others and standards by which to evaluate the performance of these norms. In this section, I examine how the problems that individuals with LD face are in many ways violations of norms related to literacy.

The stigmatization process of people with LD and the stigma management strategies are discussed in Chapter 4. The stigmatization of persons with LD is unique for many reasons in that it is considered a private or hidden problem. In response to stigma, persons with LD engage in a number of stigma management strategies that attempt to minimize its effects. Stigma management strategies among individuals with LD vary.

In chapter 5, aligning actions and quasi-theories used by individuals with LD are examined. In some situations, a person with a learning disability is required to give explanations for his or her actions. Yet, although, dyslexia, attention deficit disorder, and other learning disabilities have become more commonly known, they are still met with skepticism among some, even in educational settings. These explanations give meaning to one's experiences and actions and work to block or suspend the negative reactions of people who doubt their problems.

In Chapter 6, the strategies of students with learning disabilities are discussed. Academic coping strategies are ways in which individuals with LD become successful students. These coping strategies vary from student to student. Some students are very conscious of their studying skills and school work, while other students are more lackadaisical in their approach to studying.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODS AND DATA

The methodological approach for this research project is makes use of qualitative research techniques (Cresswell 1998; Glassner and Hertz 1999). This approach is useful in the examination of life stories and the ways in which individuals construct meaning out of their experiences. Strauss and Corbin (1990) describe the foundations of grounded theory as the discovery of theory and meaning of social action.

Other qualitative studies have examined the role of problematic situations, the effect they have on one's sense of self, and the techniques individuals adopt to cope with these problems. Charmez's (1991) work on chronic illness and the self is one example. Snow and Anderson's (1993) study focuses on the survival strategies of homeless men for both their physical needs and also their need to protect their self-concept. Schneider and Conrad (1983) examine the experience of and stigma management of people with epilepsy. What these studies have in common is on the ways in which a problematic situation interrupts or threatens one's ability to maintain a positive self-concept. As a result of these disruptions individuals are faced with a variety of ways to cope with them.

For this research project I examined the ways in which college students and young adults cope with their learning disability within their everyday setting. The rationale for limiting this study to college students and young adults is based on convenience as well as theoretical and substantive interest. College students are

more likely to have been officially diagnosed than younger students or people who are outside an academic setting.

Also, college students and young adults are in a transitional period in their lives (Karp, Holmstrom and Gray 1998). The transition from home to college gives students and young adults more opportunity to negotiate their identity. New college students are allowed to experiment with new identities or emphasize established identities. Adler and Adler (1991) describe the multiple roles that college athletes juggle in their academic careers eventually focusing on the dominate role of athlete. The issue of negotiating among multiple social roles is common for other college students as well.

College students and young adults with LD are more likely to have had recent experiences with LD. College students and young adults are in academic and social situations that require the use of learning strategies. College students are required to take courses that have heavy reading and writing requirements. They have to adjust to new workloads and different sets of expectations than they were use to in high school. Young adults with LD entering the workforce may not be comfortable with their new setting or may not want to disclose their disability to their new employer. These situations may require the individual to pay closer attention to what he or she is doing. They may have to learn different coping strategies for dealing with new expectations and obligations.

Starting the Research Process

Theoretical sensitivity (Strauss and Corbin 1990) allows experiences in the social world to inform the research process. There are numerous sources that researchers use to guide the research project.

One of the issues with conducting social research is what gets a researcher interested in the topic. Lofland and Lofland (1990) discuss how many social science researchers conduct research on problems that are close to their life experiences. My interest in the topic is partially based on my own experiences with dyslexia. I was diagnosed with dyslexia as a young child and did not really know about the diagnosis until later. My mother, who is a neurologist, was active in getting me diagnosed and deciding what type of schooling was appropriate for me. I had trouble with writing and reading and was placed in special classes and received extra tutoring. But when I attended college, accommodations for students with LD were not as prevalent as they are today. I did not use the services for students with LD when I attended college because the accommodations services for students with LD were not in place at that institution.

Another issue in the discovery of a research problem is the previous literature on the subject. The previous literature on learning disabilities is limited to the fields of education and neurology. There have been a few autobiographical accounts of learning disabilities. These autobiographies of learning disabilities are useful in helping to create boundaries for the research. Strauss and Corbin (1990) claim that one of the ways in which social research is formulated is through previous written information about the subject. In this research project I read a number of

autobiographical accounts of individuals with learning disabilities and specialists who work with learning disabilities. Many of these autobiographical accounts follow a familiar narrative in which the person experiences a series of troubles with learning, struggles with diagnosis and schooling, and finally discovers compensation skills that allows him or her to achieve success.

Description of Sites

For this research project students at two four-year universities were interviewed about their experiences with learning and the ways in which they coped with the academic setting. The respondents were recruited through word of mouth, mass e-mail solicitation, and flyers. The respondents ranged from 19 years of age to 40 years of age. There were a range of diagnoses among the respondents. The types of learning disability diagnoses were dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, attention deficit disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and hand-eye coordination problems. One of the issues in the interview is that some of the respondents used terms such as “problems with reading comprehension” or “problems with written expression,” rather than specific terms such a dyslexia.

In addition, three specialists in learning disabilities were also interviewed. The information they provided was complementary to the data provided by the students with LD. They gave a more global perspective on the issue of learning disabilities and the requirements of getting a college education. The LD specialists were very informative in describing the general requirements the university has for students with LD.

In my original research proposal, the intention was to focus on individuals with learning disabilities as the unit of analysis. The analysis done is on the micro-level. The reason for interviewing individuals at two different sites was simply to increase the number of participants in the study. Of course, the organization of services and the institutional culture of each site should have significant influences on the experience of learning disability. For this dissertation the focus is on the individuals' experiences of LD rather than the organization of the two different schools.

Site One: State University

The first site is a large state university of approximately 27,000 students. The university is the flagship university of the state. The university has several colleges and an active student life. State University is located in a town of 100,000 people in a Midwestern state.

The State University provides accommodations for students with learning disabilities through its Disability Office. The Disability Office provides services for students with physical disabilities, psychological problems, as well as learning disabilities. The Office is located in the main student center on campus. During the semester, the Disability Office is busy with students coming and going picking up tests and dropping them off.

The Office was rearranged during the study. There was no longer a receptionist on staff. So instead of a receptionist's desk, a row of computers and a television with a VCR and DVD player was installed. On the wall was a series of

framed posters with inspirational sayings: “Goals”, “Success”, “Determination”, “Vision”, “Focus”, and “Competition.” On an opposite wall, framed posters describing the official procedures for testing accommodations were displayed. Farther in the office was a series of mailboxes for students to pick up notes and other material.

The Office provides a number of accommodations for students with learning disabilities and attention deficit disorder. These include classroom accommodations such as notetakers, lab assistants, readers, specialized equipment, reduced semester course loads, course substitutions, adaptive computing equipment, and alternative formatting of texts. There are also testing accommodations, which are the most frequently used set of accommodations. Testing accommodations include time extension, quiet testing rooms, readers, scribes, and adaptive equipment. Time extension can be up to time and half double or triple time to take an exam. The Office also provides other support services such as weekly individual meetings, time management skills, study skills, learning style enhancement, reading comprehension development, and social counseling related to the individual’s disability.

The Disability Office does not test students for a disability. It does check the documentation of test results. According to its guidelines, appropriate documentation includes the following items: qualifications of the evaluator, recent documentation, comprehensiveness of the evaluation, and a rationale supporting the need for accommodations. Many students enter college with the documentation from their secondary school. For students who enter college without documentation,

the Disability Office refers them to a place on campus for testing at a cost to the student or to a certified testing service.

The staff of the Disability Office includes a director, a specialist in charge of documentation, a staff member to arrange tests, and a specialist to help students with academic and social counseling specifically for students with learning disabilities. At the time of the interview, she was attempting to establish a support group for students with LD at State University. The support group was not established at the time the study was done. There was a lack of active student involvement with the Disability Office at State University compared to the disability office at the other college.

The respondents at State University had a range of disabilities. There was also diversity in the age and location of diagnosis. Some of the respondents were diagnosed at an early age. Other students were diagnosed after entering college and are still adjusting to the diagnosis. They were also more talkative during the interview. They were able to elaborate on questions more without much prompting from the interviewer.

Site Two: Private College

The second site is a small liberal arts college founded in the 1850s. Its enrollment is approximately 800 students. The college is located in a small community of 12,000 in a Midwestern state. Private College has many historic buildings and has developed a reputation for bringing world leaders to speak at its campus.

Learning disabilities are managed through its Learning Disabilities Office.

The school established an office specifically for learning disabilities in 1974. Many of the students cited the LD program as the reason for attending the College. In its literature the program is described as follows:

Accepted and integrated into College, the Learning Disabilities Program provides comprehensive, personalized academic support services combined with a rigorous liberal arts curriculum. The program is small but comprehensive: students in the program comprise no more than 5% of the total student body, allowing experienced program staff to provide a wide array of services tailored to individual needs.

The LD office is located in the basement of one of the older buildings on campus. There is a small waiting room with a couple of chairs and a small table. The walls are bare except for one art exhibition poster. There are a number of rooms in the office for students to study, write papers, and take tests. Unlike the Disability Office at State University, many students hang out to do homework and receive help with papers and other assignments. The atmosphere of the office was casual. The staff members and the students were on a first name basis. Staff members related to each other in an informal manner. Staff members appeared to keep good memory of students and their upcoming tests and appointments.

The services that are provided by the LD office are regularly scheduled individual appointments with staff, professor liaison and advocacy services, comprehensive alternative examination arrangements, audio cassette tapes or textbooks, note-taking arrangements, academic advising, specialized computer accommodations for reading and writing, and a special class in English composition, reading strategies, and study skills.

The relationship between staff members and students was more “hands on” at Private College than at State University. Students met with the director of the LD office frequently to edit papers or to get organized. During the observations, the director was engaged with the students, reminding them of upcoming tests and assignments. At State University students did not use the Disability Office to work on day-to-day school tasks.

Sampling

The sampling was done through a convenience sampling technique. Identifying participants for the study was restricted on the basis of being diagnosed with a learning disability and enrolled in college. The collection of data on individuals with learning disabilities can be a challenge. Since LD is an invisible disability, the researcher has to rely on an individual’s willingness to disclose personal information. Individuals may have a learning disability and may not know that they have one. Also, college students with LD are able to hide or distance themselves from their learning disability. Hartman-Hall and Haaga (2002) report that only a minority of students with learning disabilities seek the help of academic services.

I ended up with a sample of twenty-three students with learning disabilities. Seven of the respondents were female. Sixteen of the respondents were male. The ages of the respondents ranged from 19 to 40. The mean age of respondents was 20.

Most of the respondents majored in the arts and sciences. The majors of the respondents included history, pre-nursing, political science, sociology, marketing,

broadcast journalism, advertising, business administration, biology, social work, and anthropology. Two of the respondents were in professional schools. One was a second-year law student and the other was a first-year vet school student. One of the limitations of the sample is that there were no participants who were in the “hard” sciences such as chemistry or engineering.

The diagnoses of the respondents covered a range of specific learning disabilities. Some of the specific learning disabilities include dyslexia, dysgraphia, test anxiety, problems with eye-hand coordination, problems with sequential order, problems with reading, problems with written expression, auditory problems, attention deficit disorder, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Many of the participants in the study had more than one specific learning disability. It is common for individuals with dyslexia (problems with reading) to also have problems with written expression as well.

In addition to interviewing college students with LD, I also interviewed staff members who work with students with disabilities. The purpose of interviewing staff members was to gain a sense of the larger population of students they work with and some of the issues the organization of learning disability in the university setting. Staff members are familiar with the experiences of a broad range of individuals with learning disabilities. Another benefit of interviewing staff members was developing theoretical sensitivity (Corbin and Strauss 1990).

The interviews lasted between thirty minutes to two hours. Four of the respondents interviewed twice. The responses in the interviews varied greatly. Many of the respondents spoke at length about their experiences and thoughts about

being learning disabled. Other respondents kept their answers short and did not elaborate on the questions. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. Some of the respondents spoke in an eloquent manner. Other respondents spoke in starts and stops, had awkward pauses, and filled spaces with “like,” “you know,” and “I don’t know.” I kept these in the interview transcripts as much as possible. I think that it gives the reader a sense of the effects of learning disabilities and the variation among the respondents.

Informants were recruited with the help of the staff of each of the LD programs. The method for recruiting volunteers was through word of mouth, flyers, and a mass e-mail message. Most of the respondents from State University responded to the mass e-mail message. Two of the respondents from State University were recruited by the flyers. Many seemed eager to participate in the study. One respondent commented on how participating in the research study might be helpful to others. Also, some were eager to help because their major was either sociology or social work.

Recruitment at Private College was done with the help of the LD director. He asked students if they would participate in the study. Many who had the time to be interviewed between classes agreed to participate. All of the respondents from Private College were male. It was traditionally a male institution but is co-ed now.

Many of the students at Private College attended the college specifically for its learning disabilities program. Most respondents I spoke to were diagnosed at an early age and attended elementary and high schools that specialized in helping students with LD. At State University students attended public school within the

state. Financial reasons were given for attending State University rather than specific programs.

Documentation/ Diagnosis of Learning Disability

Finding students with learning disabilities to interview posed a number of challenges. Since a learning disability is considered to be a “hidden” or “private” disability, I had to rely on the individual’s willingness to be interviewed. Another problem with finding participants is that a learning disability is a medical disorder with a set of criteria that has to be diagnosed by an expert.

In order to receive accommodations for each of the sites, the student needed to provide documentation of a learning disorder. There is a series of tests that an individual takes in order to be considered learning disabled. The first test is an intelligence test. The standard tests that both sites accept are the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale-Revised (WAIS-R), the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Third Edition (WISC-III) and the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale: Fourth Edition (SD:FE).

In addition to the intelligence, or aptitude, test, a student needs to provide an achievement test as well. Achievement tests include the Woodcock Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery Revised Tests of Achievement and Nelson-Denny Reading Test, Woodcock Reading Mastery Tests-Revised, and the Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement.

The third is a battery of tests for information processing which finds the problems in the specific areas of information processing short-term and long-term

memory, sequential memory, auditory and visual perception and processing, processing speed, and motor ability.

In order to receive accommodations the diagnosis must be recent. For attention deficit disorder the diagnosis must have been completed in the past five years for State University. Many students get tested in high school and carry the documentation to their college.

The Interviews

For this research project, I conducted qualitative interviews (Babbie 1992; Cresswell 1998; Weiss 1996;) with individuals with a specific learning disability and the people who work with individuals with learning disabilities. The tentative goal was to interview approximately 20 to 30 individuals with learning disabilities who are attending a postsecondary institution or have recently graduated. The final sample was 23 students with learning disabilities and two individuals who work with students with disabilities.

The interviews were conducted from November 2004 through July 2005. Interviews for this research study were conducted in an office on a university campus. The office is shared with another graduate student, but there were no interruptions during the interviews. The office is set up with two large desks, bookshelves, chairs, and a filing cabinet. The chairs for the interviews were placed facing each other with a tape recorder placed conspicuously on the desk. The interviewees appeared to find the set up comfortable. The door to the office was closed to provide additional privacy for the interview.

Interviews at Private College were conducted in a waiting room of the Learning Disabilities Office. The waiting room was a more public space to conduct the interviews than my office on campus. The waiting room was a small space with people occasionally walking through. There were no distractions or other apparent obstacles to interviewing participants. Interviewees were able to talk about their experiences with no apparent discomfort that other people might overhear.

The interviews began with me discussing the purpose of the study and handing out a written consent form. Respondents signed and allowed me to record the interviews. None of the respondents had objections to being tape recorded. The interviews usually began with a discussion of their age, major and class level and a brief description of the respondent's specific learning disorder. There were a number of core questions that were asked of the respondents. (See appendix for a full list of questions.) One theme of the questions was experiences of stigma by the respondents. Another set of questions was on the strategies that individuals with LD use to cope with stigmatization. Respondents were also asked about how they develop strategies to cope with academic problems.

After the first set of interviews, I used a modified version of the "Who am I?" Twenty Statement Test (Kuhn and MacPartland 1955). This technique was suggested by Dr. Peter Hall as a means to explore issues of self-identity. This technique was used by another study of identity issues (Bullock 2002). Instead of twenty statements, I lowered the number of questions to ten in order to save time. Many of the respondents found it difficult to come up with ten answers. Later on in

the interviews I would ask the participant about his or her answers as a way to examine how LD was an identity characteristic for them.

One of the purposes for including this in the interviews was to discuss how important or unimportant their learning disability was to their personal identity. Only one of the respondents that I did this exercise with wrote having a learning disability as one of the responses. During the interviews I would ask them about their responses to the twenty statements test and why they did not write learning disabilities as a response. Since most of the respondents did not consider learning disability as a salient identity, I asked them how they felt their learning disability affected the items on the list.

The other set of questions focused on the coping strategies individuals with learning disabilities use. The purpose of this set of questions is to discover how individuals create or adopt strategies and how they evaluate their academic strategies. Which strategies are successful and which are not? Where and how did the person develop his or her strategy? How do these coping strategies relate to their sense of being a student as well as other aspects of their self-concept?

The origins of the strategies and practices that the individual employs in different situations were also considered. Learning strategies are a major theme in the literature on learning disabilities. This theme is apparent by the numerous advice books and guides for coping with LD written for students, parents, and teachers. But the theme of strategies is significant in the biographies of individuals with LD. What are the mechanisms that help an individual adopt and maintain his or her own group of strategies to manage his or her learning disability? How does coping with LD

differ from others who are not diagnosed with LD who have troubles with reading and writing?

In addition to interviewing college students with learning disabilities I interviewed staff personnel who worked with students with disabilities. These interviews were done to get a better sense of the procedures used at the institution for students with learning disabilities. It was also a way to get a broader picture of the issues facing students with learning disabilities. For instance, many college students with learning disabilities do not accept the accommodations entitled them thinking that they will be able to succeed without them. Also, many students wish to distance themselves from the label of disability by avoiding disabilities services. Since this study was limited to self-selected participants, staff members were used as a source to get a picture of some of the problems that other college students with LD experience.

In addition to interviews, autobiographical monographs were also used in this analysis. Like many other problematic conditions, individuals with LD have recounted their experiences with schooling. These texts describe the experiences of individuals with LD and how they overcame the condition. Being published accounts of learning disabilities, the successful student with LD was the dominant theme in them. Also, many of these autobiographical accounts represent the experiences of LD in the twenty to thirty years ago when the concept of dyslexia and attention deficit disorder were considered relatively new. Many of these autobiographical accounts mirrored some of the issues that were brought up in the interviews.

The transcribed interviews were analyzed using NU*DIST 6 Software. Each interview was read for emergent themes in the data. In grounded theory one codes

data first with open coding where in one categorizes data a few key into rudimentary categories. The analysis was done with a number of sociological concepts in mind. Several concepts were based on the concepts that were used to describe other forms of problematic situations such as homelessness (Snow and Anderson 1987) and shyness (Scott 2004).

Once the data was collected and transcribed, the documents were analyzed using QSR Nudist 6 Student Edition Software. This software allows the researcher to code and analyze data. The software is helpful in maintaining a large amount of qualitative data. When analyzing qualitative data, the researcher can build theme and concepts around the quotes of the responses. I found myself finding some quotes helpful in discussing concepts of stigma and the accounts that students with LD used in describing their LD.

The analysis was done similar to the grounded theory approach proposed by Charmez (1993; 2000). Charmez refers to the constructionist grounded theory approach in which the meanings created by the interview subjects are examined. In this research, I examined the meaning that individuals with LD constructed. The focus of the analysis was on the stories that individuals with LD told about their experiences with stigma and coping with problematic situations.

CHAPTER THREE

SOCIAL IDENTITIES AND INTERACTIONS

In this chapter I discuss the social interactions between individuals with learning disabilities and peers, instructors, and parents. Unlike other disabilities, learning disabilities are usually hidden from others; however, situations occur when the individual commits literacy or performance norm violations. These violations threaten one's sense of being a competent member of a performance team.

Common knowledge of learning disabilities has increased over the years due to public awareness campaigns and news stories related to learning disabilities. Awareness of learning disabilities, especially attention deficit and related disorders, has increased with the proliferation of direct-to-consumer advertising of psychopharmaceuticals (Chananie 2005).

The increased awareness of LD and usage of medications also has brought a countermovement critical of the concept of LD and its various interventions. Moral entrepreneurs argue against the prescription of Ritalin to children. For example, film star Tom Cruise spoke out against the use of psychoactive drugs and claimed that psychiatry is a pseudo-science on the *Today Show*. School districts and others are worried over Ritalin abuse and Ritalin drug trade among their students.

Yeah. There was some guy that my therapist told me about. One of his patients just joked about it in class. And he... Like the city or state or whatever was like taking him under because someone was like, "Hey someone is selling medication at school." It's like a... considered a class one drug or something. That's something really bad. (English major)

The respondent above talked about how he disliked medication because he did not want to be called down to the nurse's office and become known as an "ADD" kid. His school required that medications including ADD medications be dispensed in the nurse's office to avoid students selling the drugs to other students.

Learning Disabilities as an Invisible Disability

One of the issues with learning disabilities such as dyslexia is that they are considered to be a "hidden disability" or "invisible disability." Unlike other types of disabilities, learning disabilities are not immediately apparent to others. The lack of visible signs creates a situation in which an individual's performance does not match the identity that one presents. One respondent describes her feelings about the difficulty with having a learning disability.

Well, what I mean by invisible disability. A lot of people know what that feels like. Somebody with lupus has an invisible disability even if they are in pain a lot of the time. People can't understand why they might collect disability for it. They don't understand that even though you can't see it. It is very painful. It is the same thing with a learning disability. If I were more obvious, say blind, and walked around with a stick, people would completely understand why I might need help researching in the library. But when I walk up to the librarian and say I need help because, they look at me like I am crazy. "There's nothing wrong with you. Go back and do that on this computer. Do it by yourself." And so that's what I am talking about. When a disability is not visible, it's the opposite problem of when you have a visible disability. People with a visible disability, it makes them crazy when people, you know, go overboard trying to help with things they can do themselves. That makes them mad. And I understand why. But by the same token when somebody can't see that you have a disability, they act like you don't have one at all. I've had even professors react this way. "You are not getting anything in this class that anybody else doesn't get." And they are determined that that's the way it is going to be. Because they can't see it. And because I perform well, they don't believe it. You know. They don't see me sitting and reading for eight or nine hours a day as opposed to three or four with some of the other students. You see what I mean. So, you know. It's the same frustration. (Social work senior)

An individual with LD is able in most situations to perform without any problems. At other times, the individual may show signs of his or her disability in their interactions with others. These signs or markers are an important step in the process of stigmatization of individuals with learning disabilities. Learning disabilities are not perceived in the way that physical disabilities are. Persons demonstrate their disabilities through performance of written, spoken, or other literacy-related tasks. At other times, problematic performance is not necessary for the process of stigmatization of individuals with LD. Since LD is a function of the brain, many respondents can keep the markers of their disability hidden. But individuals with LD are diagnosed and labeled with LD so that they are pressured into telling others. Instead of visual confirmation of an identity, an individual with LD is a concealed carrier of a label.

In addition to the characterization of dyslexia as a hidden disability, learning disabilities have also been characterized as a paradox. The discrepancy definition of learning disabilities focuses on the high intelligence of individuals with LD and the low academic achievement. One of the paradoxical aspects of learning disabilities is that individuals with LD are considered highly intelligent and have a high level of curiosity, but they may appear to be unengaged or defiant when it comes to class work.

Learning Disabilities and the Performance of Literacy

Individuals with learning disabilities have trouble with the performance of competence norms. Literacy norm is a term I use to describe the difficulties that

students with learning disabilities have in the social arena. Norms govern behavior. Compliance or violation of norms prescribes a social status on a person. Other sociologists have described the violation of certain norms. McLorg and Tuab (1985) describe the importance of the violation of appearance norms in the formation of an anorexic or bulimic identity. In later work they describe the affects of the violation of appearance norms in the formation of identity of women with physical disabilities. Hochschild (1975; 1982) describes the importance of emotion work and the emotion rules that govern different occasions. For this research project I will use the concept of competence norms to describe the types of rules that govern the daily activities of individuals in an academic setting. However, competence norms go beyond the academic setting. Competence norms govern the interactions of individuals in most settings especially in a modern society. Violations of these norms have an important consequence in the status of the individual. Violations of competence norms may cause the individual to be labeled as stupid, under stress, or suffering from a learning disorder.

What is a literacy norm? In this research project, competence norms are conceptualized as a lapse of performance. In society, individuals are expected to perform at a certain level. Failure to perform at such a level can lead to the discrediting of the individual. Literacy performance includes reading, writing, calculating, spelling, speaking, or listening. Learning disabilities cover a vast array of performance problems. Specific learning disabilities focus on the singular nature of learning problems. Dyslexia focuses on reading. Dyscalculia focuses on the

problems of mathematics and calculation. The concept of learning disabilities covers problems with paying attention as well.

Learning disorders are conceptualized in the medical and psychological literature as the disconnection between performance and the ability of the individual. Individuals with LD are expected to perform at a high level because of their intelligence and social background. However, it is the problem with performance that creates the problematic nature of learning disabilities. Individuals with attention deficit disorder and individuals with attention deficit with hyperactivity disorder have a different set of problems than individuals with dyslexia, yet they are still categorized as having a learning disorder. Also, many individuals with dyslexia or a learning disability are also dually diagnosed with an attention deficit disorder.

I call these actions competence norms in that they are like other norms but the focus of the expectation is on performing to one's ability. Intelligence is a psychological term that focuses on ability or aptitude. For literacy performance norms I examine the actions and practices of individuals that allow them to appear "literate." Intelligence is a trait that is difficult to measure. One usually relies on the scores on IQ tests to measure intelligence. Literacy is more specific in that performance of reading, writing, and math are ways to measure, or to observe, it. A successful performance makes one seem intelligent, crafty, well-read, and/or competent. Violations of a performance have the ability to threaten one's image as a college student.

The worst is especially when I get tired. My ability to spell and think coherently. I mean that is normal for everyone. But like I forgot how to spell "and." I was just like ... He was like a genius. How do you spell "and?" He

makes fun of that still. I deserve that. You should be able to spell “and” if you’re above first grade. (sociology senior)

In the quote above, the respondent talks about his inability to spell simple words when he gets tired. The problem for college students with LD is that they experience problems performing simple tasks that are considered routine by individuals in their status group.

Social Identity of Learning Disability

What is the social identity of being learning disabled? Goffman (1963) distinguishes between social identity and personal identity. Social identity is a category that individuals are placed into by others. A personal identity is a set of characteristics that identifies a person uniquely. Learning disabilities, like other disabilities, have a number of stereotypes surrounding them. Some of these stereotypes are negative while other stereotypes have the appearance of being positive.

The social identity of being LD builds on the official definition of learning disability by medical and educational literatures. The official definition of learning disabilities states that an individual has significant underachievement (or difficulty) in the areas of reading, writing skills, and mathematical ability. In most cases, underachievement is associated with negative connotations such as laziness or stupidity. This characterization was very prominent in the concerns of the respondents. Respondents who were diagnosed at an early age talked about experiences with skeptical teachers who questioned their diagnosis and made comments about “just trying harder” in class. Individuals who were newly diagnosed

with a learning disability worried about failing out of college or that their previous success was somehow “fake.”

The negative characteristics of learning disabilities include low achievement, problems with developing social skills and relationships, and low self-esteem. Being learning disabled is a condition that puts children and young adults at risk. Such labeling can lead to further problems in educational settings (Bowditch 1993; Kelly 1982). For many years, researchers have discussed a possible link between learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency.

There are many negative stereotypes of persons with learning disabilities. One stereotype of students with LD is that they are “lazy.”

The learning disabled individual is a paradox, doing some things very well and others poorly. He has an average or above-average intelligence. He is not retarded, with a below-average IQ. He has no observable differences from anyone else, and that is why learning disabilities have so often been called the hidden handicap. Yet he is often ridiculed for things he cannot do. For him, as my assistant once said, “Lazy is a four-letter word.” (p 3)

Lazy is one of the most common stereotypes of students with learning disabilities.

Other stereotypes that threaten the identity of students with learning disabilities include the questioning of the reality of the concept of learning disabilities or criticisms of the accommodations for students with learning disabilities (Coles 1987; Rao 2000; Christenson, Gerber and Everhart 1986).

In contrast to the negative impact of learning disabilities on an individual, others have pointed out positive aspects with learning disabilities (Riddick 2000). Positive role models and speakers are commonly pointed out in the literature of learning disabilities. Many successful people credit their dyslexia as the reason for their achievements. Also, advocates for the learning disabled prefer to describe

dyslexia and other specific learning disabilities as differences in learning styles rather than disability. Many of the respondents discussed how their disability was an “obstacle” rather than a more serious problem. The significance of defining their experiences as an obstacle was that their goals and interests were going to be met. Their LD was not going to prevent them from doing what they wanted to do.

The Competent Other

In the symbolic interactionist tradition, the self is a central concept. The self emerges in a process of interaction with the other (Mead 1934). Individuals see their self as the reflection of how they think that others see them (Cooley 1922).

Individuals with dyslexia can make spontaneous, impulsive, uncontrollable outbursts or lapses in performance. The “me” is the individual’s reflection of these actions and images.

Learning disabilities are characterized by the problems in academic performance. Individuals with LD notice how they are different from others by the mistakes they make in their performance. I will refer to the non-LD person in the interaction as the competent other (Scott 2004). The competent other is the person who is able to perform literary tasks without any problems and is the standard by which the person with LD compares him or herself to. In situations with the competent other, the person realizes his or her disability. Mistakes in performance are called out by the competent other. Although in many situations, mistakes in performance are overlooked by other members of the performance team to keep the

action going. Mistakes in reading, writing, math, or speaking are pointed out and become a source of embarrassment for an individual.

Emotionally I crumbled at every failure. Trying to read in front of the class was excruciatingly embarrassing. Being sent to the blackboard to write out my words was a death experience. What sense of worth I had, or any respect from my schoolmates was destroyed over and over again. To stand out in the classroom as the isolated and designated idiot. (Schmitt 1994: 19)

In this section, I will describe the social interactions between the individual with LD and the competent other. The competent other (Scott 2004) is the generalized image of fellow actors as being able to successfully perform literary tasks without mistakes. The concept of the “competent other” is borrowed from Scott’s (2004) work on social interaction between the shy and non-shy social actors. In social interactions, the shy individual imagines him/herself as socially inept from the perspective of a person who is well-equipped for social interaction.

For individuals with learning disabilities the social interaction with others brings out the sense of being different. In social interactions, individuals communicate with one another through the use of language and gestures. Mistakes in performance call attention to one’s learning disability. Any individual who violates performance norms risks the possibility of becoming labeled deviant. Individuals who violate emotion rules run the risk of being labeled mentally ill (Thotis 1985). Persons who violate the norms of casual social intercourse run the risk of being labeled shy (Scott 2004). Stutterers violate the norms of speaking. Although individuals are allowed some leeway in their performance in most situations, frequent violations of performance norms may result in stigmatization – being labeled as not very intelligent. The nature of the violation can lead to

stigmatization. If one fails to perform a literacy task that is regarded as relatively simple, such as the misspelling of a frequently used word or a mistake in simple arithmetic, he or she also runs the risk of negative reactions from others. Another way a violation in performance norms can lead to stigmatization is if the mistake is glaringly obvious to other people. For example, rarely used words or punctuation may not alert others to a problem, but mistaking “their” for “there” can.

Identity Dilemmas and Tensions of College Life

Identity dilemmas are problems in which an individual’s preferred identity is challenged by negative or threatening identities that are increasingly taking over his or her life. Identity dilemmas result from the loss of valued attributes, social roles, physical decline, or problematic situations. Charmez (1994) conceptualizes identity dilemmas of chronically ill men in a set of oppositions: risky activity versus forced passivity; independence versus dependence; domination versus subordination. Individuals faced with identity dilemmas are faced with trying to preserve or recapture what they feel their true self to be or acknowledging their new identity.

One of the components of a college student’s identity is age. When an individual achieves a certain age they are expected to be able to do basic tasks. Minor problems with spelling or reading can become sources of stigmatization when linked to a person’s age. Mistakes made by young children can be explained away as the product of inexperience, but when they happen to a young adult the problems lead to embarrassment.

I think I learned to spell my middle name probably when I was seventeen or eighteen. I finally got that one down. And that's just a little embarrassing. You know, when there are simple tasks. You know, basic multiplication tables. When you don't know that by the time you are twenty-two and everyone else does pretty much, yeah it's a little embarrassing. (sophomore social work)

Learning basic skills, mechanics, or the proper usage of a word later than other students is one of the identity dilemmas for students with LD. One assumes that an adult will know how to spell his or her name without any trouble. Another respondent reported how his dyslexia affected him by saying, "It's so bad. I learned how to use a semicolon just recently." The age in which one is able to master a skill becomes a way to evaluate one's self as a person. Gross and Stone (1964) list a number of sources that conflict with one's social role that create embarrassment. Individuals with LD exhibit what Gross and Stone (1964) refer to as an inappropriate identity and a disturbance in the assumptions that a person makes about the other in situations. For some of the respondents the LD identity was a source of embarrassment, but the mistakes in grammar, spelling, and math were a source of embarrassment in that it disturbed the assumptions that one has for college students.

For college students, a learning disability can be an identity that challenges other more valued identities. As college students, the person is in a transitional period of life creating a number of tensions for the individual (Holmstrom, Karp, and Gray 2002). One of the goals of college students is to make the transition into adulthood. This means that individuals become independent and more individualistic. College students also have to have the appearance of competence and self-confidence. Self-confidence in one's ability is valued over a person who seems timid or unsure of him or herself. These are valued attributes in a student identity.

Having a learning disability can be a barrier or a disruption in this identity formation. Students with LD are reported to have lower self-esteem, shyness, and other psycho-social problems that challenge the general identity of college students. The problems associated with learning disabilities are a threat to the preferred identity that college students attempt to achieve and create a set of identity dilemmas for the individual. The identity dilemmas for students with LD include the following oppositions: competent versus mistakes; self-confidence versus self-doubt in one's ability. Holmstrom, Karp, and Gray (2002) pointed out that there are a number of tensions that college students grapple with in their transition in college. One is the transition of place in which the individual seeks to become more mobile. Another tension is one of management of everyday living in which the individual transforms from being managed to becoming a managing self. The final tension is between dependence versus attached individuation.

One of the dilemmas facing students with learning disabilities is whether or not to use accommodations. Accommodations are seen as useful for many of the respondents, but there are some situations in which the accommodations are seen as not necessary and many of the respondents forgo them. But the use of accommodations is pushed by the parents in college, not just in elementary and high school.

My mom was always the make sure you get it. I mean, you have something on paper. Get it because you can use it. I mean, it's an advantage in a way that you can use it. But then my dad I always talked about it to him. "Dad I'm not using it. I am using it less." I don't need it as much. And I mentioned it to my mom but she, at the beginning of the semester, she always says, "As soon as you realize you need it, mention it. Because don't wait. The longer you wait it just becomes more of a problem." But I think as time goes on, I

am always more willing to say to my dad, “I am using it less.” (anthropology sophomore)

For the anthropology student quoted above, she talks about the tension between being managed by parents and independence. In this case the mother is the main advocate of the accommodations and the LD label.

Another identity dilemma for individuals with LD is the experience of being placed in both “special education” and “gifted” or “honors” classes simultaneously.

I know the classes I don't enjoy: math and things like that. And science are definitely related to the disability. I have so much trouble not in necessarily understanding but in proving that I understand. I am actually really good at math when I can get the equation straight. I can work through it in my head. No problem. Get it done. Same with science. English I am usually really good at it if I have an editor. I was actually... one of the things was I was in honors English in high school even though my disability really, really affected it. Actually I started in remedial English and had fought to get out of there. And went straight from remedial to honors. And that was just kind of fun for me. (social work sophomore)

Another respondent in broadcast journalism talked about his early childhood experiences with being diagnosed as both learning disabled and gifted. His problem was that he preferred the latter label alone.

If you scored highly, you would continue to take tests to get into the gifted program. And so, I think would be tested in second grade. Scored high in some parts and low on some parts. That's kind of how that went. Diverge from there. The public school district the gifted program is called Triple E. They also have a program that was Triple T which was for gifted students with LD. There are probably twenty to thirty districts at the time. Maybe forty. That's what I did starting I believe in third and fourth grade was that program.

I was sent to the program. Actually the gifted center the public schools (????). Went there I believe a year and a half. There were some of my friends did the normal gifted program which met on a Wednesday. An all day thing I believe. This was a Friday afternoon program the Triple T program. I was kind of (???) elementary school even didn't want to be different. And so I lobbied to get into the only and I did switch to the (????) in the fourth grade

and did the gifted only section the Triple E section. (junior in broadcast journalism)

In each of the cases, the students themselves resisted the labeling and placement in the remedial or the program for the learning disabled. Both claimed to have worked to get their parents into getting them placed in more desirable programs. The “Ugly Duckling” aspect of learning disabilities is a dominant theme in the stories of individuals with LD. The Ugly Duckling is a story by Hans Christian Anderson in which an ugly duckling emerges into a beautiful swan. This metaphor applies to persons with LD in that their earlier struggles with learning are transformed into highly valued traits. In the literature on LD, many famous historical figures are used as examples of persons who struggled with learning as children but then became great thinkers. Albert Einstein and Winston Churchill are two examples that are frequently used.

Standardized tests are another way in which students with LD can be confronted with an identity dilemma. The vast majority of college students take the SAT or the ACT as part of the admission process.

And this is the thing that always confused me. I’m really bad at math. I mean I can do it. But the amount of effort proportionate to the outcome is small. That’s why I always do bad in math. I mean I just took the GRE and was the worst section. I got terrible, terrible score. So and yeah and I guess that’s what it really comes down to math and grammar. Like on the ACT I got a 19 on the grammar section compared to a 31 in scientific reasoning and 34 in social and stuff. Yeah. (sociology senior)

Conditions beyond one’s control can have a profound impact on one’s identity Charmez (1994) examines how chronic illness in men threatens their gender identity by introducing a set of dilemmas. These “identity dilemmas” emerge from the loss of

valued attributes and social roles associated with being male. Scott (2004) also explores the dilemmas faced by shy persons in social interactions. Shy persons want to engage in social interaction but fear appearing socially incompetent in the eyes of others. A learning disability presents a similar set of dilemmas for individuals.

For a college student with a learning disability, an identity dilemma comes from the social expectation that a college student has the ability and the achievement necessary to be in college but frequently fails to perform according to that expectation. Although individuals with LD talk about passing as normal in many interactions with other people, there are times when talking to others creates problems. Most of the problems interacting with others come from the mistakes made in the performance of competence norms. Some problems also arise in the everyday conversations that do not go as smoothly as one would like. The following passage is from an e-mail that one of the respondents sent after an interview. The spelling and typos are in the original text.

In conversations (and papers) I often leave out important concepts or details, sometimes to the extent that I say things that at first seem to be out of the blue. Like I may be talking to a friend about cloning. Cloning might make me think of sheep, which might make me think of science of the lambs and I'll say something like "Anthony Hopkins was really good in that movie." (this thought process is usually very fast) It's not usually that drastic. More often I'll say something relevant to the situation like I might say "...and if that happens, it could present serious health risks." without explaining what "that" is. (e-mail follow up from a social work sophomore)

R: There are sometimes I would be talking. I am normally a pretty good communicator and sometimes I will be talking and just random gibberish will come out. And people will "what?" Yeah. And I when I told when I am driving down the road and I am looking at a billboard and say it out loud. And the person next to me says that's not what it says. (political science sophomore)

Talk was not viewed as a problem by most of the respondents and was cited as a way to avoid stigmatization. But at other times their talk can be viewed as problematic especially when one mispronounces a word or says something that is “out of the blue.” Seeing words or letters that are not there or drawing connections that appear to be non sequitur are one of the ways in which individuals with LD experience problems and they become a source of embarrassment.

Even though individuals with LD experience problems during talk, it is the problems with reading and writing that create problems in their interactions with other people.

Some of the friends that I have on campus when they first met me. You know. I got the “I don’t see anything wrong.” I don’t see it. Until they started working like in group papers. You know how in college you always get a lot of group work. Once I started work in groups certain people, you know, I would work with a group. And the first time I turned anything that hadn’t been proofread, they got it right then and there because they are like what is this Martian we are getting from you. There’s letters transposed all over the place. And I’m like yeah. You know. And so they and so with friends and yeah I would get that a lot when I first met them. But after they worked with me a while, some of them have known me long enough that they can kind of translate what I am writing. So it’s okay. (social work senior)

In the case above, the respondent talks about how her identity as a college student comes under threat when her writing difficulties are on display. She does not experience problems with her speaking ability. It is when her writing does not match the image others have of her that her LD identity emerges.

One of the ways in which an individual’s learning disability is disclosed to others is through the notification about his or her learning accommodations. At both sites, notification was done by having the student hand a letter of reference to the instructor. This happens at the beginning of the semester. But sometimes the student

waits until a test or a major assignment approaches. This process is typically regarded as routine for both the student and the instructor. Sometimes the situation becomes problematic as illustrated below:

The extent of that is that you get letters from the disability services to give to the professors that I will be filling out these forms to take tests. Most professors I have encountered have seen this before have been here long enough to have these forms. There is not a lot of conversation about that. Last semester, I had an English professor. It was a major authors class-- Langston Hughes, Mark Twain, Douglas. "What is this? I don't understand. You are one of my best students?" Yeah. Again you know it doesn't mean I can't do the work. It just means I probably put a lot more effort into than the rest of your students do. So yeah, I probably am. So that was hard for him to understand. Once I explained you know during reading takes more time for me. Clarity of thought I don't know the exact words I used. "You are doing all right." Good. You know, "You are one of my better students" Okay. Still good. But I think he hadn't encounter that disorder like that. (journalism sophomore)

For this respondent the encounter is marked by the instructor's image of him as "one of his best students" being questioned by being learning disabled. In the end the student had to describe symptoms of his disability to the instructor.

Although persons with LD face people who do not fully understand what being dyslexic is like, sometimes they encounter individuals with an understanding of dyslexia. Usually, these persons have relatives or close friends with a learning disability, and so they are more sympathetic to the individual's problems. Goffman's concept of the "wise" person is exemplified in the description below:

I don't like being dishonest (whispers). I have a real hard time with it. You know. I was actually caught once by an employer that I was applying for a job. And it was the only time in my life that they went ahead and gave me the job when they found out because my resume was just horrible. I hadn't been able to get it to anybody to look at it. And it was really bad. But this particular man really understood because he had had a son who had a learning disability that was more severe than mine. So he went ahead and gave me the job. And in fact he was the one that encouraged me to take my first college

class. (social work senior)

She was able to find a job with a dentist who was knowledgeable about dyslexia and was willing to help her out with a job. The “wise” also gave her the encouragement to attend college.

And my professor after all was said and done was like, “Why weren’t you prepared? Your arguments were there but you didn’t flush them out very well. And you weren’t ready with anything else. Why is that?” And I’m like, “It takes me a long time to write stuff. And I was only given this at the last minute. And that’s why I could send it to you by ten o’clock at night because it takes me longer than two hours to write something. And if that’s the case, you are not going to get it that night. In which case, I’m sorry you are not going to see it. But I showed up early so that people could see it. At the same time I stayed there late, not that I could figure stuff out and I had it, I just wasn’t given any notice other than. You like gave twelve hours notice and said come up with something. This is what I came up with. I’m sorry it wasn’t up to your expectations.” She’s like, “Why is that? Aren’t you together?” I’m like, “Well, I have a learning disability, thank you very much.” At which point she’s, everyone’s like oh. And there everything gets awkward. And she’s like, “Well, I’m sorry.” It just what it is. It’s just that. You have to give more time if you want better product. And expecting to be able to just whip something up. Because I am not magic. Maybe some people are, and you worked with those people and you can expect these things. I’m not that person. And I cannot be. So we need to come up with an alternate plan. At this point we got into a lengthy discussion about what sort of alternatives are there. How do you go about doing this? Because my kids all have ADD. And all have learning disabilities. So we came up tried and true plans for how to deal with this. So she was really eager to help. The problem was that it didn’t matter. It was just one of things where all I am say is I know, I have planned. I could have adapt. I couldn’t have gotten this far in life if it had not been the fact that I had some sort of basic strategy for getting myself through this. You just have to understand and not think that I am the magic leprechaun that cleans everything up in the end. (Second year law student)

Academic life is filled with situations in which the individual’s self concept comes into account. It is either confirmed in a positive way or it is subject to disrepute. Albas and Albas (1984) focus on the exam as an intense moment in the student career in which much attention and energy is placed. The exam is a

significant movement in which the student's sense of identity as a student and as a performer in a social role is judged as failure or a success. The exam situation becomes a focus for students in their organization of their everyday activity. Even students who do not actively participate in classroom activity see the exam as an important event and show up to take it.

Although the exam is a significant occasion in the student's career, one's academic career is also marked by other types of occasions as well. These events can be seen in the same light as the examination process. Such activities as the completion, submission, and return of writing assignments, or the oral participation in a classroom discussion can have the same impact on an individual's sense of his or her success or failure as a college student. Students can employ the same coping strategies to deal with the academic events can be both instrumental and expressive. Instrumental strategies are ones that are used to deal with the immediate tasks that one faces in a situation. Tasks such as writing a paper or reading a textbook frequently require a method that the person has used in the past and has deemed it successful. The other set of strategies that individuals use are related to the protection of their identity. These strategies are used in situations in which the individual is threatened with stigmatization.

For students with learning disabilities these occasions have a number of possible threats to their self-concept. Students in academic situations use various ways to cope with these threats to their self-concept. These strategies are discussed further in chapters 4 and 6.

The interactions between individuals with LD and their peers, teachers, and parents have significantly affected the way they perceive themselves. Many individuals with LD face difficulty dealing with the negative social identity of learning disabilities that people hold. Difficulties also arise when individuals with LD compare themselves to others.

When comparing themselves to other students, many of the respondents spoke about the amount of time it took them to complete tasks. The respondents reported that they had to spend a lot more time to write a paper, to read a book, or to take a test compared to students without LD:

I think because there is just no point. Because I know from other people the amount of time that I put into studying is usually two times what other people put in. And I mean that is for me just a fact just from living with different people in college and whatnot. So I mean it's, I mean I think a test can only tell so much of what the professor is asking compared to how much time you put into doing it. A grade can only tell so much anyway. (history junior)

The respondent above claimed that he studied twice as long as other students. The amount of time that an individual spends on studying or writing is usually a way to evaluate them as a student. Spending long hours studying is a characteristic of hard working students or cutthroat students (Conrad 1986). On the other hand, individuals who can read or write quickly are associated with being highly intelligent. Most of the respondents compared themselves to the “average” student. They did not spend all their time studying. They pointed out how they made time for leisure and extracurricular activities. It was only in terms of specific activities, especially writing and test-taking, that respondents saw themselves as different from other students.

One of the aspects with learning disabilities is how it affects the social relationships among peers. In many cases children with learning disabilities face severe stigmatization because of their disability. As adults many individuals with LD recall their experiences in childhood as traumatic. Most of the respondents did not see their learning disability as a stigmatizing condition in the same way that other conditions are stigmatizing such as a criminal record or a life threatening disease. The issue of learning disabilities does not come as a part of social interaction as much as a more visible condition. Instead learning disabilities are a minor stigma. Even though it is a minor stigma, there are still problems that surface during social interactions that threaten the identity of individuals with LD.

In another case, a student reported the difficulty of performing a learning activity in a math class.

But I certainly avoid situations where I have to do any kind of math. I usually refer back to... this is like, I'm like really like this very deep my math issues. It goes back to I think third grade when our teacher had a... put our name on a little space ship and she put them all on top of the classroom. And there's was like each planet was one like one, two, three, four, five. And when we did these math tests, there were these timed multiplication tests, and you do everything times one. Like every number was one times one, two times one, blah, blah, blah. And you finish all the tests and you get to move on to the next planet. And so in front of the class, like every time you had a test, like the next day you get move forward. And I ended up getting to fives, Like five times five, blah, blah, blah. When I had to do six times. Six times two. Blah, blah, blah. I never got past. I never went to six. I was always stuck at five. So and like everybody went through this whole thing. And my little space ship was still stuck on like.... I don't know, and I was like, "I don't get why you would do this?" Like even when I was in fifth grade or third grade, I was like that's rude. Nobody wants to hear.... I mean I look at it now and it's like, "You can't post people's grades." (journalism senior)

The everyday interactions are more difficult to for some of the respondents to recognize. Some of the respondents, at first, claimed that their LD was “no big deal” or that they really don’t see themselves as being stigmatized.

But like I said earlier people don’t know if I have a disability unless I tell them. But sometimes once people find out I feel like they treat me differently. Like sometimes if somebody like knows that sometimes I trouble read or like I have trouble paying attention or something like that. I feel like they really slow down for me. And I don’t need that. I don’t need somebody to slow down unless I like, “Hey can you repeat that.” It’s usually just because I wasn’t listening not because I’m not capable of understanding what they are saying. And so I kind of identify with them a little bit on that level because I do know what it is like to be treated a little bit differently because you have a disability. So I try to not treat them like they have a disability. You know, I try to not be like “Oh, you can’t see. Let me do this for you.” You know. Because I don’t want anybody feel uncomfortable. (secondary education sophomore)

Writing is one of the ways in which individuals present themselves. In many ways one’s written work is an extension of one’s self and people gain an impression of the individual through their written work. For individuals with learning disabilities, especially dyslexia and dysgraphia, writing can be the moment in which their disability is disclosed to others.

That’s going to take a lot of revision which I can’t do. I have to get someone else to do. I will usually... you know... I will send it to my sister because she is an editor. I like to let people read my writing useless it’s a very final one cause.. I just feel like all... I don’t they’ll look at me like “What are you thinking” cause it makes no sense when I first write. It rambles in areas. It just doesn’t flow. And then I will read it myself. The first thing is I’ll type and read it myself. And it makes no sense and I have to re-word it. And it takes hours to re-word it. Then I will finally just make the (???) And I still won’t show anybody until the final product. And maybe until I get a grade cause I just feel so.... Like it makes sense. It really does. And when people that ask me questions like “What are you talking about here?” I can answer it. And then I realize you have to write it. I don’t understand that people don’t automatically assume certain things. (anthropology sophomore)

Poor writing is often interpreted by the other as one's lack of intelligence, lack of effort, or carelessness. The social role of the other will influence the sanctions of writing mistakes.

Writing papers is just really hard a lot of times. I'll be like on a third draft of a paper and then the teacher will say it's really good but it seems like it's a first draft. So like I have an editor. I usually get praise for content. But technique is... or grammar what not just not.

In this situation the commentary by the teacher questions the effort put forth by the student. The work appears to the other as a first draft even though the student revised the paper. This quote also reflects the experiences of other respondents when it comes to writing papers.

For students with LD, large writing projects for coursework is one of the sources of anxiety. Informal types of writing are also seen as problematic as well. In the quote below is an example of the problems with informal everyday writing to friends. An anthropology sophomore describes her trouble with spelling.

R: I love to write little notes to people. But I will go over and over. Like I will spend a few time and even when I am finally done I still think I might.... Like the last two cards I made for my boyfriend, I spelled major words wrong. And I am just like... I don't understand... Like spelled Vatenine's Day instead of Valentine's Day. Didn't know that... When I am making a card I really want to...Because I make them a lot. And so I didn't even catch it. I'm like I'll read the card I made. It had two major.. it two words out of the whole sentence and made it no sense and I spelled a word completely wrong. And I was trying to use a ... I had in the note just like a saying or something. And the saying was off by a word. Just so many things were wrong. And he was just like, "Oh, it happens." And I do it all the time. (anthropology sophomore)

In contemporary society, interaction between individuals is increasingly becoming mediated through the pervasiveness of e-mails, chat rooms, and the Internet. For individuals with LD, these forms of communication present a number of problems.

In the age of the Internet written communication occurs at a rapid pace. An individual can shoot off an e-mail with little time spent on proofing or editing. Not being able to correct mistakes leaves one open to stigmatization.

Relationships with Peers

One of the aspects of learning disabilities is how it affects the social relationships among peers. In many cases children with learning disabilities face severe stigmatization because of their disability. As adults many individuals with LD recall their experiences in childhood as traumatic. Most of the respondents did not see their learning disability as a stigmatizing condition in the same way that other conditions are stigmatizing such as a criminal record or a life threatening disease. The issue of learning disabilities does not become a part of social interaction as much a more visible conditions. Instead learning disabilities are a minor stigma. Even though it is a minor stigma, there are still problems that surface during social interactions that threaten the identity of individuals with LD.

In the example below the respondent reported that he had a hard time relating to students because of the differences in intelligence and social ability.

So that's kind of the difficulties I face. When I was younger had a hard time relating to other students. Other people my age whenever we did... Because on the one hand intellectually I was on a far different level than on the other hand socially I was on –you know- a level of ineptitude. The klutz of the class if you will. So that was a rather isolating experience. I guess that's enough background information. (political science senior)

For this student, his disability affected far more than academic tasks. His disability also affected his social interactions with his peers. His case was one of the more severe cases of learning disabilities in that he was also affected by depression.

Difficulty in forming social relationships is one of the characteristics of learning disabilities. The respondent above had several problems with relationships with both peers and teachers. He was also coping with depression at the time of the interview, having to struggle with writing a term paper for a class.

Like I said before, it use to effect how I interacted with people but that was because I thought I was really stupid. I mean I didn't ever feel like that in high school. But then when... how I was doing in college really affected my self-esteem. But now I am.... It doesn't really affect me anymore now that I got to see my assessment. My little sister, she didn't even want to see her assessment because she was kind of afraid what it said. She has a reading a problem and so that.... A disability like that is I think very different than what I have. Like that can affect her for a really long time. She has a really hard time reading something and then understanding what she just read. And so for that... that's going... I mean you have to read your whole life. You are going to be reading all the time. And to have to... you know, Like that piece of paper that I just signed, to have to read. If you had to do something like for work. "Oh, sign this." And you have to read it over and over again because you don't understand. (marketing junior)

In the case below one respondent discussed the difficulty they encounter with teachers and their perceptions regarding students with LD. Many of the individuals feel that they are perceived as lazy or trying to get something that they do not deserve because of their disability.

The thing of it was I didn't know who I was from like my physical appearance and my tests. And so when I was like, "I'm here to talk to you about my test." He was like, "Oh, Okay.. Who are you?" And I'm like, "I'm _____." What ever." And he was like, "You're _____?" And I was like, "Yeah." And he was like, "Oh, yeah. We need to talk." You know. So I think that he was shocked to know that somebody that goes to class everyday and takes all the notes in class and asks a lot of questions was someone that had pages ripped out of her blue book and like have 5% on the test." I don't know. I shouldn't really blame him for it because it was a really bizarre situation for him. But yeah, he didn't expect from me... I mean because I think that the disability thing that he knew about you know being associated with the person in that test... He probably expected some kind of like issue. You know. But related more to my disability but... I don't know. He probably had some kind of preconceived just the way he

approached me on it. I mean not serious like most people. (journalism senior)

The everyday interactions are more difficult for some of the respondents to recognize. Some of the respondents at first claimed that it is no big deal or that they really don't see themselves as being stigmatized. However, they will go on to describe instances in which they experience the stigmatizing effects of the labeling of learning disabilities.

But like I said earlier people don't know if I have a disability unless I tell them. But sometimes once people find out I feel like they treat me differently. Like sometimes if somebody like knows that sometimes I trouble read or like I have trouble paying attention or something like that. I feel like they really slow down for me. And I don't need that. I don't need somebody to slow down unless I like, "Hey can you repeat that." It's usually just because I wasn't listening not because I'm not capable of understanding what they are saying. And so I kind of identify with them a little bit on that level because I do know what it is like to be treated a little bit differently because you have a disability. So I try to not treat them like they have a disability. You know, I try to not be like "Oh, you can't see. Let me do this for you." You know. Because I don't want anybody to feel uncomfortable. (secondary education freshman)

In the case above, the respondent describes how when information about her learning problems is known others will treat her differently. When people interact with a person with a disability, they come into the situation uncertain about the rules of interaction and may tend to rely on stereotypical images of the disabled (Scott 1969). Individuals speak slowly to people with LD based on the stereotype that individuals are slow learners or unable to comprehend.² She also points out that this treatment is

² When going through the institutional review board process, one of the responses to the letter of confidentiality if I had any plans to read the forms to the perspective participants since they were learning disabled.

similar to the experiences of people with physical disabilities. The message the act sends is that the person is incapable and needs to take on a dependency role in social interaction.

Studying with other students is a common way of preparing for tests in college. Before an exam students attempt to cover the test items up to the last minute. For many students with learning disabilities the amount of effort put into studying compared to others is a way to recognize that there is a problem.

Than the average? I think it depends on the student. But I know young women in my class that get grades as good as mine and they type theirs at midnight the night before. You know and they do fine. I can't do it. I just can't I have to type it early. And I have to take it slow and see what I am doing. And I have to make sure that it is presented to somebody who can read before it gets to the professor. (social work senior)

Respondents who were diagnosed in college reported noticing the different outcomes between themselves and their peers. One respondent reported studying and helping other students study for exams but ended up with a lower score on exams. This situation made the respondent question her ability and negatively affected her self-esteem as well.

Even when a student with LD has special talents and strengths as a student, difficulties in other subjects or with basic skills are still negatively affected their identity as college students. In the quote below, a student with problems in math discusses how her strengths in art are overlooked while her problems in math are noticed by other students.

And it's like I can get an A in a drawing class with no formal experience or just... You know it's like I'm just naturally good at this. It's just something that comes to me. It's like if I can see it, I can draw it. And then I see people in the class that thought that they were in a liberal arts class and they were

taking it to get an A. And just look at their stuff and I'm just like, "This is really bad." I mean it's like I didn't judge them for it. Whereas for me, it's like people find out that I couldn't pass Math 5 and "Oh my God, Katy. That's so easy." (???) math to do. It's the basic math you should be able to do it. You know I justify it to myself. And again ... to me it is you are just good at some things, you are not good at other things. (advertising senior)

While doing poorly in an elective liberal arts class does not question one's ability, problems in a basic math or English writing course is a basis for others to stigmatize a person.

Learning Disabilities and Family

One of the resources that young children have is that they have a parent advocating for them at the elementary and high school level. In college the role of the parent can be reduced; however, many parents still take an active role in making sure that their child gets all the accommodations he or she needs in college. Parents are also active in ensuring that their children are taking attention deficit medication. In the quote below a specialist who works with students with disabilities discusses how students have problems with parents over the issue of medication. It should be noted that the respondent is opposed to the casual dispensing of medication to deal with the attention deficit problems when behavioral interventions can be used.

And you know a lot of these kids complain that they hate these drugs. But they take them because their parents tell them they have to take them. I've had student tell me that. "I don't like the way this drug makes me feel. It makes me feel icky. It makes me feel... I don't like the way it makes me feel."

Well then I say, "Well then don't take it."

"Oh my mom."

I say, “Well you need to tell your mom about this so you can go to the doctor and they need to try to take you off these drugs.”

“My mom, tells me that she knows when I take them or not.”

“Look I am not telling you to go behind your mom’s back and not take them. I am telling you that you need to be honest with your mom and tell her you feel awful on these drugs.” And mom is not going to want to be on a drug that you feel like this on.”

“Well, you don’t know my mom.” (Learning disability specialist)

In this quote the learning disability specialist describes a typical conversation with a student with ADD about problems with medication. One of the identity tensions among college students is the transformation from being managed by parents to managing the self. Making decisions about medication is one of the tensions between parents and young adults. Decisions about when and how much medication was one of the steps toward the managing self for the respondents taking medication.

Many of the respondents in this study claimed that they had other family members with LD.

You have people who know you. And I think that... it is good to have people who know you around during when you have something like this because then you are not questioned all the time. Once you get it out people don’t question you any more and you move beyond it. In high school I think... it was trouble. But I had teachers that worked... I have always worked with my teachers. Once I realized the second that I need something. Just go in there. Just talk to them. Because they didn’t care. They, again, all had my brother because you are in a small school and so therefore you don’t have the option of having... You have basically one history teacher. And so he’s had my brother before. So he knows what dyslexia is. “I know who you are. You are his sister.” I can deal with this. It has already gone through. It wasn’t like I was in a large school with five history teachers. And then you have to get two of them together, talk to each other, find out what is this all about. Or maybe they have had a large number. But they put us together sometimes. Again people putting us together. (anthropology sophomore)

The respondent above talked about how her older brother was also dyslexic.

Family members also play an important aspect in the process in the labeling process. In the quote below, a respondent talked about how his brother was diagnosed with dyslexia. When he started displaying similar problems in school, it led his mother to get him tested.

Uh... some testing person did it. Because my older brother was diagnosed with dyslexia and he was diagnosed in middle school I do believe. There's an eight year difference. So when my mother noticed the same kind of symptoms-wise. I had a hard time I guess comparing words like the number one and the word one and I can't correlate the two whatsoever. I guess that's what gave her the warning. Or made her be aware that they might something to this with me. (biology senior)

Other respondents talked about how the presence of a sibling with LD tipped off their parents about the possibility that they might be LD as well. Once a younger sibling starts showing symptoms of a learning disability they are tested.

Even if there is no history of LD in a family, other brothers and sisters are used as comparisons for ability and achievement. This is illustrated in the quote below:

I mean I remember how many times I was doing algebra in high school that it was just bothering. "I don't get this. And I don't know why I don't get it. And it is really frustrating to know that everybody gets it and you don't." I was just really, really angry. I was really upset. Then I would have another little sister who was just like.... "It's really not that hard." And she will be able to explain it to me. She was like my mom. "I don't understand why you don't understand." And she was not a very good teacher with it. "You don't understand why I don't understand. That's why I am angry." So there is a lot of emotion behind it then. I don't know. I deal with it now. But it was... (advertising senior)

This respondent's problems with math became a source of frustration for her when other people, including her younger sister, were able to understand high school algebra while she could not. Her problems with math became more intense because others could not find a reasonable explanation for it. If others were able to

understand it, she should be able to as well. The discrepancy between intelligence and achievement that characterizes LD became a source of discord in the family.

An important aspect of learning disabilities is the role of parents. Parents are the most important actors in the formation of learning disabilities. For learning disabilities, mothers play an important role in advocating for accommodations and assistance for their children in elementary and secondary school. According to IDEA, parents are important stakeholders in deciding how their child is educated. At the college level the issue becomes a bit more complex. One of the recent trends in college life has been the continued involvement of the parents in aspects of the children's academic life. Typically, college is viewed as a transitional period in one's life. As a transitional period college students are expected to prepare themselves for the world of work and the expectations of the professional world. Some of these expectations include self management. Individuals are expected to be self-starters, manage time, and place restrictions or prioritize the demands of family, friends, and personal care.

Liz is a non-traditional student with dyslexia and dysgraphia. She is also a mother of two sons. Her younger son is dyslexic. As a mother with dyslexia she described her personal frustrations with helping her son with his reading.

My younger son has the same learning disabilities I have. And he is working with a woman... But he is getting much earlier intervention than I did. And so I do know how to really encourage him. You know. because even a small. I am very careful to point that even a small improvement in any thing.... You know to keep him working on not so much this goal here but on personal improvement. You know. Not to measure himself by others. But to measure himself by his own achievements and his own efforts. So in that way, it's beneficial because I know it is. You know. And I know the frustrations he goes through. But it is really hard because when I go to help him read. Sometimes that's really hard because I'm not sure if he is seeing it right or I

am seeing it right or we are both getting it wrong. You know what I mean. So sometimes it is really difficult. Because I don't use the reading program for him. If I can get out of it, I'm not going to. I don't want to have to depend on it the way that I do. So if there are earlier interventions that will help him more, to be more independent. (social work senior)

Other female respondents talked about their concerns regarding parenting.

They worried about passing on their learning disability to their children. One of the concerns about having children with LD was based on the notion that learning disabilities are genetic.

Well yeah. And it's my mother. My mother always like her dad.. you know it also was a different time. But she did think later on.. not until did she ever question that her dad couldn't read. And he would never doing anything in the fact that he was into the arts. And she wondered if he was dyslexic. And so I wonder you know is it genes... And like some studies have shown that can be a genetic trait. And so I just wondered if. Is this something... especially since I have a brother. I wonder two people in one family is kind of weird but I don't know if that really does show you. I just don't want it.. I don't even know the more effort for me to put in... I feel bad at some point that someone is going to be dyslexic. I mean it's great. I'm sure that it is a lot of frustration. (anthropology sophomore)

Male respondents did not mention parenting as an issue in their future. When they spoke about how they thought their LD would affect them in the future, they focused on how it would affect their work.

Newly Diagnosed with LD

In the research so far, there were five respondents that were recently diagnosed with a learning disability. Three were female and two were male. Four individuals were diagnosed after their first year in college. One was diagnosed after the first year of law school. One of these respondents was retested in college. In all

the cases their diagnosis was prompted by academic failure that became a crisis. Academic failure became a crisis because it was seen as a disruption in their previous experience with schooling as well as their identity of being a good and successful student. The crisis further develops because their college career is being threatened because of poor grades in one or several classes. They differed from the respondents who were diagnosed at an early age because they never had trouble with schooling before and in some cases thrived in honors and advanced placement classes. The students who were diagnosed later claimed that school was relatively easy. They did not have to study too hard yet they still managed good grades in high school. The crisis is exasperated by the amount of work and time put into studying compared with the work of classmates.

The genesis of the crisis is the poor grade in a class. For many respondents a poor grade is a new experience and one that is not easily minimized or dismissed. The respondents claimed to be smart, good students, so a poor grade is a blow to their sense of themselves as students. An incident of a poor grade is one that needs an explanation.

After receiving a poor grade, the students sought an explanation as to why. Going to the instructor or an advisor was the place where students went to find an explanation as to why they were failing. This step was also done because the students wanted to show that their grade did not make any sense to them because they felt like they knew the material and put in the time studying. In making the case that something was wrong, time was a significant issue. If a student spends little or no time studying, then a poor mark can be understandable and still regrettable. The

respondents claimed that they spent a large amount of time studying. Usually they claimed that they study longer and harder than students who seemed to put in little or no time at all. In some situations, students brought notes with them to show the instructor. They also explained the information to the instructor in order to show an understanding of it. Another way to show that something was wrong was to recall performances in class such as attendance and participation in class discussion.

In the interaction with the instructor, the issue of possible learning disability comes up. Instructors agree that something is wrong and brings up the notion of a learning disability as possible explanation.

Testing is available on campus. Many of the respondents describe the testing process itself as an ordeal.

R: I would say that the teachers. All teachers before college wanted to learn about what you had. Maybe because it was less rare. But then when we go over the syllabus in college. You got that whole disclaimer. And basically that is saying... and the teachers know... for some reason they don't even. Maybe the room, the large size... the idea that it seems they don't want to ask. And even if they wanted to ask they wouldn't ask because.... What I have gotten... I don't even know what the disclaimer is... but you can't even ask questions. You can only listen to what they reveal. So they have no incentive to even ponder what is it that makes you different. Plus I look like a normal kid. And I think they get.... There is a lot more normal-looking kids out there who come out fine. They probably have two people a semester who look completely normal. So they have been dealing with this. I mean teachers who dealt with this. And most of the teachers that I have had aren't new ones. So. They have been dealing with these normal-looking kids who say they have... A normal conversation is I have.... I normally just say I have dyslexia and I use the services and I need extended time. Here's my piece of paper. And you know just give it to them. They don't ask questions though. They don't ask, "Well, what is it about slipping?" Mainly, I don't know if it's because they are in their own field, own research. When you are in a younger state, when you are in high school or lower, you know the stuff you know but you also are totally absorbed in the one subject that you are as college professors are. So I think even at the stage, they are still... your biology teacher or English teacher are still very interested in learning about this. There is just a different mind-set somewhere in there that I don't know if that piece of paper

says that they can't ask these questions. Or is it just care not too. And you are just one little student. I think it's more interesting when I come in and ask questions in their field. But they are only.... Because the teacher...

Teachers are considered a competent other in the interaction of students with learning disabilities. For one reason, the instructor is the authority on the subject matter.

One of the benefits of getting diagnosed was that the medical definition gave meaning and legitimacy to the individual's experiences. Many of the respondents were able to describe their diagnosis in exact terms such as "dyslexia" or "attention deficit disorder inattentive type." These labels provided some relief to the individual's self-image in terms that they did not have a more negative label attached to their problems. Not all of the respondents had a thorough understanding of their condition. The condition they had was either not well defined for them or the diagnosis was not fully explained to them by a doctor.

I sort of think that no one can really tell me about it. Not in any sort (????) It's not ADD per se but I could have probably been diagnosed as such if I had shelled out the extra six hundred dollars to you know have that test specifically. I really didn't have the money to do it. It cost me a lot of money to get the first test done. And so I just sort of said oh well. They give me so much extra time on the test now which is good. If you want to go back from what point that I first find out that had some sort of learning disability. Fourth grade I was having a whole lot of trouble in school. And there... it kind of continued from there. Went in got some basic tests done. And they were like, "Okay, he's really smart." But there are sections of my brain that choose not to work. What was it. And the thing is nothing static. I can't tell you for a fact that I am always going to be good at this. And I am always going to be bad at this. When I focus my energy, attention on something, I can keep it all together. I can keep it all in focus. It's the stuff that falls in the peripheral that I will...my mind just blanks. (John second year law student)

While many of the respondents gave clear, detailed information about their learning disability, others did not talk about their disability in such terms. They did not use

technical definitions for their disability. Some were not able to describe details about their diagnosis. They only knew that they were diagnosed with a learning disability.

Positive Consequences of the LD Label

Not all labeling can lead to the negative stigmatization of an individual. Stigma and labeling can be considered in positive terms as well. Getting the diagnosis of a learning disability can give an individual a sense of relief. Having a formal name for the condition was beneficial in one aspect because it discounted more stigmatizing alternatives.

When I was in high school I, it finally had a name. Even though it was just, they just told me. You have a learning disability. That's all they told me. Because it was my last semester of high school. They put me in an LD class and just gave me a little extra time to finish my homework. But at least it had a name and I understood why school was such a struggle for me. So I actually responded pretty well because you know I could remember in second and third grade teachers making, literally making references to my having mental retardation. Because they thought I was mentally retarded. But they would give a test orally and I would pass it. They would put the writing stuff in front of me. I couldn't read and I couldn't write it. But I could remember it if they said it. I learn orally. Actually it was a relief. It relieved me to know it wasn't the fact that I could learn. Just that I learned differently. Yeah I didn't have any problem with that. (social work senior)

One of the concerns that individuals with LD expressed was that they were "mentally retarded." Although they were probably not serious about this issue, they did worry that they lacked the ability to be successful. In the quote above the respondent expressed how the label of LD was a "relief" in that it explained that she was able to learn. She describes how she is able to learn by hearing things said rather than by looking at a text. The benefit of the label is that it explained that she just "learned differently." The label was a means of minimizing the stigma of having academic problems.

I wasn't really surprised. I was relieved because I was afraid the whole time. What happens if I go in and I drop four hundred bucks and they tell me, "No, there is nothing wrong with you. You're just an idiot." And so, I didn't know.... It was really cool that it turns out that I have something. Because otherwise I've got no explanation and I am really maybe not cut out for this. And I felt a little vindicated when the results came back. Ah-ha, I am... you know. (law student second year)

Many of the respondents who were tested in college or, as in the case above, graduate school embraced the diagnosis of doctors and psychologists. Experiencing trouble with coursework led some of the respondents to question their ability and the choices they made about attending college or graduate school. They described how their problems led them to question if they were "cut out for college." An LD diagnosis gave some relief about their academic abilities and also future potential.

It should be noted that sometimes students felt that their LD and the problems associated with it limited their future aspirations. In particular, individuals with aspirations for academic careers thought that their goals were not possible. Instead they focused on alternative career or job situations that were close to their original goals. One respondent mentioned that his research project did not achieve the results that he hypothesized. As a result he would have to settle for being a "great teacher but not much of an academic." Another respondent talked about how a career in her major (anthropology) was unlikely because of its heavy emphasis on writing.

Another issue with the diagnosis and labeling of LD is how individuals re-interrupt their past schooling. In another example a newly diagnosed student with LD talked about getting the diagnosis of LD and how it explained the past:

I thought it explained some things at the same time it didn't. Everything I've done. I got through undergrad without the help. I got through everything else. So I mean on the one hand I want to be able to say yes, that's right. I have a learning disability and that's why I got, you know, B's instead of A's.

And so on. I never passed a foreign language class in my life. (law student second year)

In studies of individuals with chronic illness (Charmaz 1991; Sandstrom 1990, Williams 1984), the diagnosis becomes what Norman Denizen (1994) calls an “epiphanic moment.” The epiphanic moment allows the individual to reconstruct his or her past in new more meaningful ways. For persons with LD, the diagnosis becomes a way to understand past difficulties with schooling. In the case above, the respondent discusses how his LD diagnosis explained how he got “B’s instead of A’s” and his difficulty with passing a foreign language.

But we never did anything about it until mid-semester just because got some grades back. Was really, really upset, disappointed. And just said that’s it I’m done. We’re testing. We’re figuring this out. Had no idea that a learning disability was going to come as a result of all this. I was just looking for an answer. Really. So came home for a weekend and got this whole battery of tests. And at the end of it was diagnosed with learning disability. Did an IQ test which for me was helpful because for so long, you know, I was believing I was stupid. There was something wrong with me. Because of grades. Because of achievement. That sort of thing. But in case that is not the fact. Everyone else was telling me , “Oh no, no, no, You are very, very smart.” But like well the grades don’t reflect that. So what’s wrong. So what that weekend finally answered was that this learning disability was that missing piece. Between my effort and my grade, the results I guess. Was the learning disability. So my IQ test was in the superior range. It all, it pointed towards a learning disability. So that said. Found out that, “Got the label” as they call it. (pre-nursing sophomore)

Her problem with schooling was made difficult because there was no explanation for it. The label of learning disability was a relief for her. First it excluded the notion that she was “stupid” by explaining to her that her IQ was “in the superior range.” Second the diagnosis of learning disability was the missing piece, the explanation for her problems.

Although most of the focus on the stigma of LD was on its negative connotations, there was also an acknowledgement on the benefits that the LD label provided for the respondents. Herman and Miall (1990) pointed out several positive consequences for stigma among people with physical and mental disabilities. One positive aspect of labeling is the help that they receive from others. Sometimes the help can be in terms of actual benefits that they received, and at other times it is the emotional support that they got from the others. Another positive consequence of stigma is the notion that a person can get personal growth from the experiences of stigma. This issue is address in chapter 5.

In addition to getting an explanation for one's academic problems, the label of learning disability was also embraced for practical reasons as well. Positive consequences of stigma have been pointed out by many of the respondents who were able to get the accommodations they needed to succeed. The pre-nursing student above sees a positive aspect of the label in terms of discovering more effective studying skills. Many of the respondents described an ambivalent view of being learning disabled. On the one hand they did not want to be labeled learning disabled or be seen as disabled but they did find that the diagnosis gave them the academic accommodations they needed to be successful.

No. I really don't because I don't want to see myself like that. I mean I guess I am but.... I guess because I grew up with the same stereotype that everyone else thinks, thinking that being learning disabled is a huge negative thing. Even though now it is an asset to me because I get accommodations that so many people would love to have. I mean I think a lot of people, I knew a few people that probably would get the same accommodations. But either they can afford it or, you know, because it is pretty expensive the exam you have to take. But I know it is an asset now. But I still don't like to tell people about or anything. Even though, obviously, I am here because of that. I don't know I don't really think of myself. (marketing junior)

It's funny how many people don't know about the disabilities program here. I know I've talked to at least five or six people in classes like my math class. And they are like "really?" I see them struggling and I am like "have you ever been tested for disabilities." And then see them and they would get frustrated the way I use to get frustrated with it. And I am like "Dude, go to the disability office and totally talk to them." And like some of these guys are like "Dude, I have been having problems since it was like.." It was great. This like football player. My entire life. I don't have to take it anymore. He is sitting there in summer school during the intensive course you know like, "What are you doing?" (sociology senior)

Another positive aspect of learning disabilities is that the individual can take on the role of conceptual entrepreneur themselves. In the quote above a student was able to recognize problems in other students and was able to inform others about the resources and accommodations available to them. Others respondents reported helping others with LD in an indirect way. Three of the respondents talked about their desire to go into the field of education after college. They claimed that their personal experiences with LD would help them be a more sympathetic teacher. Liz the social work student discussed how her ability to empathize would help her with her future clients. One student also expressed helping other people with learning disabilities by participating in the study.

For individuals with LD, the sense that something is different or problematic with their ability causes several problems in their everyday interactions with others. Most of the time their interactions with others run smoothly and orderly while at other times they become the focus of attention. The reaction of others to the performance of the person's with LD becomes the source of stigma. It is these reactions and the fear of negative reactions that people with LD seek to avoid. In the next chapter, I

explore the issues of stigma that individuals with LD experience both inside and outside the college setting.

CHAPTER FOUR

STIGMA AND STIGMA MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

In this section I will discuss the stigmatization associated with learning disabilities. A learning disability is a stigmatized identity as with other types of disabilities. Individuals with LD have their own unique experiences with stigma. In the interviews many of the respondents distanced (Snow and Anderson 1986) themselves from their learning disability as a central element of their self. The stigma potential of learning disabilities is less than with physical disabilities. The experience of stigma varies from person to person. Some individuals experience stigma in identities that are considered core to their sense of self. At other times individuals experience stigma to identities that are peripheral to the core self (Reinow 2004). Many of the respondents expressed a minor form of stigmatization due to their learning disability while still acknowledging the negative impact that the stigma has on their life. While the stigmatization of learning disabilities for this group of respondents was generally seen as a minor problem, all of them experienced stigma in the past.

Individuals with LD gain a sense of being different from the problems they encounter with performing literacy tasks, usually in an academic setting. Most of the respondents said that they were diagnosed with a learning disability in elementary school. In recalling their experiences with LD, respondents talk about testing and being pulled out of the regular classroom for tutoring.

Being sent to what my friends called the “stupid trailer” every afternoon made me feel stupid; the silly repetitious things they had me do

made me feel even more stupid. I remember looking out the “stupid trailer’s” window every day at recess, seeing my friends playing on the playground. Was I retarded or was I being punished? Everything was so confusing. I look back and I can see that the educational system was making an effort to help me, but no one ever sat down and talked to me about what was wrong with me. I was a kid with severe learning disabilities, but nobody ever explained this to me. My daily routine simply told me I was different, and probably stupid. I had no choice but to learn to accept the fact that I was different. By the fourth grade, I felt inferior to everybody and had learned how to keep my mouth shut (Lee p. 10)

Another way in which individuals with LD are stigmatized at an early age is being placed into reading groups in elementary school. In the quote below, Brauer writes about how his difficulties reading placed him a reading group with the name “Bluebirds” but he was still aware that the group was devalued.

The teacher began to berate me. “You only knew one word on that entire page!” She was angry. I felt as if I was to blame, as if I had done something wrong. Her scolding seemed to last for hours. It cut right through me, taking my self-worth with it. She finished by saying she was going to move me to the :”Bluebird” group, the lowest in the class.

Already the buzz was in the air that the Bluebird reading group was for the dummies, children who were not very smart. It seemed that the teacher did not like the children in the Bluebird reading group; so, she must not like me. (Bauer 13)

A respondent reported similar tracking in reading when she was in elementary school. Not only did she feel that her placement in the low reading group was stigmatizing, she also thought that it inhibited her learning experience.

I am glad I am not excluded from things, I guess. But I don’t know because that is something I can’t experience. I have never been necessarily shunned. I remember when I was younger and I was in grade school and you have your reading groups. And I never.... I always felt like I wasn’t tested. They just pushed me to the low one. And I remember that always hurt. And I think that is also what kept me down like not. I took a lot later in life to realize what I realize that it didn’t have to keep me down. Make me challenge myself. But you are just a kid then. So that is what they do, you know. (anthropology sophomore)

Learning disabilities surface in situations that require the performance of literacy tasks such as the classroom. Learning disabilities also spill over into non-academic, everyday settings for people. Individuals with learning disabilities also have problems with verbal communication, spatial-motor skills, organization, and attention. Outside of school, respondents may encounter some problems with literacy tasks but they are managed in a less profound or organized way.

Stigmatization was a significant issue for many of the respondents. Some felt that their difficulties with reading, writing, speaking, and spelling made them uncomfortable in front of other people. Many were aware the possible mistakes in their performance and discussed ways in which to avoid or minimize these mistakes. Respondents discussed a number of strategies that they used in everyday interactions to cope with their performance. Settings became a factor in their performance. In some settings, respondents claimed to be more aware of their difficulties and made greater efforts to prevent possible mistakes. In situations where they were interacting with an instructor or a group of strangers, individuals were more careful about their performance. In other situations, such as with close friends, an individual was able to dismiss mistakes as no big deal.

Even though learning disabilities are understood to be a discrepancy between one's intelligence and ability and achievement, many of the respondents worried about their ability. Many questioned their intelligence and saw their grades as confirmation of their ineptitude. They conceptualized the problem in terms of individual failure (Dudley-Marling 2004). One respondent discussed her struggles with grades as evidence that something was "wrong" with her.

Yes. So it's not. It is not an obstacle that keeps me from living my life. Or being happy or whatever. But yeah, I think it is definitely an obstacle you have to deal with in your life. And, you know, everybody has them. Yeah, if I had my choice, I wouldn't have to deal with it. (pre-nursing sophomore)

I just don't want people to be dyslexic if they didn't have to. Not everyone deals with it and moves on. Like some people overly... like they can't just do it. I know that sometimes I just can't do it anymore. But if you had a choice Do you want your kid to be the shortest kid in the class? No. But maybe it's got benefits. It does have benefits but it's not clearly the greatest thing. (anthropology sophomore)

When asked about learning disabilities, most respondents felt that it was not a big deal and most characterized it as a "non-issue." One of the reasons that respondents gave for not viewing their LD as a problem is that they have learned to see the mistake as a small error rather than a statement of their overall ability.

It's like oops I misspelled that word. And like. I guess I am use to it now that it doesn't really faze me too much. Like if I do something really stupid that I should have catch myself or that I should have spell checked myself, then I like I should have done that I was just not focused. I get on myself for that. But I don't.. guess that I have just accepted it and that's just who I am-wise. (biology senior)

A simple spelling mistake or typo can be characterized as a small mistake, being careless, or being rushed which everyone experiences at one time or another instead of being viewed as a threat to their self-concept. Many of respondents talked about how they minimized the significance of mistakes. It was only when the mistakes were excessive or when individuals commented on the mistakes that they begin to experience the stigma of LD.

Learning disabilities have become part of the social landscape in educational settings. LD has become bureaucratized in the university setting. To get accommodations, students are given letters in the beginning of the semester stating

their disability and the accommodations granted to them by the disability office.

Syllabi include information regarding compliance with the Americans with

Disabilities Act. Respondents relied on the letters to disclose information on their disability to their instructors.

Regularly, you add the teacher that little note from the office. But actually, usually.....(Door opens). . I usually... I wouldn't say embarrassed....I'm just trying to think of the word. It's early so my brain is not quite working. They're usually, "oh okay, I take care of everything" and they just kind of let it go. Like... I don't know. It's always very strange. They kind of treat me a little differently once I hand them my paper.

I: How so?

R: I guess they treat me disabled. I guess would be the best way to put it. They kind of quiet it their voice and get a little more nurturing. Or they just kind of take their ... Most of them are the more nurturing.

One of the questions of this research project is to examine the meaning individuals with learning disabilities construct out of their experiences. Learning disabilities have become more commonplace in recent years. Educators, parents, and the general public have at least some awareness and basic understanding of learning disabilities as problems with performance even though the individual has average or above average intelligence. In addition, individuals with LD are able to compensate for their problems through a variety of techniques. Because they are able to compensate many of the respondents did not see their learning disabilities or attention deficit disorder as a stigmatizing trait. Many of the respondents did not see themselves as disabled especially in comparison to individuals with physical disabilities.

R: Not really. If it comes up, then I say something about it. It is not something that I want to be a private disability. But I just consider it a private disability because nobody would know if I didn't tell them. And... you know it is not something I am ashamed of. Or that I feel that I need to keep private. If it comes up, I will tell you whatever you need to know. I am not... just because I classify it as a private disability, I'm not private with it necessarily. I'm perfectly comfortable talking about it. I don't care who knows. And I think part of that is because I don't see myself as disabled. Maybe if I did see myself as disabled, then maybe I wouldn't want other people to know. But it really doesn't matter to me. Because I know how it affects me. And it doesn't affect every aspect of my life. (secondary education sophomore)

Goffman (1963) describes stigma as any trait that is discrediting in the eyes of others. Goffman further makes the distinction between individuals with visible markers of stigma and those whose stigmatizing traits are hidden from other people thus making them discreditable. Learning disabilities, unlike physical disabilities, do not have visible markers that place a person into a specific, easily understood social identity. Because the study was of college students with learning disabilities, the respondents are seen in most cases as good students and did not show the marks of disability. Some of the respondents possessed examples of dis-identifiers (Goffman 1963). In the case below, the respondent describes how people react when she tells them that she is dyslexic.

A lot of people say, "You speak so well." (laughs) First sentence out of their mouth. "But you speak so well." Well you know it's a compensation. You know. I speak well because I dictate a lot. You know. I am use to somebody writing my thoughts down. But yeah that's their first reaction is that they don't quite make the connection. But they acknowledge that I am intelligent. And they just can't see it. "We can't see it. You're fine. We can't see it." Is what I get most of time. Unless they have to directly work with me. (social work senior)

Some of the respondents reported that they received negative judgments after disclosing their learning disability to friends.

People ask you why you are taking your taking tests. Like, “Oh my God. You missed the test today.” And I’m like, “ No, I really didn’t. I took it somewhere else.” And they are like why. And you have to explain yourself some times. And you have to go into the full thing about how it’s really no that big of a deal. And you’re not really Various issues it’s just something that kind of laugh at me. Then they are like, “That’s bullshit _____ you are not retarded. You don’t need extra time.” And they don’t think it’s fair and stuff. They just don’t understand. (advertising senior)

The image of the person with LD as slow, lazy, or is somehow gaining an unfair advantage was an issue that many of the respondents had to cope with in their interactions with others. The paradox of learning disabilities is that the individual is of average or above average intelligence but has problems with performing literacy tasks. This leads to the stigmatization of individuals with LD in that they are seen as trying to get an unfair advantage with their diagnosis. There is a question of the “realness” of the condition.

I may be placing more greater burden on myself than I perhaps ought to.. I you know... very sensitive to the implication of being called lazy or being told I was expecting an unfair advantage so many times. I am very sensitive to that. (political science senior)

It is when there is a problem with performance associated with literacy or spatial coordination (knowing right from left, judging distances) that it becomes apparent to others. In order to keep mistakes from performances, many individuals with LD use strategies in order to get the right answer or say the right thing. The following account is by a woman who employed a strategy of counting on her fingers to help her do math calculations.

First grade was difficult, but by the end of the year I was able to read a few words. Fortunately, I was at the top of my math class. Unfortunately, students were not allowed to count on their fingers, and that was the only way I could do the calculations. So, I hid my hands in my pockets. Mother wanted me in dresses and skirts, but somehow I managed to sidestep her and wear trousers or my cousin’s old knickers. My mother assumed that I liked

wearing pants because I enjoyed climbing trees and playing football, which was true, but the real reason was that I needed the pockets in which to hide my fingers while I did my computations. Although my reading and spelling were appalling, my prowess in math, after its fashion, reassured me that I wasn't totally stupid. (Lelewer p. 17)

Lelewer (1994) was able to compensate for her math problems by counting on her fingers, but had to hide her hands in her pockets because the practice was not allowed. This example is significant because many of the respondents discussed similar ways of coping with their own problems. An individual with LD relies on personal strategies to compensate for their problems with reading, writing, and math, but these strategies are kept out of the view of others. The reasons for keeping the strategy in the back stage are to prevent sanctioning either by teachers who do not want students to become dependent on them or wanting them to do it the proper way or that the use of the strategy might appear as a weakness or incompetence by others.

Another way in which LD becomes discrediting is the official labeling and organization of schooling. Many of the respondents used the term "labeled with a learning disability" and talked about how school officials and practices made them and others aware of their status. The most common example of a school practice that marked the students is pulling children out of school to be placed in remediation or to be called to the nurse's office for ADD medication. Being held back was another situation in which respondents were marked as being different.

And you get called by the nurse down to class which usually when somebody gets a regular nurse call everyday in class it's kind of a.... People know that you have ADD. It's almost like a sign that you are....I don't want say you are out of control of your self.... But it is almost like okay, here's a kid who can't control himself. He is ADD. You know, he is the problem kid so... I didn't want anyone to know about that. (English freshman)

The bureaucratization of learning disabilities brings on new dilemmas in the impression management of learning disabilities. In order to receive accommodations at a university, students are required to have documentation of a specific learning disability from a medical doctor or psychologist. This documentation also includes what sort of accommodations the individual should receive. At most colleges and universities students are required to register at the school's disability service office that coordinates the accommodations for the students. After students get registered they are required to let their instructors know about their disability and the accommodation. Informing the instructor of one's needs can lead to stigmatization.

I think with the testing and stuff like that the faculty is becoming much more comfortable. I think when it comes to note-takers. Things where the professor really does have to go the extra, extra miles. Finding volunteers. I think that's where we find more resistance. I've heard some comments from students where a professor will ask an entire lecture, "Well who here is taking their tests in the office of disability services?" That's totally inappropriate. And then I have had stories of professors saying, "Well you should probably sit here so you can see the board better." This person is legally blind but you wouldn't be able to tell. But saying that in front of the entire class. So I think that there is a lot of... sometimes professors don't understand that they say some very insensitive things that can really hurt. And so I don't know if that requires more diversity training or that sort of thing. (learning disability specialist)

The situation described above is considered rare among students with LD. A more common situation that students with LD find themselves in is with testing accommodations. Testing accommodations typically include extra time on tests and taking the test in a quiet separate space. When the student is not in the classroom during a test, he or she is assumed to have missed the test by fellow classmates.

You know, friends in class certainly know that I don't take the test in the class. And it's always sort of awkward at first. But if someone new I haven't

know prior to this class. I'd be like "So, Just don't freak out that I am not here on test day. Like I am here taking the test." And they are always like "What? Why? Okay." I'm like, "Well, at the disability office which I have a learning disability so I'm taking it at the disability office." And they are like okay. (pre-nursing sophomore)

Goffman's front stage and back stage regions can be used to understand the academic setting and the stigmatization and the stigma management strategies of students with learning disabilities. In the front stage the individual is performing for an audience with the goal of giving a favorable impression to others. In the case of learning disabilities impression management techniques used by individuals are manipulated in academic situations in order to manage the stigma.

The stigmatization of students with learning disabilities occurs in ways other than face-to-face encounters. In many academic settings, students are known more by their work (papers or tests) than by their face. Papers become a part of a person's identity. Students with learning disabilities also adopt ways of managing their identity via their academic work. In academic settings student performances go beyond the physical self. One's identity can be marked with the work students submit to others. In large academic settings the only interaction between a student and an instructor is mediated through papers or assignments. The paper is a more meaningful way to remember or know a student's identity than a face or physical presence.

Writing is an activity that is problematic for many individuals with learning disabilities. The actual process of writing is difficult because of problems with spelling, concentration, grammar, and organization. Many of the respondents mentioned how much more time and effort that went into their writing in comparison

to other students. Respondents also stressed the discrepancy in their writing performance. The feedback they receive from instructors and their own self-evaluation that they discussed in the interviews emphasized the strengths of the “ideas” or the “concepts” in their papers. While emphasizing their strengths in ideas or concepts, they also de-emphasized the importance of grammar, spelling, and typographical errors. Part of this de-emphasis comes from the writing requirements for individual instructors. Instructors may not count off mistakes in papers as long as the requirements are met. This discrepancy is used to promote the positive social identity of learning disabilities which is, again, high intelligence with problems in perception. In the case of writing, use of “big ideas” or “concepts”, evaluation, and application are considered to be higher-order thinking skills, while spelling is viewed as a minor detail that can be easily corrected. Many of the respondents said they expected a lot of remarks about grammar and spelling. One respondent commented on how an editor of his papers “bleeds all over it” to correct grammar and spelling. Many of the respondents, knowing that this is going to happen, usually tend to give little importance to grammatical or spelling mistakes. One of the ways they do this is to comment that grammar and spelling are “just little details” compared to the “big picture” thus minimizing their importance in terms of one’s intelligence.

Written work is a prop in the social interaction between an individual and others. In most cases writing is as social interaction is for a small, targeted audience. But some types of writing are more private than others. Formal papers are geared with an audience in mind, specifically the instructor. Class notes are considered personal. However, in some situations personal notes from class can become public.

Students borrow notes from other students. When this happens, many of the respondents use disclaimers (Hewitt and Stokes 1975) to ward off negative reactions and questioning by their audience.

I guess you could say I'm more hesitant with notes. When people ask for my notes. And I'm like... Usually I just open my notebook and say, "You see this. You want this." And they say, "No never mind." But usually if my notes do matter for something, for to study right before a quiz. Then it becomes an issue---- (biology senior)

Passing notes in class is an activity that adolescents engage in and a part of gender socialization in middle school, but for individuals with LD this activity is avoided. Writing small notes to friends and others are more problematic than larger, more formal writing assignments. Unlike written assignments for class, informal notes posed a serious threat for stigmatization. With written assignments only one person the teacher would be aware of the student's disability.

I had great difficulty participating in the note-passing game that was so popular during this time in school. Not only could I not write notes, I had difficulty reading them too. Sometimes girls thought I didn't like them because I wouldn't answer their notes. I would smile when I got a note, trying to get by with that, because I sure couldn't get by with a pencil and paper. I wasn't learning how to get around it. I was learning much more about hiding and conning than about reading, writing, and arithmetic. (Lee 10)

Writing without the opportunity to edit and remove mistakes is a serious consideration among individuals with dyslexia. As with other literary tasks a person with LD attempts to manage them in such a way as to avoid stigmatization. Like the author above the focus of one's activities is on "hiding" and "conning" as a way to prevent embarrassing actions.

In another example, a social work student talked about how converting the name of the month to the number of the month is a difficult problem. Instead of being automatic like it is for an individual without LD, he had to stop and think about it. As with distinguishing left from right, individuals with LD are not able to perform these tasks with the same ease as others and have to find their own ways of figuring out the problem. Sometimes individuals with LD have to use physical reminders to solve them, but these can lead to further stigmatization.

And when I was dating the con. paper this morning in your office, I couldn't remember what month, number wise, it was, so feeling embarrassed I asked you the date to give me time to count in my head. I didn't even think about until I had left your office(it didn't work that well cause I still had to use my fingers and so I wrote the day, the year, and then went back and filled in the month.) This is a common strategy I use in public when I have to deal with my disability. I'll do things to stall people or time, until I can do something to figure out a math problem or something like that.

Stalling people or distracting people was one of the strategies this individual used in order to have more time to think and to solve the problem of converting the month's name to the month's number. The strategy was used to hide the disability from others. Hiding is one of the ways in which individuals with LD can help prevent the stigmatization that comes with problems in one's performance.

Hiding disability/avoidance of performance

Goffman (1963) discusses the ways in which stigmatized individuals pass as normal by hiding their stigmatizing traits from others. Stigma avoidance (Nack 2004) are a set of strategies individuals use to avoid the embarrassment or unpleasant experiences with others. Individuals with learning disabilities engage in stigma

avoidance strategies (Nack 2004) in order to avoid the shame of failing. When having to perform a task that one has difficulty doing, the individual will make sure that it is done out of the sight of others. One of the respondents discussed her problems with writing. As a result of her difficulty with writing, she made sure that she did not write in front of possible employers.

Yeah. I use to take job applications home. I would go to the different places I wanted to work, and I would collect job applications. And I wouldn't fill them out there. I would take them to my friend that had good handwriting and they would fill them out for me. Because if I ever filled one out myself, I would never get past the interview. I would never get to interview either. It would look like a third grade child wrote it. Everything is misspelled. You know file X. So that is how I got around the job interview problems. Often if it wasn't something, I purposely never applied for a job where I had to do a lot of writing. I never applied for a job that I had to read a huge manual.
(Social Work senior)

The strategy here is to prevent the potentially embarrassing situation by placing it in the back stage. Another respondent discussed how problems with math were dealt with by placing them in the back stage.

Yeah. At first, I would be like, "Oh. I'm sorry I don't have the right change for you." So I what I would do... I would say because I have a change box with me. And I'm like, "I'm sorry I need to get more ones." Or something like that. And then I would go back and I like recount in my head and be like, "Okay. I owe six fifty to them. Seven fifty or something." It was really funny at first. But they didn't know. And really what I ended up telling myself that got me over it was that they don't care. They can just drink and all they want is their beer. If I come back with their change, two minutes later they really don't care at all. Once I like settled into my job and gave people what they were drinking they didn't really care about whether I gave them back the right change like exactly. They were going to give me a tip anyway. So if I accidentally take their tip money, whatever. (Advertising senior)

In the cases above both respondents discussed how their learning disability affected them outside of the academic setting. Mistakes in employment settings were seen as particularly threatening for individuals with learning disabilities. Applying for jobs

or beginning a new job can be a difficult period of adjustment for an individual with LD. Unlike an educational environment, employers are not seen as willing to provide accommodations for a learning disability especially if it is an aspect of the job. The forty-year-old social work student with LD expressed this concern more than some of the other respondents. In an interview she said that she was told that she should not disclose information about her status until after she was employed.

I worry about that more in the work force than I do in school. In school it is expected. At a university like this it is expected the teacher, the professor and the TA's will work with you. And it is mandated by the governing body of the school. You will work with these students. In the workplace it's different and I have been counseled by people who work with learning disabilities. I can't say who. But to get the job first, and then divulge the learning disability. Because then they can't fire you. You know. (Social work, senior)

Another strategy to avoid shame of performance is to recruit the help of sympathetic others to fix problems with the performance. In the case of the social work student previously mentioned, she completed her job applications at home and had a friend go over the job applications for misspelled words.

Many of the respondents with dyslexia and dysgraphia reported that they turned in their written work to tutors at the school. This was particularly true with respondents from Private College. All nine respondents from Private College reported turning in their writing assignment to staff members of the Disability Office before turning it in to their professors. Respondents with problems writing (except for one) from State University relied more on friends and family members to edit their work.

Usually, I spell check and then I send it to K____. And then I come in and just go over it. The attention span definitely does not last long enough for me to read my own writing. Besides I probably wouldn't be able to catch half the grammar and misspelling. (business sophomore)

In the quote above the student discusses the need to have a staff member review his work. The practice is defined as necessary because, as he claims, he “probably wouldn’t be able to catch half the grammar and misspelling.” This was typical of many of the respondents with dyslexia. They had trouble seeing mistakes in their own work, and they relied on others to help make the writing clear.

Technology is also heavily used by the respondents with learning disabilities. Spell checking devices in word processing programs were seen as very helpful to the respondents. But the advantages of spell check were limited because much of the jargon in the disciplines was not included in the program.

Oh yeah, very much so. That’s why I love word check. Spell check. Very much so. Pretty much I have to get all my papers edited. From the LD department to make sure it’s grammatically correct. Especially with my e-mails too, I have to send an e-mail out to people. I cut and paste it into Word Perfect or Microsoft Word to see if I have any misspells or any fragmented sentences. And then paste it back on my e-mails so that I won’t look too incompetent. (biology senior)

Although individuals with learning disabilities recruit others to help with making their performance run smoothly, they guard who is allowed in the back stage. In many cases the person’s spouse or girlfriend/boyfriend takes on the task of editing writing.

Yeah. My wife is an editor. She has a degree in magazine editing. Taught copy editing. And all sorts of stuff. So I always get her to look at everything. And she tears it apart and says this doesn’t make any sense. Or she will just write in, “What are you saying? How can this mean anything?” And I go, “What do you mean how does that mean anything? Clearly, that is tied into this.” And then I will explain it to her. And she’s like, “That’s not what that says.” I’m like, “Oh, sure. Then I’ll write that down.” And then yeah, I will do a little dictation to her. Because she can sit down, if she sits down with me for a paper and we’re just looking at it and she says, “I don’t understand what you are saying here.” I’ll try to explain myself. And then hammer something out. (law student second year)

The close relative or partner is a safe person to edit the work in that they are less likely to react negatively to the individual. The issue of stigma is still present in the interactions with the individual with LD and the “competent other” even if that person is in a close personal relationship with the individual. One of the benefits with this strategy is the ability to explain what is meant in the written material that is difficult for the audience to understand.

I'll write part of the introduction and then I write part of something... you know, I can't... it's hard for me to do just a linear flow. And so I will just make whatever I can copy it and paste it. Put it into my outline. Then the editing process starts and I send it to usually my friend former girlfriend. Or I have a professor friend who is incredibly helpful. I usually don't send it to him because he is the harshest critic. And I don't need that harsh of criticism. And I'll get it and then I edit it again. Send to the teacher. I just try edit it as much as possible because most of my writing is not very good. My ideas are always top. My ideas are great. The one consistent criticism I get is like I don't pay attention to details very well. I'm very poor with details.
(sociology senior)

The interaction of the student and the instructor is complicated. It is often difficult for students to approach instructors. In situations in which students do approach instructors it is usually a matter of grades. While most respondents reported that instructors were cooperative with accommodations and sympathetic to their needs, a couple of respondents reported difficulty with some instructors.

My experiences here in relation with my disability. I only had it be truly problematic once. You know direct like in an embarrassing sort of way if you want. Was where I was taking a class..... I was taking a class it was philosophy of language and it was the second day. And the readings was... I mean I could read fairly well. My disability is written expression. So I can read. I can understand at a very high level. Never really..... It used to be a problem when I was really young. But I kind of over came that. And well uh.. so the teacher assigned this really, really difficult reading, and I didn't grasp it

very well. And I really couldn't keep following along because she was using this really Socratic method which...I know myself. I have never been able to work well with Socratic method of teaching. Like I need to have everything outlined for me. I can't juggle things in my head without it all in front of me. And so I was very obviously I couldn't follow along. She called on me knowing that I wasn't following along. And I understand that teachers do that to make sure that you read. And I'm like I don't understand it very well. And she's like you should be in this class. And so I go okay. And so went and talked to her in class afterwards. I was like.. "I'm not very good at this method. I really, really willing to work with you. I'm not expecting you to change how you teach the class. Maybe I'll come after class." And she pretty much bold faced told me no. And just said tough shit basically. And very looking down on me in a snotty sort of way. And I'm like I've taken philosophy classes a hell of a lot harder than this. And it is just your method of teaching that's in the way. And she didn't really seem to... seem to be okay with that. And that was really embarrassing. She made a point in class to show how I wasn't being able to get along. I understood she wasn't trying to get at me because of my disability or anything. She was just.... Yeah. In general most people the second I tell them I show them the little sheet that says have disability. They are much more understanding like I can't do certain things as well as others. I need more time. That's what it really comes down to. That's and I need to takes me just a lot longer to do certain things that most people can do very quickly. (Sociology senior)

Another respondent reported similar problems with one of her writing teachers. In this quote she mentions how the teaching assistant gave the impression that making accommodations was not fair to the rest of the students.

Well, for instance. I had a class here at the university and it was being taught by a TA. And I just getting absolutely nowhere with the accommodations her. I was getting... you know. She was very unavailable. Wouldn't answer your e-mails. You know. Just had this attitude that you know you are not going anything that anyone of these students doesn't get and it was a writing intensive course. Which made it harder. And I did have a tutor that helped me which was my saving grace. But I mean the teacher was no help at all. And I went to disability services and complained. But the fact is that I didn't have enough evidence to really file a complaint. But at the same time, had you been a fly on the wall in the class, you would realize what was going on. You could have seen it. Because the other students could see it (??). But there was nothing.... You know. When they are very careful about their wording. You know you just can't do much about it. So I have had that trouble too. But not very often. (Social Work senior)

In both of these cases the individuals attributed the difficulty arising from their disability. The issue in both cases is that the instructor appears to be unwilling to provide accommodations for the student. There is also the issue of stigmatization of the student with learning disabilities being based on the social identity of students with LD getting special treatment that is undeserved. In the case of the sociology major, the student dropped the course while in the second case the student received a B for the course. Both respondents also pointed out that these were isolated incidents.

Displaying disability

Many individuals with discreditable traits disclose their stigmatizing trait to other individuals as a strategy to deal with awkward social interaction (Schneider and Conrad 1982; Nack 2004; Snow and Anderson 1987). Disclosing stigma as strategy has therapeutic value (Schneider and Conrad 1982; Nack 2004). Individuals are able to get support from sympathetic others. Disclosing stigma allows one to get assistance to help with problems. Disclosure as a strategy also has the ability to challenge the negative stereotypes associated with stigma (Sandstrom 1990; Nack 2004; Goffman 1963). For individuals with learning disabilities, there are various strategic uses in telling others about their disability.

One of the problems experienced by individuals with learning disabilities is that others do not see the difficulties that they have with learning. Since the problems that individuals with learning disabilities face falls in the back region or is limited to a small audience, other people end up questioning the presence of a disability. Also,

many of the respondents pointed out that the discrepancy definition of LD also was an issue.

I was stigmatized by my IQ which prevented people from accepting my disability much of the time. It was actually more a fight to be labeled learning disabled than it was going against. (social work sophomore)

In this instance, a social work student diagnosed with problems in eye-hand coordination and sequential ordering describes his troubles in getting the use of a calculator for math. His IQ score was an obstacle in being viewed by others as LD and to getting accommodations he needed. The individual preferred the label of LD in order to get the use of a calculator and a computer for doing assignments.

Disclosing one's status as a student with LD was seen as a necessary means to get them from instructors.

Showing the nature of the disability is one of the strategies students use to demonstrate that the difficulties associated with their learning disabilities are an issue of time rather than an inability to do the work.

And having dyslexia makes the reading comprehension because my study is very reading oriented. And you just read all the time. And so I have to recently take, and I've noticed this with friends and everything. Sometimes I will read aloud to them so that they can kind of see what I am going through. Because my roommates now understand it. What dyslexia really means. You know they will read to me just to get my homework done. (anthropology sophomore)

I use all my time basically. But it's not like it's timed. Like they don't start counting down and say time is up. But you know I probably take generally an extra hour. Well, like one class it's an hour and half class. And so I take two and half hours to take that test. And then other class where hour long and then you know that's two hours long. And then also Spanish, I get some accommodations to come in there and I go to a class that she has right before. It's the exact same class. And so I take it in the first class and we move to the next classroom. I really like the moving period because it's like I can breathe. Just stop for a minute. They don't think like... I'm going to cheat....

I like the showing the professors that I just need extended time. I'm not trying to do anything... I just using it because it helps me. I don't want them to ever look down upon the fact that some people have a disability. Because some teachers, even if they are okay with it, I like to show them like I really don't want to be known as a student who is cheating in some way. Or using the system. (anthropology sophomore)

Students with learning disabilities are stigmatized as "being lazy" by teachers who are skeptical of the concept. They are also stigmatized because the accommodations they receive are viewed as a means of getting out of school work or receiving an unfair advantage. Respondents reported class attendance and active participation in class and with their instructors as a strategy to counteract the negative social identity of the learning disabled.

Well. I had one instructor. An older man. A nice older man but you know kind of old school. He called me his problem child the first day right because I gave him accommodations papers. And he said, "Oh you are going to be my problem child." I didn't say anything because I wanted him to see that I intended to work hard. And so I found that he usually came in early and read the paper in the lounge. And the lounge was right by the front door. When you came in. This was at Drury when I went there. So I purposely came in an hour early and studied. And made a point to wave and say hello to him. And when my papers came out with good information, sometimes misspelled but good information and I showed him that I knew what I was doing despite a learning disability, he came around. So sometimes that's all it takes. Is to show them that you are not looking for anything special. (social work senior)

In another interview the student's test became a dis-identifier. In the following interview the student tells a story of her problems with an instructor who threw out her test because of torn pages from a testing booklet.

The thing of it was I didn't know who I was from like my physical appearance and my tests. And so when I was like, "I'm here to talk to you about my test." He was like, "Oh, Okay. Who are you?" And I'm like, "I'm _____. What ever." And he was like, "You're _____?" And was like, "Yeah." And he was like, "Oh, yeah. We need to talk." You know. So I think that he was shocked to know that somebody that goes to class everyday

and takes all the notes in class and asks a lot of questions was someone that who had pages ripped out of her blue book and like have 5% on the test.” I don’t know. I shouldn’t really blame him for it because it was a really bizarre situation for him. But yeah, he didn’t expect from me... I mean because I think that the disability thing that he knew about you know being associated with the person in that test... He probably expected some kind of like issue. You know. But related more to my disability but... I don’t know. He probably had some kind of preconceived just the way he approached me on it. I mean not serious like most people. (Journalism senior)

The work that students do is segregated into front stage and back stage props.

The personal notes of students can become a prop used to show the instructor a particular social identity. In the case below one student used notes to show instructors that he was a conscientious student.

Sometimes. Sometimes because I do worry that, you know, when I do write those things out by hand that you know what I mean. The handwriting alone looks like a five-year-old’s. I do sometimes worry. But like I said the way around that is by typing out an outline or questions and going and showing them to the teachers or the TA. And showing them, you know, that you’ve done the work and that you understand it. And I usually make it clear to them before I write that, you know, “I have studied all this stuff. I have done all the reading. I am just primarily on these writing essay things, it’s a lot harder for me to get that done.” It is much more difficult for me to make it clear than it does when Like when I can type it and have, at least make sure that all the words are spelled right. (History junior)

Others reported better outcomes with instructors when they approached the interaction in a more indirect fashion. In the following incident, an anthropology sophomore discussed her interaction with her professor. In some cases, students with learning disabilities are more active in class and with their professors than the average student.

Yeah. I had been... my attitude before don’t... you could do it and your grade might not always show up. But the thing is I realized that, “okay I can do

this.” But then the way to move beyond you can move beyond it was I’ve gone into my teachers. And I have talked to them before but it was more explain what in class I didn’t get. My question when I would go to the teachers now would be: explain something I have been pondering that I do have slight question on this. But try to find a greater connection to something completely outside of the class. And I would go and ask about further details about evolution that might not have anything to do with the primate evolution we were talking about. But I have gone in and asked about a larger question and then I can break it down to myself and apply the part to the class. Rather than asking specific questions to what is it that I am misunderstanding. (anthropology sophomore)

These strategies have the strategic benefit of promoting a positive self-concept for the individual by fitting into the discrepancy definition of learning disabilities. The speaker above is a bright student who does well in the courses in her major. Even though she has trouble with writing papers and reading aloud, she displays an interest in learning and a deeper understanding and appreciation of the material. Many of the respondents discuss the positive aspects of their learning disability as being a certain type of student or thinker. One respondent emphasized his strength as his ability to see the “big picture” of ideas rather than the small details of correct spelling or grammar.

Concealing Learning Disabilities

Disclosing one’s learning disabilities has a number of pitfalls. Many individuals do not discuss their learning disabilities with other people. Having a learning disability is aspect of personal information that one can keep a secret from others especially in casual encounters (Zerubavel 1982). Information about one’s learning difficulties are not considered to be information that others need to know about. Even in our therapeutic culture, individuals in this study did not feel the needs

to make announcements (Snow and Anderson 1986; Martin 2000) about their disability. Stereotypes of students with LD are held by some instructors and peers. One stereotype of individuals with learning disabilities is that they are not good students or they are lazy.

Usually people know who I am anyway and they see me in class or they see me social light so. They already have that assumption. Uh... I guess I just figure in this day and age you know in the United States, pretty much everyone knows the word dyslexia and ADD. I mean it's on the news flashing all the time. Ritalin and stuff like that. That people when I just say it. Then they say okay. I guess sometimes when I am in a serious situation if I am doing my... I guess if I am doing something of course my responsibility-wise. I don't say that I'm ADD or stuff like that cause it.... Cause on campus-wise it's known that some ADD and ADHD kids are how should I say... not the top students-wise. I guess my own concern is to make sure they are not putting that stereotype on me. But since, I'm not too worried people who come here know who I am. (biology senior)

In this situation the respondent above acknowledges that there is a social stigma of individuals with learning disabilities even on a campus that has an active and large learning disability program. Students with ADD or AD/HD are viewed as not good students. In the example below, another respondent expresses her concern for being classified as disabled, specially having AD/HD because other people will see her as getting extra time on exams.

I do tell my professors. Because I get letters at the beginning of each semester for all of my classes. And I give them to everybody like all professors and TAs and whatever. I give them to everybody. And I tell them....I usually try to do it like the first or second class period. And you know I always tell them, at this point I only use the extra time for essay exams but if like after the first week of classes or so. If I feel that I will need the extra time for the class, then I will let them know and bring them the paper work and stuff. I tell them up front because I don't it be something I think, "Oh, this class is going to be easy and then the first exam comes around. And I do horribly and I don't finish. And then all the sudden, oh look at me. I have a disability. I need this extra." I just want it to be an upfront thing. You know, because I don't want anyone to ever think that I am using the disability to get extra time or something like that. And that is one reason that I don't use the extra time

for all my exams. Because I don't want to be classified as disabled. And I think a lot of times with a disability like AD or AD/HD, a lot of people who are not familiar with it and don't understand what it is like living with kind of disability. They think, "Oh well, she is just using extra time. She is taking advantage of the system" or something like that. . . And I don't want people to think that about me. Not so much that I care if they think that because I know I am doing what I need to do. And I know the people whose opinions matter to me know I doing what I need to do. I just don't want to deal with listening to someone complain about it. And so I just use what I need. No more, no less. And it works fine for me. (sophomore secondary education)

The respondent above discusses her identity dilemma when it comes to disclosing the information about her learning disability to instructors at the beginning of the semester. The worry for her is that others will see her differently because she does not have the visible markers that individuals with physical disabilities have.

Identity Distancing

Many of the respondents did not see themselves as disabled. Snow and Anderson (1987) discuss the identity work of homeless men in which homeless men protect their self-concept by distancing their own personal situation from the social image of homelessness. Many individuals with disabilities also engage in attempts to distance, or dispute, their disability identity (Watson 2002). In the quote below a law student describes the problem with disclosing personal information about his learning disability to others. The feeling is that one's personal identity would be spoiled if they are perceived as being disabled.

Well, actually, I mean someone does say, "Why does it take you so long?" I'll just say "Oh, I have a learning disability." I mean you can throw it out there. It's nothing... I don't think it is so stigmatizing that I try and hide it. It is just one of those things where as soon as you put it out on the table. It is an issue that people sometimes feel they need to deal with. And it is not going to be something that people really need to deal with. It's just something that should be mentioned and try to find a way to actually explain what the actual

effects are. And get them a more practical idea of what I can do. Then just categorize myself as learning disabled. (law student second year)

One of the ways in which individuals with LD attempt to distance themselves from their learning disability identity is to describe how their problems are not as severe as they once were. In the quote below, a biology student talks about how his LD experiences changed since high school:

I think it's right now it's mild. But I... But when I was in freshman year in high school I was told by my counselor and some other people who did testing on me told me that my dyslexia was so severe that I would not be able to get into college-wise on end. So pretty much had to do a lot of work to get my way up to this point. You know what I mean. It's still not easy. I guess I am just in denial. But it's uh.. I consider myself mild cause I am able to function, work, I guess,,, I guess I call it mild because I am able to work around it. I know ways. Using computers. Approaching different problems in way for me to get the answers the same as anyone else can do. (biology senior)

This respondent's LD diagnosis was severe enough that it might have prevented him from attending college. However, he defined his LD as mild because he was still able to function and he was able to find different ways to learn.

Another way in which individuals with LD distanced themselves from the identity is to claim that they have not experienced problems with their disability. For many individuals with dyslexia, they claimed that they did not experience the symptoms that are associated with the condition.

Well, my reading is a little bit on the slow side. And for the most part I don't pick up the dyslexia thing. I don't notice the, you know, approximately... It doesn't come upside down to me. They said I am. I never really picked up on that. Occasionally, I will be driving down the road and I'll see a sign and I'll say the word. And it turns out to be something completely different. But most of the time since it takes me so long to read, the attention span runs very low. After, you know, twenty-five minutes or something, I have to go run around the building once and then come back and read something like... And when I am taking tests untimed, you know, it give more time to do but then again it gives me more time to daze off and forget what I am doing. ()

In several cases, respondents distanced themselves from the diagnosis that they received from medical experts. The respondent below talks about one aspect of his diagnosis that he did not agree with:

R: I never disagreed with it. Well, I disagreed with one part. There was one section where you were suppose to do yes-no questions about yourself. And um, the way it was set up. Was that when you were doing it if you said you know, "Do you think that.... Do you appreciate it when people question your judgment?" I was like, "No." "Do you like it when other people say something and then don't believe you answer is correct?" I was like, "Yeah, that bothers me." And like, "Do you think that you are more right than other people are?" It's like well, sometimes I guess if it's the same people you are previously referring to got everything wrong. And I think I just kind of over thought the questions. And they like, "You have a god complex." Okay. (law student second year)

For the most part, respondents embraced the diagnosis that they received. The diagnosis was embraced because of the accommodations that they were able to get from it.

Stigma Management Coping Strategies

Are individuals with learning disabilities stigmatized? If, so how do individuals with LD experience stigma in comparison to other stigmatizing conditions individuals may have? What coping strategies are available to individuals with LD to deal with difficult situations and maintain a positive self-concept?

In comparison to other conditions, learning disability may not seem as discrediting as other conditions such as sexually transmitted diseases or a criminal record. The sanctions are not as harsh. Also, the definition of learning disabilities emphasizes the average to above-average intelligence of those who are dyslexic. The discrepancy definition of dyslexia became a source of reassurance for many of the

respondents especially those who were recently diagnosed. A couple of the respondents said they were glad to receive reports that showed high IQ scores so that they knew that they were not “stupid” or an “idiot.”

Stigmatized individuals have a strategic approach to coping with their stigma and the problematic situations that arise when they encounter with others. Various methods of coping strategies are available to individuals with learning disabilities. Many of the respondents discussed the social identity of those with learning disabilities and were cautious in how they disclosed the information about their disability to others. Although many of the respondents claimed that the reactions of the others were neither significant nor negative, they still attempted to distance and qualify their own situation from the social image of learning disability.

A little bit. When I actually have to write down notes or something like that, a little bit more times when I say, “okay fine. I am little bit more disabled.” I probably won’t be able to read the notes later. When I am extremely tired I start to writing words backwards and things like that. But really the only main disability I have that I view as a disability is the fact that I have Crohns. That being actually knocked me out, give me migraines, put me in bed for a while. And that is actually a true disability.

The respondent above distanced or minimized his LD identity by discussing how the condition impacted his everyday life. For him Crohns disease, a physical condition, was much more problematic than his learning disability. Even though, he was diagnosed with a severe form of LD since an early age, yet he does not label it as a disability. The problem of defining a learning disability as a “real disability” was one that many of the respondents had to work with.

When asked if and how they discussed their disability with others, the respondents emphasized how learning disabilities have become commonplace in

contemporary society. Many did not see their learning disability as a salient identity. Many of the respondents claimed that they did not feel the need to let other people know. When information of their learning disability became known, the reactions of others were generally insignificant or mild. The presence of dyslexia or attention deficit disorder was “no big deal” in the eyes of peers and instructors. Also, many of the respondents felt that the problems associated with a learning disability did not warrant public announcements of their condition. In these cases, individuals felt that their other attributes or compensation kept the problems associated with LD in abeyance, and therefore did not need attention drawn to it.

Passing is a common stigma management strategy that individuals use to cope with their stigma (Goffman 1963; Sandstrom 1990). Passing refers to the ability of a stigmatized individual to “pass as normal” in the eyes of others. This was the most common stigma management strategy used among individuals with LD. Passing was made possible because LD lacked visible markers.

Avoiding performances are one way in which individuals with learning disabilities avoid stigmatization and negative responses from others. Reading, writing, and calculating in front of an audience puts the individual at risk for exposing his or her disability, making mistakes, or fumbling over simple tasks. Many of the respondents discussed avoidance strategies they use in order to hide the effects of their disability from others. In the following, a respondent discussed her way of coping with filling out job applications by taking the application home and having a friend help with writing them out:

Only once did I ever disclose to an employer that I am learning disabled. Because it tends to put a black mark on you from the minute you get there.

With the dentist he already knew. You know. And he was ok with that. I don't mind disclosing to some people. But I am careful about whom I disclose to. I will not disclose to somebody I would be employed by. I probably would not disclose to somebody that I am trying to academically impress. You know what I mean. Like the McNair program, they didn't know until after I was accepted. And then I explained to them that I do have a learning disability. But I waited until I was accepted to let them know (social work senior)

In other case one respondent with problems in understanding math who worked as a waitress claimed that she would avoid making change in front of costumers to prevent mistakes.

R: I know how it does affect me. It affects in my confidence level... I got a new job thing. I know this is not related to really to school, but it does affect my confidence as far as going into a new job setting. Like right now I am a waitress and I see myself, like I am going to be counting money for people right in front of them. And I know that sounds very bizarre. But part of like, I think, my learning disability with math is the pressure that comes behind it. Like having tests always being timed. Or being afraid that I am going to get it wrong just because I already know that I have issues with it. So it is like obviously being a waitress you can just add and subtract. I mean it's really no big of a deal. But as soon as I do a miscount or something, I'm like, "Oh my gosh." I feel like... I get nervous just because I like know that it is there. I know there is a possibility that I could just like subtract wrong which happens probably daily. But it also probably happens to everybody else too. I mean... I don't know it's kind of like you get use to working there and you get use people giving you twenty and people giving tens and what the general price for beer is 2.50. And you learn what you are going to give back to them every time. I mean it's like ... I know it sounds very weird but really was a concern to me. (journalism senior)

What is happening here is a re-arranging of front stage and back stage activities. Literacy performances happen on both the back stage and front stage. Although much of what students do is not done for a large audience, it is still done for an audience. Some literacy performances are more public than others. Writing is public in the sense that individuals write notes, papers, letters, and e-mails for other people to read. Even in cases were the writing is done for one's personal use such as

to-do lists it is possible for others to see it. Even when literacy tasks are done in private away from the eyes of others, there are situations in which one needs to display their ability to perform. The assumption is that if a student spends time studying, the results will show up on a test. But for individuals with LD mistakes on a test are viewed as others as evidence that they did not study for the exam or are not trying.

Public performances of literacy vary according to academic settings and non-academic settings. For instance in elementary and secondary schools, literacy performances are much more frequent and public. In elementary and high school, children are drilled for reading and spelling, asked to write on the chalkboard, required to memorize poems, and required to read aloud. In these situations, the performance is done before an audience of a teacher and several school children. In the college environment, these literacy performances do not occur as much if at all, especially in large lecture classes.

One of the ways in which individuals with learning disabilities cope to keep literacy tasks in the back stage is to avoid performing literacy tasks in the front stage. Another technique is to create a supportive audience for their performances. Many of the respondents discussed using friends, romantic partners, or parents, as proofreaders before turning in their papers into their instructors. Some students also use writing tutors on campus or staff members of the disability services.

Another stigma management strategy is to display the necessity of accommodations for their learning disability. In the following case, an anthropology

sophomore discusses how she likes to take tests in the classroom with the instructor rather than in a separate, quiet location.

And then also Spanish, I get some accommodations to come in there and I go to a class that she has right before. It's the exact same class. And so I take it in the first class and we move to the next classroom. I really like the moving period because it's like I can breathe. Just stop for a minute. They don't think like... I'm going to cheat.... I like showing the professors that I just need extended time. I'm not trying to do anything... I just using it because it helps me. I don't want them to ever look down upon the fact that some people have a disability. Because some teachers, even if they are okay with it, I like to show them like I really don't want to be known as a student who is cheating in some way. Or using the system. (anthropology sophomore)

In this case the student is explaining the double benefit of her test-taking strategy.

First, she is displaying the need for the accommodation to the instructor. Second, she is also distancing herself from the social identity of learning disabled students as lazy or "using the system." The social identity of being lazy or not working hard enough was frequently mentioned by many of the respondents.

I you know... very sensitive to the implication of being called lazy or being told I was expecting an unfair advantage so many times. I am very sensitive to that. (political science senior)

Many did not feel that in their own case they did not warrant the label of lazy or one who takes advantage of the system clearly aware that this particular stigma was common for students with learning disabilities. In a couple of cases students attempted to make their work or knowledge known to the instructor vocally.

I do to some extent. You remember how I was talking about earlier about how I don't see myself as disabled. There are a lot of kids like when I proctor exams I can kind of tell which ones have AD/HD and stuff like that just by their behaviors and the way they talk and stuff like that. And so I could identify with them more. But like the girl I work with you know in her math class I can't really identify with her a whole lot because I don't have trouble seeing. You know I wear glasses that I can still see just fine beyond that. I guess I identify with her a little bit. But like I said earlier people don't know if I have a disability unless I tell them. But sometimes once people find out I

feel like they treat me differently. Like sometimes if somebody like knows that sometimes I have trouble reading or like I have trouble paying attention or something like that. I feel like they really slow down for me. And I don't need that. I don't need somebody to slow down unless I like, "Hey can you repeat that." It's usually just because I wasn't listening not because I'm not capable of understanding what they are saying. And so I kind of identify with them a little bit on that level because I do know what it is like to be treated a little bit differently because you have a disability. So I try to not treat them like they have a disability. You know, I try to not be like, "Oh, you can't see. Let me do this for you." You know. Because I don't want anybody to feel uncomfortable. (secondary education sophomore)

In the case of learning disabilities, the issue of stigmatization is more complex than with other conditions. While learning disabilities have become more common in contemporary United States, they still carry negative stereotypes. The negative image of a learning disability is a person with severely limited reading ability, writing letters backwards, exhibiting behavioral problems, and unlikely to finish school. For college students the issue of stigmatization becomes more complex because of the structural components of college environment. These include increased work loads, organization of coursework, types of coursework, and interactions with highly successful peers.

One of the issues of stigmatization for college students with learning disabilities is that they are experiencing failure for the first time. A number of respondents were diagnosed with a learning disability after entering college and after some "academic crisis" they encountered in the course of their college career. In one case a respondent was diagnosed with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder during her first semester in college. She reported that she was aware of some problem but it

was not a significant problem because the school environment allowed her to be successful.

I have always kind of had problems but I was always the smart girl so I wasn't allowed to have problems learning. And because I went to a really small school, everything was very easy - - you know. And I never had trouble at all. And I never if I think if I could have been more active in my education I would have noticed the problem earlier. But I just did enough to get by. I could just show up and get A's. So why was I really going to do anything more than that. And I noticed you know a few kind of odd things but I didn't think anything of it. I was making A's that was the important thing.
(secondary education sophomore)

However, upon entering in a state university, the situation changed and the workload became more intense. As a result, she reported falling behind and starting to do poorly academically. She also expressed fear of not being able to finish college and ending up in a low-status occupation.

And then when I got to college and you know reading was a lot more important and being able to retain what I read became a lot more important and everything was moving faster, I was completely lost. I would go to class. And I would take notes. And I would go home and review my notes. And be like "Wow, I don't remember that." And so I started doing really bad in my classes. And you know I mean I would call my mom and just bawl because I was convinced that college wasn't for me. I was going to work at McDonald's forever. (secondary education sophomore)

The poor grades in the beginning of her college career had a threat to her concept of herself as a good student. Unlike the situation in elementary and secondary school, she became lost as the pace of the college workload moved faster. Her sense of self was also threatened by the fear of not being able to complete college. The image of "working at a McDonald's forever" is one that is commonly associated with individuals who do not have a college education. This respondent was looking to become a school teacher.

Destigmatization/Nonstigmatization of Learning Disabilities

One of the themes that came from the interviews was the possibility of the destigmatization of learning disabilities. Destigmatization is the process in which characteristics or identities that were considered negative or undesirable are now viewed in a more positive, or at least non-judgmental, way. Destigmatization occurs when an individual's characteristic no longer provokes reactions from others. Traits that were once considered to spoil an individual's character considered to be normal.

Well, I think that when I was young a learning disability was looked... was connected more closely to your IQ. In other words, the assumption was that if you had a learning disability you also had a lower IQ. And now that's really common knowledge is that doesn't really have a lot to do one with the other. So I think in that way. People are looking at it differently. And plus they see a lot of people with visible disabilities that work very advanced jobs. We have physicist who have MS that have some of the most brilliant minds in the world. So I think that public disclosure and public discussion about the differently-abled have really improved things for those. (social work senior)

Speaking out and political activism are stigma management strategies that is used by social movement organizations engaged in identity politics (Anspach 1979).

Although the respondent above talks about the importance of speaking and being visible as a means to fight social stigma, she did not see it as a useful strategy for her when it came to job applications. Respondents made distinctions between the dilemmas they face being learning disabled and those with physical disabilities. They acknowledge aspect of identity politics such as the problems with labeling children and social stigma in their interviews but did not see it as an option for them. A lack of identity politics was also noticeable in the way they spoke about learning disabilities as a problem with the individual. Unlike other personal characteristics

such as homosexuality or fatness that have sparked identity movements, individuals with LD do not have a sense of a collective identity. One of the possible reasons for this is the lack of social interaction among individuals with LD in the college setting. Most of the respondents in both sites received services from the university at a disability office. Other than picking up letters or taking tests, there was little interactions between the respondents and the staff members and respondents and other students with LD. The lack of interaction was commented on by one of the staff members at the State University. She spent time trying to organize a support group for students with LD but found little participation among the students.

Conclusion

Students with learning disabilities continue to experience stigma in both academic and non-academic settings. The experience of stigma varies according to the individuals just as the severity and problems of learning disabilities vary according to the individual.

The sampling for this research project relied on individuals with LD who were actively using the accommodations services on their campus. Many individuals with LD in college choose not to use accommodations. They may have different views toward their LD and the ways in which they cope with it. Another limitation of the study is the participants were drawn from two four-year universities. Other types of universities have different ways of organizing accommodations for their students with learning disabilities.

One of the issues with the study of stigma and formal labeling process is the acceptance of the condition as real. Many of the conditions that are considered examples of the medicalization of deviant behavior are viewed skeptically. For individuals with learning disabilities there is a need to demonstrate the difficulties that one experiences with learning disabilities while at the time maintaining a personal identity that distances himself or herself from the negative social identity that some people have about learning disabilities. For individuals with LD, their diagnosis can be kept a secret until it becomes strategically convenient in social interaction.

CHAPTER FIVE

ACCOUNTS

In regards to the self-concept of individuals with LD, research questions will focus on how individuals think and feel about the effect of learning disabilities on their self-concept and self-esteem. One component of this will be the ways in which individuals with LD believe and feel about their strengths and weaknesses regarding reading, writing, mathematics and other tasks associated with learning. Another component will focus on the ways in which individuals believe and feel about the negative aspects, or stigmatization, of LD as well as the positive aspects of LD. The experiences of individuals with LD in both academic and non-academic settings will be examined with particular importance on how they become sources for their self-identity.

Accounts of learning disabilities and coping strategies will also be an important aspect of this research project. Being learning disabled is considered a personal trouble (Mills 1959). Individuals have to find ways in which to explain the reasons or causes of this trouble. Individuals with personal troubles use accounts (Scott and Lyman 1968) to develop their sense of self and to give meaning to their daily activities. These accounts are also useful to people in explaining their social identity and actions to others – especially those who find the identity and behavior problematic (Mills 1947; Hewitt and Stokes 1977). A significant part of this research will focus on the accounts of persons with LD and their experiences in school, at

work, and other situations. These accounts will especially focus on the personal understanding of their learning disability and how that understanding influences their coping strategies.

Accounts are verbal reactions to problematic situations. Scott and Lyman (1968) describe excuses and justifications as a set of accounts used to deal with the problems that occur when an individual performs an untoward act -- violations of laws or social norms. Being learning disabled is not viewed as a willful violation of social norms, but excessive mistakes and errors in reading, writing, and math are seen as problematic to one's audience. Especially, when one considers that adults in modern society are assumed to have a high-level of competency when it comes to these activities, these situations can appear to be a disorder. Individuals with LD find themselves having to explain their actions to others.

Another issue with LD is that its legitimacy is still questioned by others. Even though the concept of a learning disability has been around for decades and has become common knowledge to lay audiences, it is still met with skeptics and critics of the concept. This is one of the burdens that come with the label of LD: individuals with LD have to legitimize the existence of LD as a real phenomenon. Many of the respondents talk about how others questioned the "reality" of various learning disorders. Also, in the interviews many expressed an awareness of the contentious nature of learning disorders and the policies in place to deal with them. The second burden is that individuals with LD have to justify the accommodations that they use.

And I think the hardest thing is not having a visible disability. Not having a visible disability you often are questioned. Your integrity is questioned. And

I find that really aggravating. Because I do the best I can. And I work really hard. And I work probably longer than anybody else does on my assignments in order to make the good grades that I do. (social work senior)

One of the issues with the medicalization thesis is that the disorder is not only owned by the institution of medicine, they are heavily publicized to the general public. Medical disorders that were once never heard of become commonplace in the popular discourse. In the modern societies, medical vocabularies of motive (Mills 1949) are readily acceptable explanations for problematic action.

Every once in awhile, when I have something huge I have to say, people will make comments, “Well, I didn’t really understand that.” “No problem, Sorry, I’m dyslexic so it probably didn’t come out as I wanted it to.” I explain it to them over the phone or whatever. And they are like okay. (business major, junior)

As demonstrated in the quote above, a problematic situation occurs in one’s performance. In this case the problem was with written expression. Written expression is one of the ways in which one’s LD is disclosed to others. Problems with writing are instances of untoward behavior especially for adults and those enrolled in college. Some of the respondents discussed how problems with writing are problems that other people catch.

Another verbal technique is to use the word “just” to qualify the difference between students with LD and students without LD. Many of the respondents did not see being learning disabled as a significant aspect of their self. When asked to explain how their disability works and how it affects them in their work, many of the respondents used the just qualifier to make their disability appear not as disabling as other conditions. Instead of not being able to read, the problem is explained as “it

just takes longer to read.” Another way the “just” qualifier is used is to minimize the significance of accommodations. Accommodations were at times defined as “just a little extra time.”

One of the consequences of medicalization is that medical conditions are introduced to the general public via news programming and direct to consumer advertising. Public advocacy groups educate the general public on a wide variety of medical problems. Individuals are exposed to information about learning disorders in their schooling. So when an individual talks about his LD, the other person typically has some common knowledge about the disorder.

R: It’s usually is like I will just mention from.... Like where are you taking your test at. I’m like, “I have to go to the LD office.” And they are like, “What?” And I am just like, “Yeah I am ADD.” Or sometimes when I also ramble sometimes. Or I will hyperfocus on certain subjects I can ruminate on. So it’s just kind of like, “Dude, I’m ADD. I’m sorry.” Or if I am not paying attention to someone. They’ll be talking to me or something, which really doesn’t happen very often. But it’s usually like, if I think of something else. It’s kind of like dude. (makes a noise). I’m like, “What?” You know. I’m like totally not paying attention.

I: So you usually just to say , “Oh, I am ADD?”

R: I mean usually I try not say too much because it almost like, “Oh I am ADD.” That’s like you use it as “Ah, I am ADD. I can’t do anything.” It’s just kind of like. Like usually it will kind of come up like, I usually don’t tell everyone that I just meet usually. It’s usually like, after a while. I get to know them. I may just casually mention it. Like, “Oh, Yeah, I’m ADD so.” Not trying to do it like, “Ah I am ADD so!” (meaning being defensive?) You know.

The common knowledge of learning disabilities is such that individuals do not have to explain their conditions in detail. They can simply say they have LD or ADD.

Appeals to biology

There are a number of accounts that individuals use to explain their actions. Excuses (Scott and Lyman 1968) are verbal accounts in which the person's actions are described as the result of forces beyond one's control. One type of excuse is the appeal to biology. For individuals with learning disabilities, appeals to biology are used to explain the cause of some of the learning difficulties that they face in everyday situations. The appeal to biology focused on the neurological understanding of LD. Learning disabilities are rooted in the brain making it a permanent condition.

The individual's brain was seen as the source of one's learning difficulties. Many of the respondents talked about how the brain is "structured" or "works."

Either I, you know. Even though it's not technically a chemical imbalance. I jokingly refer to it as something like that. Usually I just kind of explain it. I have to look and think a little bit differently. Most people either get it or just kind of let it go. That kind of thing (social work junior)

The social work student above explains his dyslexia and problems with written expression as a result of a "chemical imbalance." This explanation helps describe how he works differently when it comes to reading and writing. Although the explanation is not considered an actual theory on dyslexia, it places the cause of his learning difficulties in the realm of neurology or brain chemistry, a matter than one has little control over.

I try to pay attention to what I eat. Usually, before I was diagnosed, there were days were I just felt like my brain was just mush. Like there was nothing in there. And my head even felt kind of heavy. And everything just seemed a little bit darker than normal. And kind of like in the commercials. Kind of a whirlwind. I just felt lost and really disconnected. And I always thought that was kind of weird. But I'm like you know, everybody has a bad day. And I really didn't think anything of it. But one thing. My mom is really big on making sure that her kids get enough protein and things like that.

And so earlier on she fed me a lot of tuna fish. And that became something I craved when my brain just felt like mush. And I actually after I was diagnosed and was doing some research about AD/HD and things I found on a couple of different websites and stuff on how foods high in protein are actually good for people who have ADD or AD/HD because they help you focus. They help the brain work better. And so I thought that would kind of something neat that I... And so I try to make sure I have a lot of protein and things like that because it makes me feel better. And I just feel that my brain works better when I have a lot of protein. (secondary education sophomore)

In the selection above the respondent claims that certain foods helped her brain work better. Attention deficit disorders are typically associated with food triggers such as sugar that causes one to become “hyper” or unable to focus. In this case certain foods (such as one high in protein) and eating habits (eating in the morning) work to keeps one’s ADD under control. This practice was also confirmed for her by research on the Internet.

In the theories of learning disabilities, the problem is explained in genetic terms. Although there have been many claims to the inheritance of LD, there is not a genetic link to LD. Geneticization is increasingly becoming a way to define and understand human behavior (Phelan 2005). Much like the process of medicalization, geneticization is way to redefine problems as a genetic phenomenon. Genetics almost becomes a default category in which other explanations either fail to explain or do not seem to fit.

My understanding is that they skip generations. I’m not sure. You know, I can... like my mom has done a lot reading and is pretty well verse. And so I can pick up tidbits of information. But it was not something I was really interested in. I didn’t really care. So early on when I was younger and she was really getting into it, I didn’t pay attention. (social work sophomore)

Another aspect of the use of genetics to understand the origins of LD is by pointing out siblings who were also diagnosed with LD. Many of the respondents report how dyslexia ran in their families.

Uh... some testing person did it. Because my older brother was diagnosed with dyslexia and he was diagnosed in middle school I do believe. There's an eight year difference. So when my mother noticed the same kind of symptoms-wise. I had a hard time I guess comparing words like the number one and the word one and I can't correlate the two what so ever. I guess that's what gave her the warning. Or made her be aware that they might something to this with me (biology senior)

Other respondents talked about the presence of a sibling with LD "tipped off" their parents about the possibility that they might be LD as well.

One of the recurring issues in the interviews was the way others responded to their disclosure of their learning disability. Many of the respondents reported that fellow students and instructors expressed surprise when they disclosed the information.

no, not really. I can't spell either. You know that's the thing. When you tell people they are like, "You? Really?" You don't really expect it. I don't know what they are expecting. I don't know what I would be expecting, if I learned somebody else did. It's really nothing that... There is not a common thing like "Oh you didn't spell that right." "Oh you forgot that date." You must have a learning disability. No, I never really thought that. And I don't think other people felt that about me either.(pre-nursing sophomore)

In many of these cases, the appearance of normalcy is a way to challenge the legitimacy of accommodations. Since there are no visible markers for a learning disability, the individual has to make an effort to prove the existence of a learning disability. Individuals with LD have to rely on their documentation as evidence of a learning disability.

Not only do individuals with learning disabilities lack clear visible signs of a problem, they often have competent performances in other areas. For example, one of the respondents reported that people were surprised that she was dyslexic because she “speaks so well.” Another respondent reported that people told him that he “didn’t seem very ADD really.” Many of these challenges are based on not knowing the individual manifestation of a person’s specific learning disability. One respondent explained:

Sometimes no one will notice that some of the things that I do are ADD like. Like ruminating on certain subjects. It’s the whole hyper-focus. And then... And then I’ll like... I don’t to say that I ask questions a lot. But like auditory things, Like if someone is not speaking clearly, then I have a problem. Like you know. I will be like, “what did you say?” Like, “Dud I just said that.” It’s like What did you say?” (business freshman)

Many of the respondents did not think of LD as an important aspect to their self. Instead many characterized it as a problem that does not threaten the self as other types of problematic identities would. A learning disability is surmountable to many of the respondents even though it poses a number of challenges for them. LD is seen as a minor nuisance that does not prevent one from achieving long term goals. Since it is a minor nuisance rather than other personal characteristics it is not an identity that is salient to one’s self. When one respondent was asked if he would put learning disabled on a list of personal characteristics, he gave the following:

I don’t think I would put it on the list. I’d say its more I’m hard working so I can overcome the learning disability. If I didn’t work as hard as I do, then I wouldn’t be here. So I don’t really see it as a personality trait. (undecided major freshman)

A difference between individuals with learning disabilities and individuals with other types of disabilities such as physical or mental disabilities is the former is perceived as one that a person can overcome while the latter is thought to prevent a person from doing something.

Another benefit expressed by individuals with LD is their patience and sympathy for others. Many of the respondents talked about how their frustrating experiences with schooling allowed them to cope with setbacks.

I guess it's hard to think of positive thing most of the time. But yeah. It made me who I am. I think I am more. It's made me have more patience. As far more patience with school, homework, with tests. You know. Understanding that one bad test grade is not going to ruin my grade in the class. It is not... even when the class grade is bad. It's not. It doesn't keep me from reaching my ultimate goals of graduation basically. And I think, if didn't know I had the disability, then it would a bad thing because I wouldn't be able to understand that. Because I know that I am dealing with a lot. I know that I am dealing with a lot emotionally from it. Every time I have to explain it sort of you have to be okay with it yourself to be able to explain it to someone else well. (pre-nursing sophomore)

The difference between individuals with learning disabilities and individuals with physical disabilities were brought out in many of the interviews. The problematic nature for individuals with LD in social situations is that their disability is not visible to others. For many of the respondents the invisible nature of LD was helpful in avoiding stigmatization in that they could "pass as normal." At other times, visibility can be more advantageous.

I would definitely say that, I had a physical disability. When now if you think of it for yourself. Your self-perception I really like being active so that is going to suck. But then if you think of it how people look at you or if it leads to an obvious that I had maybe.... It depends. Let's just say that some mental things that are physical, like Down's Syndrome. You know it is something mental but it's physical because you can see that they have it. So if you had something like that, they kind of it seems that they get accepted into the fact

that they do have a problem. And that is the thing about it. I look completely normal. And in my past it was really hard to deal with the fact that people didn't... wouldn't accept me necessarily for reading slow. In time it has been a lot easier. It's just like, "I read slow. Okay that's it. Leave me alone. I do it." It's after awhile you feel like you have to explain yourself some times. Like why is it. I mean one of my good friends and he is like, "You never know to choose the right word." And I am finally like, "I am dyslexic. You get it." And then people want to learn about it. I think... I've noticed that... when I am talking... You don't usually talk to a person who has a physical trait, but you are really willing to talk to someone who you don't see it. Because you think you know it all. And people when they hear that you have something that they cannot see, because they don't think it's as serious or offensive. A person who has light skin might be more willing Might talk about the fact that they actually have a black or other genes that are darker in their heritage because it doesn't seem as offensive. But the thing it probably is just as offensive. I've grown up learning to say when people want to know what dyslexia is, I'll explain it to them. I will give them a rough overview. But people are wanting to... People will further their questions. They don't feel it's obtrusive. And maybe that's the difference. You have to accommodate. Because I think that's the positive about it. Because people do want to learn. And people do want to find out what's the disadvantage you have. (anthropology sophomore)

The respondent above talks about the comparisons with her situation to the experiences of people with visible conditions. In many situations discussion of visible difference is considered taboo or in bad taste.

Everybody Has a Problem at One Time

Another verbal device that students with learning disabilities use is to categorize failure or mistakes as routine. Making a mistake or failing a test is considered acceptable or even normal in the college career. This excuse is made with the qualification that it is one poor grade that is not significant in light of one's entire college career.

R: Basically what he was thinking was that, if this attack were somehow related to my disability, I shouldn't be taking a class like this where I am

afraid of the test. I was like, “Sir I am a journalism major. If I had that much problem writing an essay, everyone should.” You know. Really what it was I just got psyched out. If anything, (????). I mean everybody fails a test sometime in life. Maybe not everybody. Most people. Basically that was all what it was. I was really psyched out and I didn’t give myself enough time to prepare the way I know that I need to prepare for an essay test. And so that is what I told him. It was like I am okay with the grade because I know that I will graduate. I am going to get above a C in the class. I know I will. I just did really poorly on the test. (journalism senior)

The academic problems that students with LD face are not necessarily all that different from the problems that all college students face. One of the ways that students with LD talk about their problems is to frame their problems in terms of normalcy. In the quote below the respondent describes his attention deficit disorder as a small problem compared to his other specific learning disorders. One of the ways to minimize an individual’s difference and disability is to describe one’s problems.

I have two learning disabilities: dysgraphia and dyslexia. And somewhat ADD as well which is a third one. But however, everybody has a little bit of ADD. It doesn’t matter who you are. You have a little bit ADD. So I really don’t view that as a vice because everybody has it. (business major junior)

It doesn’t really affect anything else. Again, I didn’t get tested for the ADD, so I can’t say officially I have that. I think I have some degree of it, but I think everyone has some. It is a matter of what degree is officially, you know, debilitating. (Law student second year)

Medication is another way in which individuals with LD explain the biological basis of learning disabilities. Many of the respondents who were on medication described the effectiveness the medicine has had on their academic work.

Many of the respondents described themselves as “average” students. One of the ways in which they describe their “average-ness” is by the amount of time they

study. The veterinary student below compares the amount of time he studies to a group of “super” students that never get below an A. The term he used to describe these people is “crazy.” For this respondent, the amount of time studying places him in a category of the average student.

There’s crazy people who.... I mean my school, vet school, you got lazy people who just want to be a doctor. And you got people who have never gotten below an A, below a B. I mean below an A in their lives. because they study twenty four hours. That’s how you got to be to get that. I would say I am average. (vet student – second year)

In their descriptions of themselves, students stressed being average by comparing themselves to the “cut-throat” students who have high aspirations that ignore other parts of student life. Respondents talked about their social activities such as being members of a fraternity or student organizations. This also helps them minimize the effects of their learning disability.

The diagnosis takes on significance in the accounts of students with LD. In many of the comments made by respondents the discrepancy definition was used to distance one from the negative connotations of disability. Respondents emphasized their average to above average intelligence and IQ scores when they discussed their diagnosis. The discrepancy definition gave “relief” to the respondents that were recently diagnosed in college or went through an academic crisis while in college. In other accounts, respondents did not refer to their actual diagnostic tests but emphasized their strengths in reading or writing.

The special school district was never really able to pinpoint exact what I was learning disabled in because on all the tests I would always score real high on the IQ. On my IQ testing part but then on other parts, like the reading and comprehension, where I was suppose to do well on according to those tests. It would either be lower or real low compared to what, I guess, you know, the

average is or to what other test results. But back to your question, it's primarily reading and writing comprehension. (history sophomore)

Another type of account that college students with LD use is to emphasize the minor impact or minimal problems that violation of performance norms cause. Problems with spelling and handwriting are not viewed as problems that others consider significant.

R: Well, ask me? Well I tell them, "Yeah I'm really bad at spelling. I spell at a seventh grade level." I kind of have an issue with spelling. You know I don't go into too much detail about it. But most people like oh. I don't think they really care that much. It's not like I'm doing something incredibly bad. Not too many see my handwriting you know. And if they do... Like, if you can read it, then... (sociology senior)

In the literature on accounts, one way to minimize the negative reactions of others is to minimize the importance of activities that they have problems with. Many people both with and without LD have trouble spelling. Poor spelling is not considered "doing something incredibly bad."

Appeals to fairness

One controversy surrounding learning disabilities and the institution of academic accommodations is the issue of fairness. Critics of learning disabilities argue that academic accommodations weaken standards and lower expectations for college students as well as give some students an academic advantage over others. Many of the respondents were aware of the issue of fairness in their use of academic accommodations. One respondent said that he resisted using academic accommodations because he would appear to be taking an unfair advantage.

Well, I mean never been a teacher's favorite. The one low grade I have ever gotten in this school was in Math 5. I got a D. I studied two hours a day on that. And I will admit I did not do everything I could. Because I could have taken extended test times, and I didn't take that option. Which leads me to.... Up until this semester I never used the disabilities office for you know.. because I always felt that it gave me an unfair advantage. Because I did really well in my other classes. I get A's in everything I write and I always felt like I was taking advantage, an unfair advantage over other people that I had extra time. It was just now that I realized because after I got that D and I just like, "Okay. I can't." I have these problems here. I need to get help with this. And so I am taking geometry now and I get double the test time. And I do well on the test. It's not that I...it just takes more time. (sociology senior)

The concern for many students who use accommodations in college was that they would be seen as getting an unfair advantage by other students. Sometimes when individuals with LD use their accommodations they are asked to explain why, especially with testing accommodations.

Basically. Like this happened every semester so I am pretty much used to it. But at first it was kind of like "Oh boy." So they would be like, "Well. You know, why weren't you in class for testing?" Well, I take my test in a separate testing room because, I got tested and they said that I need a separate testing space. For you know to show my complete abilities. And I get extra time because I just read a little bit slower." And it would take me longer to process the information than somebody else does. It's actually fair for me to do. It wouldn't be fair if I didn't do it. (journalism senior)

Being absent from class on a test day is noticeable. Albas and Albas (1984; 1988a; 1988b) discuss the importance of interactions and management impressions among college students around examination times. Students probe others to get an estimate on how well or how poorly they did. When someone fails to show up for exam, there is a sense that there is a significant problem with the person. The student is called on to account for their absence. In the case above, a journalism senior describes the explanations that she typically gives in this situation.

This is one of the reasons why individuals with LD disclose information about their disability. In a sense the individual is forced to disclose the information because missing an exam is seen as a significant violation of a student's role. But the disclosure of one's learning disability can also be a way to neutralize any negative reaction that others may have.

Sometimes I just give them examples. I mean you know from a class or something. You maybe be able to... If you can't sit there and take notes or something or listen and take notes at the same time, it's because you are tired. It's because you really don't want to be doing this anyway. But when you absolutely have to do it, you can. And that's the difference is that I can't. Even when I absolutely want to be processing what the teacher saying and writing it down at the same time, it just doesn't happen. I may get part of it. I may get a couple of words but I'm not going to get the point, main idea enough down to actually look at it later and go "Okay, what is that." So I guess that is one way. I'm not sure if I even know (??) There is a story in a book. It's called "Learning Disabilities" or something that sort of this girl went through the same issues that I have gone through. Like always questioning whether or not you were smart enough to be in these classes. To be at this school that kind of thing. That is something that other people without this, I don't think they have ever gone through. And I think that's maybe the nonacademic setting. If they did bad on a test, okay whatever. They just brush it off and keep going. Whereas if I did bad on a test, it was like, "Oh god, I must be so stupid because I studied just as much as they did. You know. I came to every single class. But yet I got a C and this person who slept through half the class has got an A." That throws your self-esteem into loops I think. That's... It's hard ...to explain that to people is really difficult. But once they kind of understand, once you explain like, "This is the deal. I studied 36 hours for something or whatever and I get a C." Then they kind of understand it something is not right there. So that I guess that helps people understand it a little bit. (pre-nursing sophomore)

In the quote above the respondent discusses the differences between doing poorly on the test because one did not study and the problems she faced with being LD. The purpose of the comments is to make clear the distinction between those who do poorly because of not following the rules and her inability to do well even when

conforming to academic expectations. The idea of the “something is not right” is based on the disjuncture between the amount of effort that the respondent put into studying and the final product. For students without LD, the explanation for school failure is typically the student’s own fault or a decision not to put effort into studying.

When I first heard that my little sister had. I mean I just think that, sometimes, I think that when people first hear it, I think they think you are just lazy. My roommate, she still has huge stereotypes on... So I don’t even talk... We use to be really good friends and that has been a huge conflict because.... And I even let her read my assessment because she still thinks...For example, like the note-takers, how certain people get note taker, she’s like, “What’s wrong with that person?” You know, “Why can’t. ... If I can do it they should be able to do it.” And she doesn’t understand that some people, it’s just hard for them. It’s not that they’re... I mean if she... people are so against the fact that people get accommodations. Like, “Why does that person get it?” they don’t understand that maybe the way that their mind works that they understand the knowledge in their head but it is harder to get it out when they are asked questions a certain way. I wish it were different. I mean that’s why I came to talk to you. Because anything that can be shown to other people to let them, help them understand what a learning disability is. That is not necessarily that, you know, you have huge problems maybe. Like me I just have a few problems. I got a problem with being timed. Because you have a learning disability, people think of learning disability as people who couldn’t go to college. That they couldn’t survive in college. That’s what I think the stereotype is. (marketing journal)

Human agency is an issue with many of the accounts of students with learning disabilities. The issue of control is an important aspect in the construction of their personal identity. Respondents discussed how they were able to deal with problematic situations and the difficulties posed by their learning disability. Also, many of the respondents discussed their learning and performance issues in the future.

I mean I have theories. Like I think that I.... I thinking working on outlines. I really like outlines. I think I can do outlines better than a lot of people. Maybe because it is the way my brain is structured or something like that. This is so BS. Quasi-kind of cognitive science sort of stuff. But like you.

Because I think I can deal with.. juggling all the little details I think . My brain took to it and could do a lot of work you know what I mean. As opposed to distributing it evenly. I can't deal with large abstract concepts and fit them together in a puzzle piece sort of form. Whereas people who can get like multiple math stuff have a hard time doing stuff like that often. Then there is also because I am use to working with that stuff. That's another hypothesis. (sociology senior)

In other accounts by the respondents, problems are understood in terms of external forces rather than internal ones. In these accounts the cause of the problems with schooling are seen not as a lack of ability or personal motivation, but as the fault of specific individuals or educational practices. In these accounts, individuals express frustration at how subjects are taught, the methods instructors use, or the types of knowledge and skills that are valued in the course. Instead of viewing poor grades or marks on one's own ability or motivation, the issue is one of the instructor's ability to teach the subject. An example of this type of account is given below by a marketing major:

R: Yeah. And he is very interested in anthropology but he doesn't know how teach. He told us in the beginning that his exams will be easy. And you really us wants us to.. you know, it's not about the exams. It is just about, you know, being interested in anthropology. And that you should have to study more than the night before because you go to all the classes. Well, everyone did bad on his exam. I mean there was one person that like he ended up... people did so bad just giving the letter grade where the breaks were. The natural breaks. Like he wrote all the scores. And I mean people who would have gotten like a fifteen percent got like a C, you know. It was mainly.... There were two essays, two like short answer, and then multiple choice. But the multiple choice were so random. I just... when teachers test you like that it makes not fun to learn the material. Whereas my marketing classes were, They were really just like... you are just suppose to sit there and just enjoy being in the class. And then they test on the most important things that they discussed. And that's how it should be. It shouldn't be like trying to trick you. I mean one of the questions on this exam was a percentage. What percentage is something? There was only eleven multiple choice. How can you ask a percentage question when you read like two hundred pages. Probably more than two hundred pages. How are you going to remember that

one? And since this test was a pretty small exam, each one is worth so many points. I just don't... I mean I don't understand why.... If the school is a research school, they want the people that are really good at research as sometimes they don't care if they are really good teachers. But I don't have that many. This was pretty much the first teacher that has been like that. Shouldn't be a teacher. I mean I feel bad for him because I know he is trying. (marketing junior)

For her the problem was with the teacher who did not know how to teach the subject matter in an effective way. Although the respondent expressed an interest in the subject, the actual experience of the course was ruined by how the exams were constructed and graded. In this case, the instructor gave a small number of multiple-choice questions covering two hundred pages with no clear sense of what was considered important. This type of account helps put the student with LD in the same situation as other members of the class. Instead of being different, they experience the same trouble as other students.

One of the ways in which students constructed justifications was to be a critic of the educational system. In criticizing the educational system, they point out the typical ways in which certain subjects are taught as being problematic.

Oh when did I realize? I guess like then I couldn't read...And I always had really bad test scores on my spelling tests. And I was just like, "I'm sorry. I am spelling it the way it is supposed to be spelled." It wasn't like I sit at home with my parents and like go over the words and spell the words out and.... And usually....I mean I guess that's what other kids did and memorize the words. But that's not really the way I wanted to learn anyway. It's just like I don't why it is supposed to be spelled this way. And I don't think that's the way kids should learn anyway. Just memorization. I don't think that's right. So I guess just like a really long time ago I knew I was messed up. (journalism senior)

Memorization of spelling words is not considered a way to develop skills.

The conventions of teaching and thinking are also problems that individuals with LD face and describe as a limited way to measure intelligence. The way individual respondents describe this problem is to explain that most of the ways of thinking and doing things is “linear.”

Instead of looking at a linear list and trying to memorize it, I would never be able to do it. I could do that for a month and probably still not remember it. But this was physically manipulating these papers into a list so that I was seeing it differently. I was seeing it better and committing it to memory. And then end up getting an A on that test. So it worked really well. (pre-nursing sophomore)

The concept of “linear” thinking was used to describe the common teaching and learning that takes place in school. The linear way of doing things could refer to many of the performance tasks in education. Writing in a linear fashion means being able to write in a straightforward, sequential fashion. Also, the phrase invokes the image of restricted, or a lack of creativity. One of the accounts the students with learning disabilities use is that dyslexia or other types of LD give one better insight and a different perception to see problems differently than non-LD students.

It’s just for... memorize it, spit it out, move on. So that’s been a challenge. Classes in general that are... I don’t want to use the word dull. But are very linear. It’s just strict like memorize these theories and spit it back. That is difficult (pre-nursing sophomore)

One respondent discussed his justification for dropping a class after a confrontation with an instructor. In his justification, he made the distinction between teaching as a noble profession and the instructors who do not have the same aspirations. The action is explained in that he has respect for education but the individual teacher is violating the expectations he has for a college instructor.

R; I dropped the class. I didn't want to deal with a teacher like that. I have no respect for a teacher who doesn't want to teach. Who doesn't want... I mean that's... I hold teachers in incredibly high regard. But.. I mean in elementary school the reason why I am able to be here there was a resource teacher named Mrs. _____. Who basically held my little head up. Like I am able to read as well as I do. Everything I can because she decided that I was going to. Actually helped me out incredibly. And I had an incredible ideal. I know I idealized teachers. And when a teacher falls from that, I have no respect for them. The second they decide to put their egos or their methods before teaching or education, I don't respect that. (sociology senior)

Good teaching is highly valued and a good teacher is defined as a person who puts the student first and puts extra effort in her student. This student gave an example of his elementary teacher that was credited with helping him read. Teachers who insert their "egos" or their "method" are violating the expectation they are she is supposed to help students learn. This respondent was critical of the perceived motives of the instructor. In a previous quote, a marketing junior described an incident with an instructor in an anthropology class. She describe the instructor was not motivated by his "ego" but rather was not an effective teacher. Her explanation focused on the distinction between having an instructor who was a good researcher but not necessarily a good teacher.

English as an Obstacle for Students with LD

Another way an individual with LD accounts for performance problems is to refer to the rigid nature of communications and writing. In the quote below the respondent discusses her problems with writing formal papers in a college English class. The structure of formal writing is difficult because it is different from the "speaking" or "talking" world.

this structure. And I never like understood the this type of structure thing. And I still don't get it. And I don't get why can't there be other ways of writing. And I feel like people... I just want to be able to express it. And will people say write it down. I'm like I don't know how. And then even if I say a sentence and then that exactly what you should say. I'm like what did I say. I have no idea. I forgot. Because when I try to write it down it's going to be like... I go blank. It's like whole different world. Writing world and talking world are just completely different. I try to stay away from writing. But I do write personally like to help me maybe learn how to write. But what I write personally in like journals it just makes no coherent sense. (anthropology sophomore)

One of the big problems with individuals with dyslexia is learning phonetics (Shaywitz 2005). Learning phonics is difficult for individuals with dyslexia. The English words are not necessarily spelled the way they sound.

For example, reading and writing were never a, very rarely phonetic discipline or understanding for me. Phonetics was always somewhat confusing to me. It's becoming somewhat better for me now that I am older but only marginally so. And the English language is not phonetic. Which makes the teaching of it as phonetic very problematic. I learn words before I learned the spelling of words. I never did really pick up much of the spelling of words. I learned to recognize words as whole units. And so on the one hand I would learn words very well and never learn how to spell those words. (political science senior)

Individuals know the meaning of words but may not be able to spell the words or have trouble pronouncing new words.

Critics of Learning Disability Programs

Although respondents are critical of the regular school system and its traditional teaching methods, a couple of the respondents were also critical of the learning disability programs and practices in place in secondary schooling.

Criticisms of learning disability programs were not of the actual programs, but how they are abused by parents and students.

I can see it as being a negative thing. But I deal with it pretty much. If you let it get to you, it is going to be worse than if you just say, "okay I can just work around, fix it, and do whatever I can." Just don't let it get to you. Again if you don't let it get to you, it's going to be ten times worse than it really is. Also the other thing is, you have to view...other ways around... because I have seen this happen so many times, when you tell somebody they'll say you have to take these special accommodations. You have to look at it this way. "Or he's learning disabled and he can't really do things." I mean I know one person who I went together in a scout troop for about three or four years. He pretty much had the same LD as I did. However, his parents kept him in the public school and made the public school give him recommendations and accommodations. He is essentially hundred times worse than I am now because they made it so he is, "Awe, he is disabled." He is majoring in art and working at I think Tom Thumb if that. He could have come out with so much more potential had he'd been with the attitude of, "Well, okay, I'm disabled that doesn't mean I can't do things." (business administration senior)

In the quote above, the respondent expresses a concern that once an individual is labeled as learning disability that it would become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The feeling is that the attitude becomes *disabling*. The respondent describes a situation in which the negative stereotype of how children with LD are not able to succeed was placed on his friend by his parents and the school.

In another example, a respondent described his feeling about schools designed specifically for children with learning disabilities. The respondent talks about the abuse of the learning disability diagnosis and medication.

I believe that it matters how you make it. I drove me crazy when I went to my LD schools, and my classmates would use it as an excuse for everything. And they are just being blatantly annoying. And they would just use it as a crutch. I mean if you know you have it and you accepted and you are working around it, that's great. But if you use it as a crutch, then I mean... that's just.. I mean... It's just an excuse to be lazy. In my opinion. And I think that's a lot of people... a lot of LD students sometimes get that. And a lot of time I blame the parents. I mean I've seen the parents when I was young. And I am asking, "Why are they babying you like that?" Or try to make excuses. And I mean well... I think that a lot of it's the parents on bringing you up. My

parents have accepted it. But they kept on... You know.. letting me fulfill my goals. Not trying to like say like “Oh, yeah it’s the medication wearing off. Or he can’t do that, Let me do it.” And it’s like horrible. And I see these younger parents with their... I guess what I mean to say is these younger kids and their parents. And I watch the moms and how they are trying... I guess what kills me is that a lot of these parents feel like something dramatic has happened. And they must shelter and protect these kids. And all it’s doing is making them worse. (biology senior)

These two examples are similar to what Snow and Anderson (1986) refer to as identity distancing. Individuals with a negative social identity try to maintain a positive self-concept by distancing themselves from the stigmatized group through various verbal techniques. The negative social identity of LD as being dependent on parents or academic accommodations is viewed as threatening to their personal sense of self. To protect themselves, they criticize what they see as some of the drawbacks of LD programs. Another aspect in this distancing present in both of these quotes is that the respondents talk about the role of parents in the process of disabling children with LD.

Many of the individuals in the study also distanced their experiences with individuals who had physical disabilities. They did not see their condition as one that warranted protection.

To use the legal recourse and to enact the ADA I think is something that should only be done when you really, really need it. If I could not do the same as others. And I have demonstrated this to myself. Then I would use it. For I think it is for people who need, like could not. Not “don’t want to work as hard.” I realize that sounds like rational choice BS again. But really for myself that’s how I find it. I think people abuse the ADA at times. And I think if you abuse it, you lose it. (sociology senior)

The stereotype of individuals with LD used policies to get an unfair advantage is expressed in the quote above. The individual wanted to disavowel (Davis 1960) himself from the disability identity.

Compensation

One of the ways in which students with LD present a positive identity is to draw upon the discrepancy definition of learning disabilities. The discrepancy between above average intelligence and poor performance is used in many of the accounts by the respondents. Important knowledge and skills are stressed over the troubles associated with other tasks. The knowledge and skills are ones that are regarded as having higher status or a more abstract aspect than the basic skills of spelling and handwriting. In the quote below the respondents, discussed how his problem with spelling is countered by his having a big vocabulary.

I'm a horrible speller. I realize that simple laws aren't. I have somewhat of a large vocabulary but I can spell most of the words so I so I find myself ... in papers a lot of times will word things differently because I can spell it that way. It's kind of strange but sometimes frustrating I guess. (journalism junior)

Many of the respondents reported that they have compensated for some aspect of their specific learning disability. Reading was frequently cited as an activity that is no longer a problem. The notion of compensation is based on the discrepancy between an individual's intelligence and his or her ability to process language. The respondent above was able to compensate for his problems with spelling by phrasing things in his papers in a different way.

Individuals with learning disabilities are also reported to have differences in perception. One of the quasi-theories about learning disabilities is that individuals with dyslexia are considered more creative or are original thinkers and able to perceive things differently. Although dyslexia is viewed as a barrier or a nuisance, some respondents attributed some of their strengths as students to their dyslexia.

I often have a kind of perception of things. I perceive things differently than other people do. Both from my personal experience and also I think I haven't taken a terrible strong look at it to compare the way in which I relate things and the piece of information may be somewhat different from than what others do.

An English student with ADD credited his disorder with helping him focus on writing. His disorder allows him to focus on an activity for long periods of time. He explained the experience as "hyper-focusing."

Hyper-focus actually does help when it's more when you are into like fine arts type. Like I want to be a writer. It's a fine arts type thing where you just really focus on something. You know every detail so which kind of helps

One of the ways individuals with learning disabilities describe the benefits of their disability, is in terms of a trade-offs. An individual's hardships for their disability give some of the respondents the "patience" to be a better student.

There were other benefits that respondents saw from their learning disability that was not necessarily related to their academic life. The social work student bellows describes how he has the ability to read upside down or backwards:

If had to, I would probably say that I have problems with the sequential order of things. Just off the top of my head. Occasionally, I might give an example of how like.... A friend of mine had a very similar disability to mine. And we both figured that we learned that we could read upside down and backwards in rearview mirrors no problem. Other people don't seem to be able to do that as well. I think that might be... there seems to be a kind of... with having to

look at things differently. The way brain works I guess with my disability, there seems to be perks as well as downfalls. (social work junior)

The respondent above claimed that he can read words upside down and backwards. He saw this as a “perk” rather than a skill that helps him academically. He also said that his learning disability also gives him a different way of viewing the world that helps him with problem solving.

Like I said the ability to read upside down or like reading billboard in the rearview mirror easily. Not really because it’s useful, but it’s kind of fun. Bill my friend and I have... like I said earlier when we were being tested like in high school or what not.... Would read the comments and whatnot the tester was taking from looking across on their sheet. And just kind of mess with them for that. I couldn’t really give an example of how I would view a situation differently. It becomes apparent that the way I tend to look at things which is you know is very true with everyone. I am really good at problem solving. Brain-teasers. Things are just quick for me. (social work junior)

Another strength that the respondent found was the ability to do brain teasers. Many people with dyslexia claim that they are able to perceive the world in different and creative ways allowing them to work with puzzles and brain teasers.

Disclaimers

For individuals with learning disabilities, the image they give off in their everyday interactions typically does not include their LD identity. Verbal performance and social interaction are viewed as “normal” for people with dyslexia. For individuals with attention deficit disorder or attention deficit with hyperactivity disorder, verbal performance and social interaction success may be more difficult to achieve because of their physical manifestations. Since learning disabilities are a “hidden disability” there are few visual cues for others to pick up on. Many of the respondents elaborated on this point.

A lot of people say, “You speak so well.” (laughs) First sentence out of their mouth. “But you speak so well.” Well you know it’s a compensation. You know. I speak well because I dictate a lot. You know. I am use to somebody writing my thoughts down. But yeah that’s their first reaction is that they don’t quite make the connection. But they acknowledge that I am intelligent. And they just can’t see it. “We can’t see it. You’re fine. We can’t see it.” Is want I get most of time. Unless they have to directly work with me. You know. (social work senior)

Hewitt and Stokes (1976) describe the verbal technique of the disclaimer. A disclaimer is a verbal technique in which an actor provides toward off doubts or negative typifications which may result from intended conduct. However, for a student with a learning disability, the course of action that he or she has planned may not come out in their actual performance. For example, one may have planned and worked on a paper with correct grammar and spelling, but the product may contain errors. The disclaimers that individuals with LD use are taken into account with the probability of grammatical or spelling mistakes in their work.

One of the issues with some of the respondents have is showing their writing to others. Students with dyslexia use disclaimers in situations where they need to perform difficult tasks. In college the use of disclaimers is not as necessary as in other academic environments because most of the work done in college is done behind the scenes and not in front of others.

One of the situations in which disclaimers are used is when there is a possible disclosure of the disability through the accommodations. Concealing the use of accommodations is difficult for most students because they are noticeably absent when an exam is giving. Testing accommodations typically include extra time to take an exam and quite often, a separate location.

All my friends. I think all of them know pretty much. You know, friends in class certainly know that I don't take the test in the class. And it's always sort of awkward at first. But if someone new I haven't know prior to this class. I'd be like "So, Just don't freak out that I am not here on test day. Like I am here taking the test." And they are always like what? Why? Okay. I'm like, "well, at the disability office which I have a learning disability so I'm taking it at the disability office." And they are like okay. It's never been a big issue. Nobody has lots of questions answered. Or thought I was lying or anything time and a half, because then it gets into the "oh, that's not fair. What? Wait. Blah, blah, blah." So, I just leave it at I'm taking it at the disability office that kind of thing. And then if they want to ask questions about the length of time they can. I'll tell them. But it just seems to avoid a little bit of those questions basically. If you are just...

When an individual with LD makes a disclaimer, he or she has to be selective in what to tell the other person. One of the dangers with using a disclaimer is that others may react negatively to the information. In the example above, the student does not get a negative reaction from disclosing her LD to others, but she is selective with the information gives. She does not want to tell others that she is getting extra time because others might berate her for getting an unfair advantage. Other respondents reported similar reasoning when making a disclaimer.

The Medical Model versus the Social Model of Disability

In the literature on the sociology of health and illness, the ways in which individuals view illness is an important aspect to how it is treated. The medical model of disability focuses on the problem rooted in the individual's biology or psychology. The medical model is viewed as objective reality in that medical science and its tools can diagnosis and treat the condition. Many of the respondents talked about their experiences through the lens of the medical model. Many of the

respondents distanced themselves from a disability identity because they compared themselves to the physical disabilities.

So we try to tell them that number one there is no highest disability and lowest disabilities. The person who has the physical disability is more disabled so to speak. That's a negative term "disabled" I know. has a more severe disability maybe that's better than someone like you. You view your self as not being worthy of getting services because you look at the person who is quadriplegic and you think that person really is disabled, but not me. And I try to explain to them, yes your are. If you have a documentation from a physician and a psychologist that has given you a diagnosis, it's all relative. You are entitled to the services that you are entitled to. Even if you look at your disability as not as great as someone who may be quadriplegic, or someone who may deaf, or someone who maybe blind, you still are entitled. You still have a disability. It's not the same. It's not anywhere near the same. And we try to explain to them, and we've done this through banquets, we've done this through panel discussions, we've done this through individual students talking to other students with the same disability. (learning disability specialist)

Many of the individuals felt that being learning disabled is a small problem that they can overcome given enough effort and time:

how far it would be if I was more... I think dyslexia is something that you can grow out of. It's always there. But it is something... It is always there because it is part of your past. And you always know that you have some disability. It just depends on how much effort you are willing to put out, to not show it. Like just be a slow reader rather than be the dyslexic slow reader.

Neurologists point out that a learning disability is a condition that affects a person throughout his or her life time. Many of the respondents did not see learning disabilities as a persistent, life-long problem.

In contrast with the medical model of disability is the social model of disability. The social model of disability places less emphasis on the individual and focuses more on the environment in which the person lives. Disability emerges from the social structure and the built environment which privilege the non-disabled over

the disabled. The social model of disability emphasizes the importance of how the reactions of others create a person's experience of disability. The respondents did not identify themselves with a social model of disability. Most of the individuals saw their problems in individualistic terms. They did not see their troubles affecting them as a group like other members of the disabled community.

I don't know. I think I was diagnosed with ADD like in first grade or something. Just never really got prescribed any prescriptions or anything. I think everyone really has ADD. I don't see it.... I think it is kind of made up.

I: What do you mean that you think everyone has it?

R: Well, at times, I mean I am a natural procrastinator. If I find something I like. If I'm in my room and I don't want to do something, I'll start cleaning my room. If I don't want to do an assignment, just push it off. I don't really see it as a disease or anything. (education freshman)

Many individuals in the study resisted the disability identity as it was conceptualized by the medical, or pathological, model of disability. Many of the respondents resisted the disability identity by comparing their experiences with physical disabilities. Individuals with LD also distanced themselves from other individuals with disability by not seeing their learning disability as severe as a physical disability.

The parents will say on the phone, "This is Mrs. So-and-so. And you know my son does not have a disability. I just want you want you know that right up front. He just needs some help." I mean I have parents say that. And then I try to educate the parents by saying, "You know, your son does have a disability. And if he didn't have a disability then he wouldn't be coming to our office for services. That there is no shame in that. And that's the first thing you need to understand because if he thinks you have shame in that. And if he thinks you're embarrassed to say that he has a disability, then he is going to be hiding from it his whole life. You're not helping by saying that." A lot of these parents, pardon me, just need someone to say these things to them. And they never thought of it that way. And they'll say, "You know,

you are right.” Well, I have had some parents say, “Well, my son does not have a disability. And I don’t want you to say that he has a disability.” I just say, “Well, ma’am let me just tell you something. If your son comes into this office and he registers with us, the letterhead that he is going to take to his professor clearly states that it is the office of disability services. It clearly states that he has a disability but we don’t say what that is.” (Learning disability specialist)

Distancing one’s self from the disability label can prevent individuals from seeking the accommodations they need to be successful. Many of the respondents from State University did not apply for disability services when they entered college. It was only after they experienced problems with courses that they sought assistance.

In some ways, individuals with LD resisted the disability identity because their problems did not seem as traumatic as the problems of people with other disabilities. Using the medical model, individuals with disabilities are viewed as objects of pity or sufferers of a tragedy. Many of the respondents minimized the problems associated with LD by comparing their situation to people who had more severe types of disabilities. Learning disabilities are not viewed in terms of a personal tragedy and those who are learning disabled are not seen as “worthy of pity.” So individuals with LD are able to escape the personal tragedy model of disabilities that stigmatize people with physical disabilities:

Oh no. Not at all. Not at all. I think that people who have visible disabilities are more frustrated than I am. I get a little frustrated because it’s invisible and sometimes I have to give papers to prove what I am telling them. But I don’t have the reaction of well meaning people insulting me. You know what I am saying. I don’t really have that problem at all. So I don’t think so. I think I would be more frustrated if I had a physical disability. (social work senior)

Another respondent compared the LD to AIDS:

Usually, I just kind of... I'm pretty comfortable with it so I just kind of like, if they need to know, they can know. But it is like if it is not really important to the situation. It's not like it runs my life or something. I don't have AIDS that type of thing. (English freshman)

Another way in which individuals with LD resisted the LD label was to limit its impact on the one's life.

Just daily life. It only affects very specific things. And it affects those specific things about a five. Like math or grammar. Well grammar I think it's more like a seven. It's so bad. I learned how to use a semicolon just recently. Yeah like in the those particular like if I put math at seven. For grammar and spelling particularly. In everyday life, I don't really feel it. I don't feel it everyday. It's not something I hurt.(???) It's something I have incorporated into my existence. Just recognizing the limits. That is what wisdom is recognizing what you can do. (sociology senior)

One of the respondents said that he did not see himself in terms of the diagnosis he was given by the doctors. "They actually said I am severely disabled. But I don't see myself as being severely disabled, because I can pretty much do what everybody else does."

I don't think that... I mean on the one hand, I feel the effects when it hits. It doesn't hurt me. I mean I know people who are dyslexic and they can't find their way through streets because they can't read the street signs. And that is a major problem. This is something that comes up and I start shaking my fist at one in the morning when I am trying to type. (law student second year)

Severity was a criterion for seeing one's self with a learning disability identity.

Severity was defined by some of the respondents as ability or achievement. Most of them did not see their LD as preventing them from one's goals.

You know, I don't know. I don't think it is as severe as many other people's because I have been successful to this point. I have gotten myself through this much of college without knowing about it. So what I found out this summer is that I have been able to compensate so much just with my intellect with... you know.. just having some common sense I guess. Compensate for some

things that I didn't know that I was sort of lacking in. So I don't think probably as severe as many people's. (pre-nursing sophomore)

For some of the respondents, the severity of the LD still would not prevent one from getting a college education. It was viewed by many as a small problem that was rather isolated in one's life.

It slows me down. But that's about it. It doesn't stop me. I view a disability as something that actually stops you from doing something. And so far my school abilities, it has never stopped me from doing something. (business junior)

Many of the respondents placed a high bar for what can be defined as a "disability."

In the quote above, a respondent defines a disability as something that prevents one from doing something. When asked to characterize their LD, many of the respondents used such terms as "obstacle" rather than a "barrier." An obstacle is something that a person can maneuver around, while a barrier keeps people out.

Another aspect of learning disabilities and the distancing from the disability label comes from the negative publicity stemming from the medicalization thesis.

The medicalization of contemporary America is challenged by critics and skeptics.

Many conditions that are labeled as medical problems have their legitimacy questioned (Baker 2004). Learning disabilities have met the same skepticism since their early days.

But it seems to me that as a parent it's a whole lot easier to get your child a prescription and give them a pill, then just to sit down, talk to them, try to find out things that you can do to help, get them out hyper-whatever, and do thing in another way. But given the world that you know, pharmaceutical companies have a pill for everything here fix it. Quick fix. Take this pill. And then, like you said, the poor kid is addicted to it and dependent on it for the rest of his or her life. And then it affects, anytime as you know, anytime you put anything like that in your bloodstream. (learning disability specialist)

The antipsychiatry movement of the 1960s is another challenge to the legitimacy of learning disabilities. The “myth” of mental illness (Szasz) critiques the concept of mental illness as being unverifiable in terms of physical manifestations and vague in its definition, thus making any behavior that is not considered “normal” or “acceptable” an illness. The advocates of the antipsychiatry movement argued against the practice of institutionalization of individuals. College students with LD also have to contend with this issue in their interactions with others. One of the respondents talked about an instructor who made claims that learning disabilities do not exist during a lecture.

Yeah. Like recently I did have a sociology class where we were talking about mental states and mental diseases and different things. And the teacher just off handedly mentioned something about.... He didn't exactly believe that everything that was categorized as mental disabilities, disorders were that severe and among them he listed LD and ADD so. And actually he did mention it on the day that I handed him my sheet. (social work sophomore)

Although in this instance the claims made against learning disabilities were expressed in a way that could be severely stigmatizing in that they were public, the outcome between the respondent and the instructor were not as problematic as it could have been.

He just accepted it. He didn't make a face or do anything about it. Just said it was okay. And he gave me all my accommodations. (social work sophomore)

While the respondents were talking about how they saw themselves in terms of disability, they also tended to draw on stereotypes of people with disabilities.

Anspach (1979) categorizes numerous strategies to cope with stigma. Many of the

respondents in this study did not express a notion of identity politics around their learning disability.

Defining Self as a Learner

One of the ways in which individuals with LD see themselves as learners was one of the themes of the interview questions. Individuals conceptualize themselves in different ways. One of the ways in which the respondents viewed themselves as learner was either as visual or auditory learner.

I am definitely a visual person. Even though I can have like all of my notes. And I look and I can read through them and flip the page and highlight stuff, I end up making notes cards of my notes. Not like all the notes but like I would take a definition in my notebook I would end up writing that definition on a note card with the word on the front and the definition on the back because it's... I like went through my notebook and read all the information over and over again, it would not benefit me as much as using note cord where I can ask myself a question and flip it over and find out if it is right. And at times (???) I could cover-up the question with my hand but I feel like even if I do that I would see the question before I get there.... I don't know. It's just a really weird thing that I do. And then that's takes a lot more time for studying rather than somebody else who already has everything written down and can just go through the notes and memorize it from just reading it like that. So it is definitely, better to have notes on note cards, like having to read because you get.... There's that and ... I don't know. I end up studying a lot more than most people I know for all my tests. And they kind of ask me questions and I can answer them. They'll end up doing better on the test than I will. That's the way it is. (journalism advertising senior)

Another way that individuals with LD defined themselves as successful learners was to attach positive sounding attitudes to their learning styles. In the quote below, the social work senior with dyslexia and dysgraphia describes how she likes learning and labels herself as an “enthusiastic learner.” Instead of “dragging” herself to class, she forces herself to find value in the classes she takes.

R: Auditory and enthusiastic. I like to learn. I really do. I like learning new things. I like learning. Well even if it is not horribly interesting to me. If I am in a class that I am not usually interested, I still try to find something in it that it is like really cool. That's really neat. I'm glad I learned that. You know. Because I want to be an enthusiastic learner. I want to really value what I have picked up in college as well as in life. So I think that is one of the big assets is the fact that I am not dragging myself to class because I have to. I am going because I want to learn something.

I: Could you give an example of a class where you had to be an enthusiastic learner?

R: Where I had to really push myself to be an enthusiastic learner. I had a writing class. And writing.... Oh, I am just not a good writer. I just never have. With effort I can write a good paper. But it really takes a lot of effort. And this was a technical writing class. And it was so hard for me because I just didn't understand it. I didn't know the technology to use on the computer for it. I didn't know what. I couldn't understand the technique that the instructor was trying to get across to us. And it was hard to be a good learner in that class because I didn't understand a lot of it. And it was frustrating for me. Even with the help of tutors. Real big for me. But I still went, because I thought, you know, there has got to be something I can pick up in this class that will benefit me later in life. I'm not here to waste time. I am here to learn. And so I try to look at that way. And there were a few things that I did pick up that I have taken with me and have been able to utilize.

Some of the respondents had an ambivalent view on whether they defined themselves as visual learner or auditory learner. Following is an example is given by a secondary education major with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder:

I don't know. I'm more.... Sometimes I am visual. Sometimes I am audio. Sometimes I am audio-visual. It just kind of. It depends on the subject too. If it's sometimes that is interesting, then just hearing it I am going to retain more of it if it is interesting. If it is something that is more kind of common sense stuff, then hearing it is just fine. I am not necessarily going to retain anymore if I write it down too. Like I took a finance class last semester. Like it was the intro stuff. And it was like how to do your taxes and you know simple interest stuff like that. So it was kind of common sense stuff. And so I just went to class. That was it. I doodled occasionally stuff like that. And got an A in it just from being able to hear what she was saying I was able to retain

enough to remember and do well on the exam. But if it is something like a math class or even my econ class or something that isn't necessarily familiar to me, then I need to see it and hear it. And sometimes I like hands on kind of stuff and sometimes I don't. Because if like I know how to do something and I am competent. Like if it's a science class or something like that or a lab or something like that. If it is something I am competent in, then I am going to jump right in and do it. But if it is something that is new to me, I'd prefer to see an example before I try to do it. It kind of depends on the subject. And I think at this point I know kind of what interests me and because it interests me in a certain degree, how I need to go about what I need to take really intense notes or just jot down key words or something like that. (secondary education sophomore)

Some topics were viewed as easier to grasp one way as opposed to another way. In the following example, topics that she defined as easier or as areas in which she was competent were more accessible through spoken words while topics that were more difficult or not interesting had to have a visual demonstration to be grasped.

Yeah. Well, I don't know. I've said recently I kind of noticed more what type of ADD I have in a way that... I would say that there are people that are... I kind of noticed that I am a visual learner and not an audio learner. And I am kind of less in a way, like with poetry. Like with music or something like that I don't really understand what the words in the music. Like I won't necessarily understand what they are saying. I won't be able to decipher as well until I have read it. And then I can totally understand. So I kind of realize that. And with other things that I will kind of mishear people a lot. You know. So I've realized that audio learning is one of my problems. You know trying to picture someone talking usually and then something visual, something that I can keep my attention focused on. (English freshman)

Another way respondents talked about their learning was to focus on the "big picture" or the "abstract" nature of knowledge.

I am very abstract. I tend to perceive the world in abstract ways and in... try to and then begin to relate the empirical knowledge I receive. The hard facts if you will, to a structure. On the one hand evaluate the gestalt. And in the other hand use the gestalt as a means of interpreting the data. Obviously, there is a certain logical flaw you found in that it's kind of a problem of understanding. To me something is not understood unless it's related to another thing. And I think I can feel that more than most people. And so I

tend to try to ultimate or necessary relationships. And then from that sort of foundation and abstract away logical relationships (????). I think, yes I do think in ways different than most people. And that can be I think be a benefit in that I have a different insight than other people do. And perhaps with their insight and mine, we can come to better knowledge than could have before.
(political science senior)

Many of the respondents liked how their particular major played into the idea of being “abstract” thinkers. This was especially true for students majoring in the social sciences such as sociology, anthropology, and political science. Ernie is a political science major at Private College diagnosed with dyslexia and dysgraphia. During the interview he talked about his problems with doing manual repetitive work in a factory one summer.

CHAPTER SIX

STRATEGIES

As with any creative learner, I have had to create my own system; I have had to find my own keys. Although the keys are not conventional, they allow me to unlock my cell and escape for awhile. One of the most useful keys I have discovered is one that is available to anyone with a reading disability—recorded books. Although I began by simply getting my textbooks on tape, I explored further and found that printed books of all kinds were available on tape. The key to reading was listening ... to the author's words communicated to me by some other reader. (Lee and Jackson 2001 p. 52)

Creativity or originality is considered a positive aspect of learning disabilities.

It is a common assumption that when one sense is lacking the other senses are heightened. In the autobiographical literature of the learning disabled, one of the dominant tropes is the unique ways in which individuals with LD are able to see things. Developing their own ways of learning is a one of the hallmarks of a successful student and becomes a way in which individuals can construct a positive view of their learning disability (Troiano 2003). Many of the respondents talked about their own ways of learning how to learn. The variations of strategies for students with LD are as various as the students themselves.

In this chapter, the performance and academic strategies of students with LD will be discussed. Strategies are an important aspect in the construction of learning disabilities and attention deficit disorder. Much of the educational and self-help literature on learning disabilities frequently discusses the importance of adapting

academic strategies as a means to successfully overcome or compensate for one's learning disabilities. Typically, this literature gives advice to readers on what strategies are successful for students with LD. Many of respondents discussed the strategies they use to approach different performance tasks. Respondents described a range of strategies from the very complex to a collection of haphazard approaches to dealing with performance tasks. Commitment to strategies varied according to student. Some students reported following their performance strategies very closely while others were not very committed to following any specific set of strategies. Also, strategies varied according to course, instructor, and subject matter. Studying strategies are used by LD students and non-LD students alike. But for many of the respondents, their studying strategies take on particular importance because of their awareness of their learning disability.

What is a strategy? For the purposes of this analysis, a "strategy" is defined as a set of processes, methods, practices, or a course of action that a person intentionally uses to achieve a desired goal (Lofland 1976). Strategies are ways in which people overcome problematic situations that they encounter in both their everyday lives and extraordinary circumstances. Individuals have a vast array of strategies to draw upon according to the situation they face and their definition or perception of success. Many of these strategies were selected because they reflected the strengths and learning styles of the individual (Cohn 1998; Lee and Jackson 2001; Smith 1991; Troiano 2003).

When a person enters a situation he or she is able to conceptualize his or her role and the norms that govern the situation. For individuals with LD they realize

that they come to the situation with their difficulties and know that they will have to use techniques to survive the interaction with their self-concept intact. These impression management strategies are ways to preserve an image of the “competent” student or intelligent individual.

The concept of strategies is used to describe the conscious actions one takes in specific social situations. The types of strategies a person uses in social situations include all actions coordinated in order to achieve a specific outcome. The ultimate goal of all strategic activities is to promote and maintain a positive self-concept and to minimize damages to one’s self-concept. Strategies can also be used to gain advantages over others. Strategies also include laying a ground work for future successes or to avoid future threats.

The temporal dimension of strategies is another important aspect in the way in which individuals cope with problematic situations. Strategies are usually thought of in terms of directing present or future actions. Strategies are used to anticipate problems and cope with the possible negative outcomes of such problems. Strategies can also be used to cope with past events such as memories or personal artifacts of one’s biography. Individuals use stories and objects to account for their sense of self. The past experiences are used to construct a biography in which the person can make sense of the world and his or her place in it. Denizen (1994) describes the ways in which individuals will use epiphanic moments to create a self-identity.

Strategies assume a sense of agency on the part of the individual actor (Lofland 1976; Giddens 1991). An individual constructs a set of strategies to cope with situations that are problematic. Many of the strategies are learned through a

process of trial and error. Other respondents learned studying strategies from the help of educational specialists and tutors.

More is Not Better: Mundanity of Excellence among Students with LD

Daniel F. Chambliss (1989) discusses the mundanity of what appears to be superior success by individuals. The common assumption is that some individuals possess more talent or intelligence than the average person. Excellence cannot be attributed to talent. Talent is a useless concept for sociologists because it is a mystification and is usually explained by the presence of success. What makes excellence possible is the consistent and correct performance of small tasks. In many ways the studying skills of the respondents represent the mundanity of excellence.

Excellence as Chambliss characterizes it is achieved through a qualitative differentiation rather than a simple quantitative change in effort. Excellence requires a change in the way in which people do things rather than “doing more of the same.” People assume that successful students spend more time studying than the average student. Chambliss gives three dimensions of difference that characterize the Olympic swimmers from other competitive swimmers. These are technique, discipline, and attitude. What makes the Olympic swimmer different is his or her techniques that produce different results. Olympic swimmers do not necessarily spend more time practicing than other swimmers but they are more likely to practice everyday. Also, Olympic swimmers have favorable attitudes to more boring aspects of their practice than other swimmers.

Many of the respondents reported similar dimensions in their studying and writing skills. Spending longer hours studying in the library is not always effective for students with LD. Instead they had to develop special techniques that made them successful students. Students who were diagnosed with LD in college had to re-learn how to study because their old studying strategies were ineffective.

I guess the semester just after I was diagnosed, my thought was, “Oh, I will spend all my time in the library.” Like probably, could of have a bed or something in there for me because I was there so much. And that’s what I found out was the total opposite of what I should have been doing. It’s just not conducive for me at all. But I didn’t know it at the time. So this semester, the approach has been I guess like I said physical. Actually went and get to Michael’s to get all these little...I feel that this is not the right word. But like foam shapes and balls and ribbon and crafts. Like make a craft box basically of things that could be manipulated into a web, into three-D to study with. The art test for example. There are 100 slides per test. Well, so you know, you can’t make 100 different webs. You could but it would be crazy. For it’s all on flash cards. OK, well that’s great but I also have to know the time periods and there’s about twelve of them. And the date, and you know the ranges for each of those. So for instance when I did this I did a memory game. I rocked at memory as a kid. I could beat anybody. So you know I wrote on scraps of paper every period down on each one. Period per square and the date on each one. And just mixed them up and started laying them out. And I had to put them in order and I had to match the dates up. So that’s a good example of like how I was physically able to do something with this. Instead of looking at a linear list and trying to. (pre-nursing sophomore)

One of the characteristics of the mundanity of excellence is that dedicating more time will not necessarily result in one’s becoming a straight-A student.

Studying strategies were viewed in two ways. One studying strategy that individuals theorized about was that effective studying takes more time. Straight-A students are viewed as a special group of students who spend all their time studying and who are highly competitive students (Conrad 1983). Spending more time studying was not helpful, but studying in different ways produced success for students with learning disabilities.

Well, I don't spend a lot of time in the library now. I usually just read in my room the material. I end up getting more behind than I was before. But it really doesn't even affect anything. I mean now I see why all those people are lazy and... I always go to class, always. But I can see how those people. If you just know how to study, you can do well without having to read, you know, read over... Sometimes I would read all the chapters over again. What a waste of time. You know. But I was trying to, I thought at least if study that much, then if I do bad, at least I know that I've tried everything. But now I know... Well some of teachers, they give us objectives or study guides. And I know that's pretty much all I need to study. (marketing junior)

In addition to learning new methods of studying, developing a disciplined routine was another dimension of successful studying for some of the respondents.

I just try to keep things fairly consistent. I am definitely on a more of a routine schedule than most college kids are because I don't party. It doesn't interest me so I don't have deal with being out late. Things like that. That's partly my own choice. It just doesn't apply to me and because of the medication I'm on. It could interfere with alcohol and things like that. I don't feel the need. I just try to eat at a consistent time. And not get meals and things like that. Just try to keep my body fueled. Get enough sleep to go to bed around the same time most night so that I am not operating with too much sleep one day and not enough the next day. (secondary education sophomore)

The respondent above talks about how her schedule is being more consistent than other college students. She does not engage the social aspects of college life such as "being out late" and "partying."

Boredom is a problem that interferes with studying. Boredom can come from doing the same activity for long periods of time. For individuals with LD and attention deficit disorder, studying for long periods of time is nearly impossible. In order to study effectively one has to "break up" the time in order to make it more manageable.

I tried to break it up a little bit so that I am not burning myself out. For each class you know, I'll study for a nursing test for a little bit and then you know I might get find myself getting a really bored and antsy. So I'll switch and

either just take a break or maybe do some history homework or something like that. But the studying in short blocks like an hour or two hour is sort of normal. I can't study in a six-hour block. Like I just couldn't sit still that long. One thing like that. (pre-nursing sophomore)

This is also illustrative of the mundanity of excellence in that the amount of time is not as important as the quality of time. The traditional "cramming" for exams is not a characteristic of a successful student. The student above talks about the routines for studying for her nursing exams. By breaking and studying subjects in one- or two-hour blocks, she is able to concentrate better on studying.

Another way to deal with studying is periodically incorporate some sort of physical activity. Many of the respondents with ADD talked about having to physically do something to help keep focus on the larger task of studying or preparing for an exam.

Well first off I take like, I take like twenty minutes, thirty minutes, to just...I'll sit and look at my computer screen. And then I'll just think during that time brainstorming and stuff. I'll just brainstorm in my head instead of writing stuff out on paper. Like... but my writing has improved. People have been trying to teaching all these different methods to writing and...I haven't implemented many of them. I have been taught so many different ways to write things that it's which way is the right way to go. Which one is the right one to use. Because everyone wants a different way of it.... And so if you do it this way, that might not be the way the professor wants it. Or if you do it that they might want it anyway. (business sophomore)

Another student reported his studying habits were different compared to other students.

I have been told that I have ridiculous meticulous studying method. Like I especially for biology which I usually get B's in because it's . Because I have a list. I write lists and then write it to memory. And I repeat before... When I... every time I add a new word I repeat the entire thing, write the entire thing. And say it. And the look at it. I try to get as many possible sorts of input and repetition as possible. I think that's the only thing I've ever known that's a bit unusual of how I study because it takes a long time. But I have a fairly good memory because of it. Like I can spit out the vocabulary and tell

you how it applies. Also, this is another thing I do which I think is unusual.
(sociology senior)

The study method is considered unusual, but it is also characterized as being very repetitive and routine. This method is considered to be beneficial to the individual's skills at memory and vocabulary. What is described in the section is the routine work that is put into the studying. The small task of the concept of the mundanity of excellence is also present in the quote, specifically the list and the repetition of information.

Time Management Strategies

One of the biggest concerns of students with learning disabilities is with time management and organization. Organizing one's time effectively is a difficulty that many college students face in their careers as students. College students have many different roles to juggle during their college careers. In addition to class work, a student's time competes with work and social activities complicating their academic life. Time management is an important aspect in academic settings because time is considered to be a scarce resource (Yoels and Clair 1994).

Time is an important dimension in student life. All students have to cope with time schedules and constraints in their daily lives. For students with learning disabilities, time and time management become particularly problematic because they have trouble performing tasks in a timely matter. In this study, many of the respondents discussed their problems with time and performance in two ways. One aspect of time is the amount of time it took for them to perform certain tasks such as

writing a paper, reading a book, or studying for a test. The other aspect of time has to deal with the routines and schedules of schooling.

The amount of time spent on performing specific tasks was one of the most frequently mentioned difficulties for students with LD in this study. Many of the respondents discussed the amount of time it took to complete a simple task such as reading a couple of paragraphs or a chapter in a textbook.

I do things like tape record lectures and then spend time listening to that again. Taking notes from that. So that I've heard it twice. And then I got the notes. Well, what that ends up doing is adding an hour you know... Two hours for each one hour I am in class as far as studying goes. (pre-nursing sophomore)

Many other respondents discussed how much time it takes them to complete tasks compared with other students who are able to do with relative ease.

I would have to say that it is a lot more time consuming for me. For assignment-wise, it takes me a bit longer to uh... Write a paper or to read an assignment. Pretty much, I need to do my work in advance. Be one step ahead compared to everyone else. If not then I would fall behind and never catch up. (biology senior)

Keeping up with assignments is important for students with LD because of the fear that they would fall behind and not be able to finish.

Well, I've been recently been working on a paper that I am perhaps to two-thirds the way done with. It'll be about six pages. I have spent the better part of the waking hours of three and half days on it. Now this is.. This is not a simple paper. There is a heavy research part content to it. So it's a more complicated paper than some papers in the same league. But I think that it presents an idea of how long it takes. (political science senior)

Time management is one aspect of the student career that takes on significant meaning to students with learning disabilities. In comparing themselves to other students, students with learning disabilities view the time it takes for them to read a

section, write a paper, or respond to a question as significantly different. It takes them longer to perform tasks than students without a learning disability. Many see this issue as the most salient feature of their condition. Respondents gave the issue of time and time management prominence in their interviews.

I still struggle with time management. I've always had good intentions. But if I think "Okay I need to study." If I am at home, I'm like, "Oh, but I haven't done the dishes." Or, "Oh I need to make my bed." Like I want everything to be immaculate. And I always try to put studying off. And I think part of that is because I have had so much trouble with it that I am afraid I am going to have that trouble again. And so I keep pushing it away. But most. ... I mean there is still times that I try to study and it is just not going to happen. And I am still learning to deal with that and to accept that. But still I always try to push studying off to the very last thing because I am afraid that I am going to have that trouble all the time. And then I will just be back at square one. Most of the time now when I do actually make myself sit down and start reading the first paragraph or two my mind may be wondering but after that you I can get it good. And I remember what I read. I am on a lot better. (secondary education sophomore)

One respondent when asked to describe how his dyslexia affected him stated the following:

I believe it's reading comprehension and written expression. Two subjects. Fairly slow reader. And... I have had books on tape or readers for books, essays to read like in high school. In college I can understand more or better following along with a book having it read out loud than if I sit there and read it myself. I can read four or five pages and can go back and I don't know what I have just read. I know the words but I don't follow... don't pay attention kind of thing. Everybody does that to some extent. But having it read orally, listening to it, and then following along helps. The written side of it is just written expression. Taking the different thoughts or ideas and forming them into cohesive paragraphs for writing. This was the difficulty in that. Had in high school I guess the term would be scribe but dictating essays, papers helped. And uh.. that kind of helps a little. It's hard most things because of time constraints. (broadcast journalism sophomore)

One time management strategy was to get things done ahead of time. Starting ahead was seen as necessary for students with LD because it levels the playing field.

Whereas other students were seen as able to cram for an exam the night before or quickly write a paper, respondents claimed that they had to work ahead just to keep up with others. It was a common for individuals interviewed to say that they either do their work in advance for an assignment or at least think about working on an assignment in advance.

Not directly. I don't think it directly affects anything. The only thing it affects is how long it takes me to deal with school and how long it takes me to write papers and stuff like that. I mean that affects my relationship with my wife. There have been plenty of nights where my wife has told me, "Why aren't you coming home tonight. It's two in the morning. Aren't you done yet?" And I will say, "No. I'm not." And I need to get this finished. I've got a deadline. And I know that tomorrow night I'm still going to be up here for six to eight hours and it is still going to take me just as long. And I need to do this if I expect to sleep four hours a night and to have it done by this date. And that date can be way off into the future. And my wife will be saying, "there's plenty of time between now and then for you to get this done." And I'll say, "No, there just really isn't." Because if I am still going to school and I am still going to work, then I don't. The only thing you get to cut into is time you otherwise have with me. (law school student)

Respondents discussed the organization of time and the difficulties they have with managing schedules. Some applied specific techniques to deal with the scheduling. Computer software was specifically mentioned by one respondent.

An organizer. Pretty much uh uh... Pretty much what I have to do is that I use Excel. Which pretty much I schedule out my day. And pretty much... it goes pretty detail from when I wake up to my first class and the times in between what I could be doing studying at those time and what class I could be studying. To uh.. It goes up to the end of the day till like ... spending time again when I chop up what I should be studying. Classes before the next day It's all color coordinated-wise so it's a quick look up so where I should be. It's a good motivation. (biology senior).

Another issue of time management is the adherence to schedules by students.

Schooling is segmented into semesters. Classes have final exams, tests, assignment due dates specified in the beginning. Throughout the semester there are "heavy" or

“busy” periods followed by lulls in course work. Adherence to schedules becomes more important in busy periods. Students with learning disabilities also go through periods of close adherence and periods of lax adherence to schedules.

One of the reasons given for working ahead of time on assignments--especially written assignments--is the need to have papers edited by others. Some respondents said that the editing process consists of submitting a number of drafts before turning it in to the instructor.

I can't.... After I get done writing a paper I am pretty much drained because I... It could be a simple 3 or 5 page paper. And uh. And it takes my hours compared to everyone else in my class. If they.... Well here at Private, they are done in an hour or two hours and I'm like in there for five hours. Pretty much an hour a page almost making sure it's done. But that's if I am doing it correctly. But.... It's... I don't... After I get done with a paper I'm so drained that I don't want to look at it. So I look at it the next day. So that's why it's important for me I do my papers in the proper amount of time. So I can write a paper, then the next day read it, and then hopefully do my own self-corrections, and then give it to _____ or to _____ someone in the LD department and then they bleed all over it with a red pen. Then they send it back to me for me to do my corrections. And then take notes on how to ... or how I can make the sentence make sense kind of thing. Then get that done. And then give it back to them. And then I get it back and hopefully I can give it to the professor. (biology senior)

To demonstrate the personal trouble with having LD, respondents stress how “even the simplest tasks” take time. Comparison to other students is used in the explanation of having LD. Another issue is that it makes the troubles with LD a real problem. One of the issues with learning disabilities is that people question the validity of the concept. This presents a problem for individuals with LD to disclose or to discuss their disability with others. Time is one of the points of contention about learning disability. Giving extra time to some students and not others is viewed as unfair. When respondents discuss accommodations the issue of unfairness comes

up as a barrier to discussing LD. One respondent said that they tell others about taking tests in a separate location but not the extra time that is given for concern of being criticized for getting an unfair advantage.

Earlier I guess it just was the struggle of having, you know, primarily just the amount of time. Or just not being able to... of failure of not being able to do it. Now, I figured out a way especially going through college, ways to get by. Where you need to do it in order to get like a college education. In high school, you know, they give you a grade, a low grade, and they let you just kind of slide by. But now, I mean, I guess I assess it best. I can assess it better just from my experience in high school with difficulties that I have had. In terms of like math especially that, I mean it just, the amount of time that it takes me. I mean it's got to be double what it takes other people. I mean I am not saying that other people aren't struggling in other things. But I mean the physical amount of time that things take. That is basically how I've assessed it. And especially reading, writing. Writing, you know, even the simplest things like e-mails. I think that if someone were to sit down and watch me do that it would probably take me... I'd say to write a normal e-mail just to a teacher assessing a few problems to make sure that it is just coherence and it makes sense. You know, it literally takes me time to write out a letter that sounds good and then to go through and proofread it. So accessing it from there. (history sophomore)

Time is the one of the most significant features that distinguishes the college student with LD from those without LD. This was seen as a major barrier for students with learning disabilities to become successful. Many of the respondents were able to manage time by making studying and reading more routine. The organization of time in work settings is an important for employees to become more productive and to insure the quality of their work (Fine 1990). When the pace of work becomes too busy or too slow a person's work suffers. Many of the respondents in this study also talked commented on how they were not able to study effective when they were bored or were pressed for time.

Writing Strategies

For college students with learning disabilities writing can be the most problematic performance task that is required of them. While reading was a task that many of the respondents said that they have compensated for, writing was seen as a difficult task for many of the respondents. (Although about half of the respondents reported that writing was not a problem for them.) For respondents with dyslexia or dysgraphia the process of writing is filled with problems.

Yeah, I mean it's My biggest concern is like people.. People here know me and know I can... I write pretty bad. So they... So when I want to make sure that they know what I am saying. That they don't have to come back to me and uh... say "what are you saying in this?" you know or when I am giving a notice up telling people what is going on in an organization, you know. I want to be clear and concise. So that is my biggest concern is making sure I am clear and concise. That there is no fragmented sentences which will make people take notice and it's like, "What is he trying to mean by that."
(biology senior)

Writing is a concern for this student because of the interactional difficulties that could emerge from "bad" writing. The worry for this respondent is that people will not understand what is being said. The fear is that other individuals will say, "What are you saying in this?" resulting in his stigmatization. In this section the student also describes the extra tasks that his disability places on writing. He has to "make sure" that people know what he is saying.

One of the strategies that the individual uses to cope with this problem is to use the spell check and grammar check options available in word processing programs. Spell check was viewed as a big help for students with learning disabilities, but many of the students also listed some of its drawbacks.

No too much. I mean like in writing papers and stuff, I can tell because it is hard to determine if the word is spelled correctly. But if I am typing in Word

they have spell check which is a help. Even then sometimes the right word is just the wrong spelling of the word. It's the same word with a different meaning. But having somebody else go through it kind of takes care of that. So they can determine which spelling I need to go with. (business freshman)

At first, I mean, sometimes it takes a lot longer for me to write a paper. And formulate. Be clear of what I want to do. I mean sometimes, especially now I found out that now I have to go over and over with the spelling check like for anatomy and things like that. Where you have to have the definite spelling of every word. You have to write it down constantly to make sure that I get it all spelled. Like I am still getting some time for, extra time, for my tests just to like look over my work. (vet school student)

In this case, the vet school student above points out that many anatomical terms are not identifiable in the spell check option. Other students talk about the how jargon in one's discipline is not recognized by the spell check option in word processing software.

And I started out like for my first paper I turned in was a D. Well she taught me that you really need to pace yourself more. You need break it up. You need to ... and like by the end I was writing my own style. And you know like I got an A. So I realized that there is different way of doing it. You really have to do it over time. Give yourself you know... don't wait until the last minute. If I did that, I couldn't do that. You know like a five page papers aren't going to be able to ... I just can't pump them out like some people can. That's going to take a lot of effort. That's going to take a lot of revision which I can't do. I have to get some one else to do. I will usually... you know... I will send it to my sister because she is an editor. I like to let people read my writing useless it's a very final one cause.. I just feel like all... I don't they'll look at me like "what are you thinking" cause it makes no sense when I first write. It rambles in areas. It just doesn't flow. And then I will read it myself. The first thing is I'll type and read it myself. And it makes no sense and I have to re-word it. And it takes hours to re-word it. Then I will finally just make the (???) And I still won't show anybody until the final product. And maybe until I get a grade cause I just feel so.... Like it makes sense. It really does. And when people that ask me questions like, "What are you talking about here?" I can answer it. And then I realize you have to write it. I don't understand that people don't automatically assume certain things. And in a bigger. .. Like my teacher said it was she did know...like English 20 she noted that even for me it was more severe than I... the way that students did some things. She noticed there was much different like.... Like my assumption

pattern was so much different than even the writer student. (anthropology sophomore)

In the quote above, the student talks about her issues with writing. Her experience was common for many of the students with learning disabilities. Writing is difficult requires one to use many strategies to successfully complete a task. One of the issues is with time management. She talks about how she has to “break up” and the “need to pace” herself when doing a writing assignment. Another issue about time consumption is the editing process. In the case of the student above “rewording” is necessary because the first draft “makes no sense” and she has to work before it can make sense to another person.

Another strategy that was used by many of the respondents with dyslexia is the use of editors to help with the writing process. The editor in this case was her sister, and also her mother helped her with writing as well. Many of the respondents pointed out that close family members (including a wife of a respondent and close friends, or a parent) were used to help edit drafts of writing assignments. These people are seen as safe individuals in that they are not likely to stigmatize or embarrass the individual.

In addition to family members many students with learning disabilities seek help from staff members and tutors to help with editing writing assignments. At Private College, the director of the Learning Disabilities Services was also an instructor of English. He worked very closely with the students on writing assignments. Students would drop off papers and make appointments for editing sessions. At State University, students were given access to tutoring at another

location free of charge. Only one of the respondents with dyslexia used this service on a frequent basis. The other students at State University used family members or friends to help with editing.

Another writing strategy for students with LD is to use scribes. Both universities provided scribes as an accommodation for their students with LD. Scribes are staff members who help students with writing by recording their answers and writing down ideas for term papers. The quote below describes the use of scribes to help communicate what the student means and what is communicated in the text.

Sometimes it is run-on sentences and stuff like that. Also punctuation at times. As for on the more important actual structuring of the sentences sometimes considering I will have something in my head know what I want down there and someone read what is written down. So it is easier sometimes for me to actually tell them what I was meaning and then they will write it out to what that is versus what I got down there. It just wouldn't sound right.
(political science senior)

The respondent above has the scribe help make the information or ideas sound right.

Scribes are helpful with writing assignments, but they also have their drawbacks. One respondent discusses his problem with the use of a scribe for his written assignments.

I've tried forms of dictation for writing essays and that sort of thing and I often get lost in the details and it's disconcerting because I don't get immediate confirmation as to what I put down as it were on the paper. And sometimes I feel when I work closely with someone I am dictating to or working with, I feel like I am imposing. It's a rather awkward situation.

I: How is that?

R: I say...I end up usually try composing sentences in my mind before I speak, which means there is a lot of starts and stops. And then I have to read and think about it. And then.. so the process of generating texts becomes

slower even though the process of transcribing becomes faster. And I always feel and certain ...I try to do my best to be honest and not permit the scribe to influence my answers. And sometimes that's difficult. I may be placing more greater burden on myself than I perhaps ought to.. I you know... very sensitive to the implication of being called lazy or being told I was expecting an unfair advantage so many times. I am very sensitive to that. And that's another reason why I find using a scribe a stenographer somewhat difficult. Another thing is that most people who opt to do it for me. (political science senior)

The situation described above demonstrates the difficulty students with LD have interacting with others. The respondent points out that the use of a scribe is problematic in writing because his process of writing is characterized by “a lot of starts and stops” that make the interaction with the scribe problematic. He also describes how he is sensitive to being seen as lazy or getting an unfair advantage because of this accommodation. Having to interact with a scribe makes the person vulnerable to stigma. The situation forces one to display his problems to other people when in most cases these problems would be hidden from view. There is also the concern that he will be placed in a position of dependency by having the scribe influencing his work.

Classroom Strategies

Another set of accommodations that are provided for college students with learning disabilities are note-takers and the use of tape recorders in classes. Some of the respondents have trouble with taking notes in class because of their LD and were allowed to tape record lectures. Listening to the lecture and writing down important parts are difficult for students with dyslexia. Respondents with the dual diagnosis of dyslexia and attention deficit disorder reported extreme difficulty with paying

attention in class. Even if they were able to keep up with PowerPoint presentations in class, some respondents reported having trouble with retaining the information after class. One of the respondents discussed his problem with taking class notes:

I mentioned writing. I tape record my class and I pretty much rewrite my notes because my notes are illegible. Not readable. After class... after I get done with class or as well as. They are incomplete because I can only pick up so much and try to play it for me... try to write it down into complete sentences. So something I would understand. So I tape record and the I pretty much rewrite my notes. And then... for a class that lasts for over an hour, I could probably be spending three hours dictating what I just... from the tape recorder. Because so much information and so much I did miss when I taking on the notes. (biology senior)

The student describes the difficulty with taking notes in class. Some individuals with LD have poor handwriting skills. Problems with spelling, handwriting, and retaining information can make note-taking difficult for individuals with LD. Sometimes class notes that the individual takes are illegible after class. Their own notes do not make any sense to them. Tape recording lectures, having a note-taker, and rewriting notes are strategies that respondents used to cope with the problem.

Lecturing is a common teaching method in college courses. This method has its advantages and disadvantages for individuals with LD. Some claimed that lectures were too boring, and it was difficult to pay attention:

Boredom. Boredom would be a big one. Well, sometimes occasionally I will be sitting in class and then I will just pack my shit and leave. But that's because I am not learning anything. And there is really no point for me to be there. (political science sophomore)

Although the lecturing method can be problematic, some of the respondents found the lecturing method as preferable to other teaching methods. Many of the respondents

attributed attending class and listening to lectures as the reason for their success in school.

R: If I can hear it, I can remember it. Okay so, I make sure that I go to every single lecture. And it's always to my disadvantage if it don't, because I won't remember it even if I read it. I have to read something several times. Many times before I really, really remember it. And even then sometimes I don't. But if I can hear it, like if I am studying for a test and there is a lot of different information, I will seek out one of my classmates and will go over it verbally a lot because then I will remember it. And I know I will remember it. Or I can remember, I think back what did she say in this lecture. This one particular lecture. And I can usually remember that. So in that way that's how I process a lot of my information through verbal communication. (social work senior)

This individual discusses how lecturing is an effective teaching method for her because verbal communication – hearing the information – is the best way for her to learn. Listening to information was seen as a better way to learn information than reading. Some of the students were able to get books on tape as an accommodation. The respondent above used a software program called “Read Please” that transfers texts into spoken word.

However, many of the respondents claimed that books on tape were not an effective strategy for studying because it was more time consuming.

Oh yeah. Yeah. And I have used books on tape. Which I don't usually like because it's a kind of.... I mean, it gets. I mean you sit there and listen to it. It's easier to be distracted then it is than you know. Can sometimes be more time consuming if you sit there and you listen to something as opposed to just sitting down and reading it. And actually taking time to read slowly and highlight what's important. (history junior)

Respondents reported that attending classes was enough to be a successful student. Attending class was viewed as a strategy for success by respondents with dyslexia.

You know. I found in college more than high school, the discussion sections will tell about what the book meant. You kind of read the jist of it. And listen to them talk about it in class. You do okay. You going to read the book and it's on the test. Then you are going to read the book now. So college professors want you to read they should put it on the test. That will get you to do it. (journalism junior)

Another student claimed that this was also a strategy that she used to maintain a good grade in her coursework.

I love going to class and know that I have my homework already done. And I don't... I mean usually I've been thinking of these classes like kind of a blow off class. And I don't really read that after awhile. I'm just, realize that the notes are sufficient for the test and they don't rely on the book. So I will usually stop studying for a class and I'll just base it off the notes because I never miss class. I can't. Cause that is the most beneficial learning I get is going to class. (anthropology sophomore)

Attending class is viewed as a more effective use of time than spending time reading the textbooks for the course. The information that is considered important (meaning that is will be on the exam) is said in class. Another reason that attending class was seen as an effective learning strategy is that the information is spoken.

And then cause hearing someone say it and not use all those little words make a lot of... I don't know just it makes so much simpler to understand. (anthropology sophomore)

The respondent points out her strength in understanding material comes from hearing the information rather than reading it. In the interview she mentions several other instances as to how she is able to access information.

Scheduling Courses as a Strategy

Many of the students keep their learning difficulties in mind when they make decisions about courses and scheduling. Respondents in the sample represented a

range of learning disorders. Respondents anticipated difficult courses by planning to balance them with easier courses.

Yes I do. I think about what is going on. Like next semester I got set for eighteen hours. But I think it will be all right considering it is in my main major of computer science, or MIS rather. I never really had any problems in those classes. There is only one class that I have problems with in the computer science area and that is with programming. And that is because it is learning another language. So there is a little bit more studying involved into it. And next semester does not look there is going to be too much program language. (business administration junior)

One strategy is to arrange more difficult courses later in one's college career.

Most of these courses were writing intensive courses, math courses and foreign language courses. These courses were put off until later in order to get other graduation requirements out of the way.

Writing is hard. I have learned. Like I was terrible writer. Before I use to...Before my mother would have typed everything because I would rather write it. Being in college you have to type it. So I have been. So I don't take classes that are writing intensive. I am pushing that off until I get through Spanish. Because that is everyday, and once where I didn't start, it's going to be everyday for me no matter what. (anthropology sophomore)

Another way to deal with difficult classes is to take the class during the summer.

Selecting the Right Environment

The right environment is viewed as essential to studying for students.

Environments are filled with distractions and other pitfalls. Noise was one of the major distractions that interfered with studying. A common accommodation for college students with LD is a space free from distractions. Many of the respondents

reported that many settings contained distractions that interfered with their performance.

I go to the library a lot. Or I will study when my roommate is not home. At the library, I cannot study in the big room that they have where most students they all go to some place where I know I can be completely by myself. And lucky our library is so big that they have plenty of places like that. But when I used to take the exams in the lecture hall, I would sit in the very front in the corner so that I would you know be somewhat blinded by all the other people. Because every movement, you know, you looked up. For me I could not just sit and stay, keep my eyes on my own paper. And it helps that to sit in the front because the teachers are so crazy about cheating. So if you sit in the front you can look around. I would just look around too much. Like look up at the ceiling. That just wastes time. So if I keep looking up.... If there is a whole line of people done. And they are making noises, rustling papers. Every time you look up it takes seconds away from the exam. (marketing junior)

People were another distraction for students.

And I like having all my classes close together to kind of get them out of the way. I don't like having them spaced out. So I try to... like this semester, everything is taken up and I am sitting on campus. I get a lot accomplished on campus, but sometimes there's too many distractions. Like somebody will walk by and I'll be, "I'm wondering where they are going?" And then it's all downhill from there. (secondary education sophomore)

Places with heavy traffic are distracting to students with attention deficit disorder and for other students with LD too. Many of the respondents reported that they prefer studying in their own room or in a quiet place in the library. Finding a private space can be difficult for some because of roommates.

It's a lot different. Good in some ways. And annoying to me, frustrating in some ways. Having people constantly around. That is good at times. But can be frustrating at times especially living in a fraternity house.

Social activities in college life have an impact on the amount of time an individual studies. Many of the respondents had many duties and obligations competing for

their attention. Being a member of a fraternity or sorority was a common activity for many of the respondents at Private College.

Like I come up here. Or go to the library. Studying at the fraternity house doesn't really work contrary to even having a study room and stuff. It still doesn't work. You still can just say, "Screw it. I am going to do something else that I rather do." I got off to a very good start in college. I think that I first semester of my freshman year. And then I got sort of became over-confident and took it easy and slacked off some. And tried to see what... How much not doing what I can get. I did a bunch of stuff that didn't work. And I had not good grades. And I was disappointed with my performance and stuff and so. It still can be a battle if sometimes I want to play a video game and stuff. If I start doing something I want to do, I can realize how the time can just slip away. And then I just start getting frustrated with myself for realizing how much time I have wasted.

So by the time we got done with the book I am half through it. So move on to the next one. I am still reading along with it. I'm just not reading when they are reading it. So...yes I could... I could not be in fraternity and do fun things with that. I could not have a job and do... I enjoy my job. It's not to have money. It's because it's fun. So I could not work and could not be in a fraternity and I could do school solid. And I would have a fairly miserable existence. So I could do everything I have to. I could read everything. I could write everything. I could do really great stuff. But do I want to spend four years in college doing that? (journalism sophomore)

For the respondent above and many others, electronic media are as a distraction.

Students have numerous electronic gadgets that compete for their attention. During one of the interviews one of the respondent's cell phone kept ringing. Since most of a student's work is done on computer, the temptation to check e-mail, surf the Web, or play video games was constant.

I don't have television personally. I hate television. I don't own one. I haven't owned one for years. It's like a siren. It's incredibly distracting to me. Like more so than any other thing. Television distracts me enormously. I see it as a distraction. I used to think it – "it's television." Now I think of it as purely distraction. Well, mean it could have something to do with my more

likely.. it could have something to do with my disability.... Where... I'm not really sure how this works, but. For some reason... because I can get distracted. I mean it's pretty apparent for somebody who I think maybe visual input distracts me from conceptual manipulation -- possibly. I felt that... (sociology senior)

Television is a source of distraction as well. The respondent above talks about how television is a distraction when it comes to studying and how he sees it connected to his learning disability.

Individuals have to force themselves to maintain or regain their attention to the activity they are doing.

Um .. deal with this.. get a "it's a bit of a journey" thing. I find that I verging off topic and I have to steer myself back into class. I also deal with it by making certain I am participating in class. So I know that I am actually paying attention and putting something back into the class. (anthropology freshman)

One of the strategies that individuals use is to ask questions about the lecture and be a more active participant in the classroom. One of the respondents said she asked questions in most classes including large lecture classes.

Avoidance strategies

One of the strategies that students with LD use in their college career is avoidance strategies. Avoidance strategies are used to avoid performances that might lead to mistakes and stigmatization. In the quote below, the student talks about how she avoids certain tasks when working with other people.

Yeah. If we are in a group, I try not to take notes because nobody can read them anyway. I volunteer to do other things. Like if we have research to do. I volunteer to be the first one at the library and get the information. Somebody else can put into form if it is a group paper. Because I don't want

my disability affecting their grade. Okay. So in those words yes. I do avoid certain jobs in a group setting. (social work senior)

Avoidance strategies for students with learning disabilities are more likely to be employed in elementary and secondary school. Many students with dyslexia mentioned the anxiety that they face in elementary and secondary school when it came to reading aloud in class.

Accommodations as Stress Relievers

For many of the respondents the accommodations and strategies were seen more as stress relievers than anything else. When asked about the accommodations, many of the respondents claimed that they do not use all the time entitled to them during examinations and assignments.

Well, I mean really I think since I have those accommodations I don't. In the exams that I don't use the accommodation I'm fine. I'm just as much.... I have no problems at all. When I, before I got, the accommodations I would feel really stressed. My heart would be beating. And that's why I got the anxiety. They thought I had anxiety attacks. Physical ill feelings. When I was first talking to a doctor about it, they said that you feel.... you feel... submit to talking in your head and then you get these physical feelings. And then the physical feelings make your mind wander even more. And it just keeps cycling until you feel like. .. You know, I like sitting in the test center while I can't think. And then at times I got a B on the test. So I mean I used to have horrible problems with it. But now I really feel very comfortable with school. Just to be having the accommodations for that one class. (marketing junior)

The student above describes the impact that accommodations have had on her test-taking experience and her overall grades. Testing is marked with feelings of anxiety and being physically sick. But with the accommodations available for one difficult class, test taking is not as stressful.

Feelings of stress are common among all college students not confined to students with learning disabilities. College students have numerous academic and

social obligations that interfere with performance. Many of the respondents talked about how their stress was relieved by the presence of accommodations and claimed that the accommodation could be used by other students as well.

Learning Disability and Decision of Major

One of the dilemmas that individuals with LD face is the expectation of what they should do as a course of study or as a choice of career. Performance difficulties are seen as a partial reason for not selecting a particular major. A number of the respondents said that they were not going to be English majors or math majors.

No, I. I know I was no English major. That's for sure. And I am no math major. Because I just never. I find math interesting. I just don't have the mind for it. I mean. If someone's willing to sit with me for hours on end and talk to me like a little and explain math simple-minded, then I am all for it. But for..how this space (????) And how fast they teach it and their expectations for a math major or an English major. (biology senior)

One of the ways in which college students manage their learning disability and their college career is the selection of major. The major is a source of identity for many college students. During one's college career, the major is a salient identity in which one defines him or herself.

I started to speak, but then he interrupted me one last time. Looking directly at my mom and me, her smirked and said, "Jonathan, what are you planning to major in?"

"English," I said.

"English?" he said. "Really?" he laughed. "Is that the best major for you? Perhaps you should rethink that. To be an English major, you need to know how to spell, how to use grammar correctly, and you certainly need to be able to write. It seems that those are your weaknesses. Perhaps you should consider something, well, something less intellectual." (Mooney and Cole 2000: 46)

For college students with learning disabilities, their learning disability can influence their choice of major. Many of the respondents discussed how their major that played on their strengths rather than their problems.

Considering that my life is so centered around academia: yes. If not for that then I like I don't feel. Well, actually now that I think about it, the jobs that I can do are limited outside. Like for instance, I used to work at Wal-mart as a truck unloader. I loved it because it was simple, hard manual labor. It was repetitive and stuff. It was the kind of work to keep you interested you know. But put me in front of a cash register. Especially if it doesn't have mathematical stuff. It doesn't calculate. I mean I can't do it. I worked for a charity-- football concession stand. And I could not work the register. I can't. I was like, "you gave me a ten. Hold on a second. Five fifty. Now what did you give me again. Hold on." I can't juggle in my head. I can't do too much. Steady linear sorts of stuff. I cannot do lots of stuff at a time. And like cashier jobs are pretty much closed to me. Anything that is low-level labor that does not... that's not just repetitive and mindless I can't do because you know... unless it's like sales. Like, "Hey, do you want to buy this." That's easy enough. But like dealing with figures or dates quickly I can't do that. So that's I would be, there is an entire segment of my life that I can't do. I guess that would be a larger (sociology senior)

For some students with learning disabilities, one of the respondents with dyslexia and problems with written expression was a major in journalism, which requires a great deal of reading and writing. Others questioned his choice of major.

Journalism is writing. If you are not good at writing, why would you choose journalism? It's like an English major. A lot of people that know me. That is if they do in the...."Well, you have to take a test in here." I'll read and you know. Journalism major yeah I am. That doesn't mean I can't do it. I'm not as quick or as good. It takes longer to get there. Initially, there was some... "Journalism? Really?" "Okay. Go for it." I think I got that a little bit for people who knew about me. No one has ever discouraged in the slightest. But there was that, "Really? Okay." You can do that but it is going to be a lot of work." It is a lot of work initially for everybody, and that is going to be a lot more. That what I always say that I guess. (broadcast journalism junior)

Another student switched majors from psychology to anthropology deciding that anthropology would be a better fit for her than sociology.

They are like the three different views on how to study people. And I like both parts. Well sociology is all numbers to me. I mean that is what I kind of see it is. But anthropology I had to change it cause you just talk to people. You get your information from people. I mean you can do.... There are some people who use more numbers. But a lot like cultural anthropology they don't do that. (anthropology sophomore)

This anthropology student found her major to be a better fit for her because of its emphasis on story-telling which makes material more meaningful and applicable to her life. She also describes her interest in the field and wishes to continue but has reservations about the future. One of the issues that influence the choice of major was the requirements in math, reading, and/or writing. Math requirements were one of the factors that steered some of the respondents away from majors in science and engineering and towards majors in social sciences. Writing intensive majors were also considered problematic.

When I was a little kid I wanted to be a scientist. Well, if I couldn't be a construction worker then I would be a scientist. That was the goal back then. But I wanted to go into the natural sciences. I wanted to go into chemistry. Especially physics because it is so cool. And I can't do it. I just can't do that sort of mental gymnastics. Even though I have a fiber in my I think I would . I'm not sure exactly that is. I would like to find out. But I.... If I had done well that junior year of chemistry class, it would have been much more likely that I would have gone and continue in natural sciences or minored in it or something. But I am not good at it. Not good at the math side of it. But I'm like the reasoning and ideas behind it. That's why I like the social sciences you don't have to deal with it as much. SSPS does much of the math juggling. Also, I mean when I came here I was social studies education major. They have to take a lot of math. And that was part of my motivation for taking sociology. (sociology senior)

In this case the respondent wanted to be a scientist but has trouble with math. The math requirements were a barrier to being a major in the natural sciences. Sociology was seen as a compromise major. Other respondents described their selection of a major as a compromise between their interests and their strengths and weaknesses as

a student. By selecting a compromise major individuals are able to think of themselves as achieving an anticipatory identity (Ghaziani 2004). This identity focuses on the idealized version of a self-concept. The anticipatory identity is the romanticized reflection on a goal career or image of the future that an individual has in mind. The sociology student above has an academic career as his anticipatory identity. This anticipatory identity of becoming an academic was challenged with his actualized identity over the course of the study. Instead of having a research career based his anticipatory identity transformed into one of a college teacher. This transformation of his anticipatory identity was a result of a setback in a research thesis for his degree.

Dell-Amen and Rosenbaum (2002) discuss the consequences of efforts of stigma-free remediation in community colleges. One of the consequences is that individuals have educational expectations that might not be realized. For many of the students in this study, this issue was salient in their educational careers. They acknowledged their difficulties and suggested that these difficulties might

In another case, a student with dyslexia explained his change in major to history. The rationale for his change in major was based on the perception of the performance pressures in the business school.

I think. I changed my major...This is the third time I changed my major, too. But I am definitely keeping it there. It should have been that when I started. And think it is primarily having a relatively decent background in it. And it being something that I do where I know I can achieve and not necessarily be, like you said earlier compared to other students. Like I was studying business before, and the first thing they say when you come to Public University that business has a lot of people in it. And that they take people with highest GPAs to get in the class. And then I mean things like that just totally stress me out. I don't even like dealing with the mind set of walking into a test and being like if I don't get an eighty-five on this test or higher, then I will not get

into this department. I don't think it's worth that anyway to be honest. But I changed it to history basically because it was something interested in, and it was something that I figured I would be able to succeed in. And do pretty well in. (history junior)

The competitive nature of the major was defined as a problem. Some undergraduate majors have a reputation as being more competitive and cutthroat than others (Conrad 1986). In such an environment, he explains that he would be at a disadvantage in terms grades. The strategy for him was to switch to a major in which he was interested and could succeed.

Leaving Accommodations Behind

Students attend college with the goal of entering the workforce in a couple of years. Many of the students anticipated the world of work when dealing with their accommodations. The respondents knew that outside the academic setting, accommodations would not be available to them. Some of the respondents have coping strategies in place for dealing with employers. One of the non-traditional college students interviewed that she was very cautious about hiding her dyslexia from possible employers. She also limited herself to the types of employment that would not reveal her LD. Madaus et al (2002) studied the issue of disclosure to employers by college graduates with LD. The reason for not disclosing information about one's LD was that respondents felt that it would not affect one's ability to do the job and the fear of negative reactions by others. These concerns were present in this study as well.

Many defined their accommodations in the same terms as addiction to medication. They worried that relying too much on accommodations would be harmful to their future career.

Psychologically they are not going to help me out that much because I'll either A- I will be dependent on them or expecting them. Or B – um just have to get along with them ..cold turkey on the idea. I mean I tried to set up an internship with a bike shop so that I can learn how to actually run business. And um they are not going to be able to tolerate uh me taking too long doing something or getting distracted and that is something I need to really work on. (anthropology sophomore)

The concern for this is that the college a safe or protected environment for students with LD in that they are given accommodations to help them cope with their academic difficulties. Meanwhile the world of work does not allow for accommodations for individuals with LD. Even though there are laws against the discrimination of persons with disabilities, many of the respondents felt that these laws will not apply to them. Physical disabilities would not lead to problems in the types of work that many of the respondents expected to go into after college.

One of the goals of college disabilities services is for students to become independent of academic accommodations.

I'm glad you said that because our number one goal is independence. And we have a saying in our office, "Treat college like a job." That's going to be on our new Web page. And the reason that... the reason that we've had said that is from what you were just talking about. We don't want students to be dependent. But we also don't want them to not get the accommodations they need because of all the reasons we were just talking about because of stigma and all that. But the less accommodation you can use now, and we tell them that.... it is a weaning consent. Every time they can try to do something on their own. It means this is their practice time because when they get out into the real world like you said they are not going to have an office like this. And they are not going to have people who are going to be defending them, and helping them, and encouraging them. Well, they might but not the way that we do. So we tell them, "This is your training. Treat college like a job.

And don't be coming here to us and using your disability as an excuse for why you overslept, why you missed a paper, why you didn't do this, blah, blah, blah." I say, "You know what. In the real world your boss isn't going to care. And that's why you treat college like a job because it's truly..." Like you said it's a weaning process. And we do encourage that. But I guess what I was thinking about was the students who truly need the accommodation because of that stigma or because of laziness, or because of whatever. But the student who is truly trying to do it because they want to be more independent over here and maybe they think by and they can by going through this process they are building up coping mechanisms and they are figuring out the short cuts to do things. And they are doing so when they get out in the real world they've learned how to cope. (Learning disability staff member)

In this quote, the learning disability specialist describes the mission of her office is to prepare students for the "real" world by giving them the coping mechanisms necessary to succeed. College is viewed as a form of anticipatory socialization for entering the work force. It becomes a place where one needs to learn to make it on one's own without the help of assistance. Most of the respondents claimed that this was the case in their own situation. The use of accommodations was less than previously used during elementary or secondary schooling.

My parents were actually very supportive of the idea. And they suggested most of the time that I take advantage more often of what I can get down here. Which I don't because I feel that like in the real world they are not going to have LD accommodations. So what I am going to have to do is learn how to do without it. I just suspect I am going eventually to have to learn how to take things with the time limits. And just get it done whether I like it or not.

The university setting is viewed as an in-between stage in the passage from childhood to adulthood. In many ways it was interrupted as a form of anticipatory socialization for the respondents. The college setting is where one has to prepare for the world of work in which accommodations will not be made. Many of the respondents reported testing their abilities without the accommodations in some classes.

Even though many respondents and individuals who work with students with LD talk about the need to learn to how cope without the use of accommodations, parents still urge their use.

My mom was always the make sure you get it. I mean, you have something on paper. Get it because you can use it. I mean, it's an advantage in a way that you can use it. But then my dad I always talked about it to him. "Dad I'm not using it. I am using it less." I don't need it as much. And I mentioned it to my mom but she, at the beginning of the semester, she always says, "As soon as you realize you need it, mention it. Because don't wait. The longer you wait it just becomes more of a problem." But I think as time goes on, I am always more willing to say to my dad, "I am using it less." (anthropology sophomore)

The woman quoted above claims that she does not use the accommodations as much as before even though her mother tells her that she should use them.

Many of the activities and requirements in academic settings are unique, especially written tests. Many of the respondents thought that they would not face these activities in the work force and therefore would not be needing accommodations.

I think questionable after school... but I don't think it will really be subject to me in anyway. If it is, I know it will be something that I will definitely be able to work around. Because I don't think in any job they are going to be asking fifty multiple choice questions about political science with distracter on every single thing. I mean I can't say that when I write something, if I work for a business or whatever work for. But if I have to write something it will be something that I will have... I will need somebody to proofread it. But that is not a concern of mine right now. (history junior)

One of the many issues that the respondents faced was with the testing in school.

The types of tests and the requirement for them are limited to academic settings and would not be required of them in the workforce.

That's going to be a little bit more obvious then having a problem with.... I mean I probably won't have any timed situations ever again after or multiple

choice tests. That's the types of things that exist in the work place.
(marketing junior)

For this respondent, her learning disability is limited to schooling. Her learning disability is with testing anxiety. In the workplace, it is assumed that the routines will be more flexible and that she will be able to function without any problems.

One of the ways in which individuals with LD prepared for being free from the use of accommodations was to not use accommodations for some of their classes. Some of the respondents did not use all the accommodations that they were entitled to. Many of them waited to see if they can do well in the class without them.

One of the respondents talked about how he would have to teach himself grammar and the ability to edit his work in the future.

Don't really think about that. It doesn't affect me that much that I am worried about it. Sure in twenty years when I don't have a secretary. Yeah it might suck for a while until I teach myself how to do the grammar and teach myself how to revise my own stuff. (history and political science major)

Many of the respondents had an optimistic view of the future. They did not feel that their learning disability will affect them once they have adjusted to their jobs. This contributed to the distancing one from a disability identity. Their problems were bounded to academic situations.

Others respondents talked about how their learning disability might be a problem depending on the employment they would have in the future.

It depends on what I end up doing. Like if I do something were I don't have to talk then it wouldn't be problem. But the only thing that I am scared about. Like if I wanted to be an anthropologist and research it, I can't write. Like I couldn't write a book. And I think about like what if I like I have a friend that directs documentaries for PBS. What if asked him to do something for my work. Because I know that whatever I do is going to be hard. But then I also think, "Oh I want to be a teacher." And I know that it is not fair.. Like there is

no way I can be a professor. Because I couldn't put some people through me trying to talk if can't get over. Maybe I'll get over it. Maybe I can learn like go through a class where I can learn how to speak. Or verbal preparation that I need like if I have to go into education. But then I think what I if I was at lower education? You know I always thought being a teacher would be incredibly cool. (anthropology sophomore)

For this individual, her learning disabilities were defined as more than a minor issue or a nuisance. It is rather viewed as an obstacle that would prevent or close certain opportunities by acknowledging that whatever she is going to do is "going to be hard." She claims to be interested in teaching but being a professor is not likely because of her problems with writing. However, teaching in elementary or secondary school was also a concern because of how she viewed her verbal ability. She worries that she would not be able to communicate with others. Becoming a teacher would require extra effort to "learn how to speak."

In another quote, a student talked about finding work that would be conducive to his interests.

As far as the future I hope find kinds of work that are more conducive to my strengths. Obviously I have to find work that is probably academic and degree. Because some people think that arrogance for me.. it's just as simple as I can't do physically one of the other kinds of things. I am thinking very strongly about doing research and writing. Not entirely sure what direction I'll go. Being I have a strong political- social critique in what I want to do. Also, devise some strategies and strategic thinking sort of situations: international relations, as to finding ways to break through communications barriers. And you know communicate a message and also you know do a lot of theological study. So that ... to be really honest I don't know. And you know I think that writing books might be one of the most conducive things for me. I mean obviously I need to.. I have improve some of time management skills. (political science senior)

Cooling out the Mark

In one interview, an individual talked about his problems with a research thesis that did not achieve what he was hoping. This led him to change his thinking about what was possible for him.

It's been changing recently. I've had several experiences. I have a girlfriend who is vastly more intelligent than I am. She's 22 in a doctoral program and does like mathematical modeling and stuff. And my friends are brilliant. It's just that my... the way I think and my writing everything has become apparent to me that I do have a disability. I have some issues. It's so funny my view of myself has been changing. My locus of control, lack of banter. (???) Instead kind of moving down a little bit. Well maybe I can't do everything that I thought I could. My thesis didn't work out. My hypothesis was wrong and it didn't get completed because of that. It turned me off really bad. But seeing myself now, I just try to have a fair assessment of what I can and can't do. I didn't get any (???) do this a whole lot so I don't think about myself anymore. You know what I mean restricting... I try to recognize limitations in ability. But not to reify all the abilities into emerging entities that doesn't...

Erving Goffman's "Cooling out the Mark" is when individuals come to the realization that one has been cheated and has to accept the fact of it. In educational settings many individuals have high aspirations for the future. Henry is a sociology major who when I first spoke to him had high aspirations for attending graduate school. But when I spoke to him in a follow-up interview, he described troubles with his thesis.

Yeah. I mean of course....commentary. One of my friends who is a professor in economics said I'm going to be a brilliant, brilliant teacher. I'm not sure about how much you are going to be an academic. But you'll be an awesome teacher. I was like, "Thanks." (sociology major senior)

When asked about how he came to this realization, he responded as follows:

It's accumulating. Well, I have three attempts at major papers in sociology and each one has failed miserably. This final one was just like, "Man." You have got to reassess what you think you can do. Because I am surrounded by brilliant people who can do just about anything they want. And so like I just pretty much produced shit--- orientation.

Although his self-concept of becoming a sociologist was dealt a blow, he still planned to attend graduate school. The interaction with others affected how he viewed his self in terms of being an academic.

Medication Strategies

Dyslexia is often accompanied with attention disorders. Many of the respondents were also on medication for either attention deficit disorder or anxiety. Numerous drugs to control ADD were mentioned by the respondents. Many of the respondents were given medication specifically to cope with academic problems caused by their disorder. Unlike other types of medication, ADD medication does not need to be taken everyday.

Yeah. There is... because my doctor prescribed you know a certain amount. But he is like, "You can take it when you need it." You know he is like.... Because I don't like (says in an emphatic tone) to be on medication. And he knows that. And so that is one of the reasons he is like you know. "I know you are smart enough to know when you are going to need this and when you are not." And also with the kind of drug that it is, I don't want to become dependent on it. And I want to try to make myself do as much on my own as I can. Because I don't want become somebody who is dependent on a medication instead of learning I could deal with the disability itself. So that's the main reason that I don't take it. Like if I going to.... If I know I have to study all day you know or something like then I make sure I take it. You know on time and stuff like that. Or if I had an exam, I make sure that I take it. But I normally only take it in the morning to kind of get myself going. And once I like if I can get myself to focus early in the day, then I am usually for the rest of the day. But there are some days when I can take all my Ritalin like I'm supposed to. (secondary education sophomore)

The respondent above was given some leeway to decide when to take medication.

Another respondent was also encouraged to test different ways in which to take the medication in order to see what works best. Physicians encouraged respondents to

take “vacations” from ADD medications in order to prevent drug tolerance and to keep the medication effective.

Some of the respondents reported taking the medication only around tests and final exams. It helps during exams to keep one focused on the tasks at hand but there are still powerful side effects that make one want to control its usage.

I mean it's like an amphetamine so it just keeps you up at night. And it doesn't allow you to. And you really have to watch what you eat on it. I mean, because you don't eat and it's probably one of the most unhealthy drugs to take I would say. It's a lower dose of speed. It's just kind of physically and emotionally exhausting. Usually when I take it, I mean, I usually study for tests for like days and nights before. Like literally days and nights. And don't get... hardly sleep. I mean it is just nice not to take it for awhile.
(history junior)

Another issue demonstrated in the quote above is the fear of addiction. She also described her resistance to taking too much medication and becoming dependent on it. She claimed at one point in the interview, “It's kind of something I want to keep at a distance because I don't want to become dependent upon it. I want to do as much as I can on my own.” The respondent acknowledged the need for the medication at times but wanted to make sure that she controlled the medication rather than become dependent on it.

I would say it mostly depends on what I have to do. Like there are some doctors that I have had, they are kind of like, “Stop taking your medication over the summer just because you don't really need to.” My second therapist who was ADD was like, “You have stuff you need to do every day. You need to learn every day. Like you need to drive. You need to take it every day. There is no reason...” He said every once in awhile he says to take a break from it. “Every once in awhile just don't take it one day just to see what you are like. Just to kind of remind yourself that you are ADD and the medication does help you. You know just to kind of remind yourself.” There always people who are totally like, you know, “I'm fine. I don't need this medication. I'm doing fine.” You know. I will stop using it and I kind of realize that... I don't know, I think there is a lot of people with ADD who

have, I wouldn't say they're worse drivers but I would probably say they have more situations, more close calls. Like they will kind of see something that attracts their attention. Most of the guys I take to they will see an attractive woman. It's easier when you are on the medication. (English sophomore)

Although medication was seen as beneficial at times, one of the respondents minimized its importance in controlling attention deficit disorder:

It's just to sustain yourself and realize that the medication is helping. But the medication's like ten percent say of control ADD. And I would say the other ninety percent is therapy and understanding what works for you and understanding what your problems are and how to take care of them. (English freshman)

Medication is seen as a temporary measure to help with immediate problems. It was not viewed to be a long-term solution for the problems associated with ADD. In the quote below, a student with test-taking anxiety discussed her temporary use of anti-anxiety medication to help her with exams.

R: Oh yeah. Well, actually after all this. Actually a couple of weeks before I had my all the testing done, that I was put on anxiety medication. I am not taking it anymore. But that helped me for awhile. But they don't really. I mean they told me that maybe I should go to therapy. But the therapist said you don't have to come back. You don't have anything that I could help you with, unless I want to come back and talk. I really think that it's like I'm scared I guess. These accommodations have changed everything for me. Even though I don't even really take advantage of them. Just knowing that I can take advantage of them is really helpful. (marketing junior)

Medication was defined as beneficial when it came to dealing with immediate tasks at hand. When medication was used in limited, bounded situations, it was not viewed as threatening to the individual. Medication use increased when important--during exams and when important assignments were coming due. After deadlines passed, some individuals relaxed the taking of medication. Many individuals in the study

claimed that they felt that medication, in general, was a dangerous thing because they feared the problem of addiction.

Resisting medication was a common theme in many of the interviews. Drugs for attention deficit disorder are powerful drugs that have unpleasant side effects. A couple of the respondents reported experiencing a lot of side effects from their medication such as mood swings, a loss of appetite, and sleeplessness.

I was. Hell yeah. They doped me up on some Ritalin for nine years maybe. And then I stopped taking it because it gave me the mood swings or whatever. And made me not hungry. And then they moved me to Adderall. Adderall worked better. But the time I started taking Adderall I just didn't care anymore. Sitting down and concentrating for six hours was not a main concern at that point. (history/political science major)

The lack of control over the medication was also a problem for some of the respondents. Many of the respondents reported feeling that medication was forced on them by doctors and parents.

R: I mean, I never... I've always felt that. I started drifting out actually. I always have resisted taking medication because I don't think. I don't think anybody should be subjected to take the medication if they don't feel like they should., especially something like Adderall. (law student second year)

One of the ways in which medication was defined as a problem was the issue of having the medication "forced on them." College is a transitional stage in life in which individuals experience tensions between old and new identities (Holstrom, Karp, and Gray 2002). An important tension that college students face is the tension between managing everyday life and being managed. Taking medication is one of the issues of control that college students with LD face. In the two quotes above the respondents talk about how attention deficit medication was imposed on them by

others. Many of the students resisted medication because the medication was seen as having side effects that were too powerful.

Resistance to medication gives the individual a sense of agency in the management of their lives. Many of the respondents talked about being “put on medication” by others. Parents pushed medication on their children, doctors pushed medications on their patients, and school administrators required medications of their students. Respondents who took medication wished to assert their own power over the taking of medication. They wanted to make their own medication regimens and not be subjected to a strict daily schedule.

For many individuals with learning disabilities, the strategies they develop over time. There was no systematic method for developing academic strategies. Few sought advice or counseling on how to develop effective academic strategies from books on educating students with LD or learning disability specialists. This could possibly be the result of how individuals viewed their disability. Many of the respondents claimed that their disability was not a significant problem and, therefore, did not need to develop an elaborate set of strategies to cope with problems. Also, there was a lack of a collective activity among the respondents with other individuals with learning disabilities. Respondents viewed their academic difficulties in individualistic terms. Their problems are not the same as others with LD, who may need more formal training in academic skills.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I examined the ways in which individuals with learning disabilities are stigmatized by others. The ways in which respondents talked about stigma in the interviews demonstrates the variation among the individuals. The experience of stigma is subjective. Many of the respondents claimed not to feel stigmatized by their LD. Others recalled many negative experiences with their LD both as children and as adults.

One of the issues with learning disabilities is the interactional nature of the condition. While other research focus on the psychological aspects of learning disabilities or the “discovery” of the category, I contend that much of the issues with stigma comes from the problems that happen in the everyday interactions of individuals with LD. The learning disability identity was a product of the difficult interactions as much as official labeling. An LD diagnosis can be hidden from others. But mistakes in performance are more difficult to cover.

Individuals with learning disabilities are increasingly become more common in college settings. The policies and procedures for dealing with students with LD are similar among the two colleges in this study. However, the interviewees were attracted to the two institutions for different reasons. Students were attracted to Private College for its LD program. For the students at State University, various reasons were given but the disability services were not specifically cited as a reason

for their choice. All of the respondents seemed to be satisfied with the academic accommodations that were provided by the institutions.

The case of learning disabilities can inform sociologists on the concept of minor stigma (Ellis 1998; Renfrow 2004). Not every stigmatizing condition is viewed as threatening to one's overall self-concept. This is not to say that all individuals with LD viewed as unproblematic. Some of the experiences reported by the respondents could be considered traumatic to one's self-image. But many of the respondents felt that their LD was peripheral to their overall sense of self. Unlike other studies that examined how learning disabilities affected one's total self-image, this study suggests that individuals with learning disabilities tend to see the problems associated with LD limited to certain aspects of life. Also, even though a learning disability is viewed as a life long problem (Cramer and Ellis 1996) many of the respondents see the problems associated with LD as something that will eventually disappear.

The stigmatization of individuals with LD is unique in many ways. Unlike other types of disabilities, many individuals with LD do not see themselves as being stigmatized in the same terms that individuals with physical and mental disabilities are. Identity distancing was a predominant tactic that individuals with LD used when talking about themselves. Instead of embracing an identity, many individuals with LD preferred to minimize their problems in favor of being seen as "average." Many of the individuals did not embrace either extreme of being a poor student or a "cut-throat" student.

There was ambivalence with the LD label itself. On the one hand students found relief the diagnosis of a specific learning disability. It was a way to explain their academic difficulties that distanced themselves from more stigmatizing alternatives such as “retarded” or “lazy.” Also, learning disabilities are familiar to most people in contemporary American society. There was a level of acceptance of the concept of LD among the people they encountered.

On the other hand, there was still a negative stigma attached to the LD label. Many of the respondents talked about embarrassing situations that arose from their learning disability and the negative reactions of others. This negative aspect of LD was also present in the account-giving that individuals with LD had to contend with in certain circumstances. The burden of having to justify the diagnosis of LD and the accommodations that one received was seen as problematic for many of the respondents. Even though learning disabilities have gained some acceptance in institutions of higher learning, there is still a strong moral discourse used to against college students with LD. One of the implications of this study is to find ways in individuals with LD can understand their problem without the persistence questioning of the moral worth of their condition and accommodations.

According to the medicalization thesis (Conrad 1976), individuals are increasingly becoming under the control of medical authority and other forms of social control. In this study, individuals with LD are able to resist various forms of social control and exert their own autonomy on how they wish to function in academic setting. One form of resistance was with medication. Medication was seen as a necessary evil for many of the respondents who took medication to control their

attention deficit disorder. They were concerned with both the side effects and the potential for addiction.

There was also an aspect of resistance to the official definition of learning disabilities. The official definition of learning disabilities stresses the biological origin of the disability. Resistance took on number of different forms. One way interviewees resisted the official definition of LD was to conceptualize LD and ADD in their own ways. Some saw dyslexia as a temporary condition that they would grow out of once they left school and established adult work lives. Another way individuals resisted the official medical definition was to view learning problems as common to most people.

Realist assumptions are the basis of the medical model of learning disabilities. Many of the respondents held a realist view of their disability and embraced the medical model of disability especially when asked about the causes of LD. Genetics was frequently cited in one's explanation of their LD. Respondents pointed out family members that also experienced LD when talks about their school experiences. Although many of the respondents had some explanation about the origins of their disability, they did not develop an elaborate theory about the causation of learning disabilities.

The constructionist view of LD was also present in the interviews. There was a sense that LD was a situational problem that would not be problem for respondents once they were outside the academic world. The timed nature of many of the activities in the academic setting was one ways in which respondents understood the difficulties of their disability. Test taking under a limited amount of time was

understood as particularly problematic for many of the respondents. Most of the respondents claimed that once these obstacles were behind them, they would be able to be “free” of dyslexia.

Learning Disabilities Narratives

Many of the individuals in the study discussed their success or their ability to overcome the obstacles that they faced because of their learning disability. The success story was the dominant narrative among the respondents. Many of the respondents focused on their strengths and weaknesses as individuals. Learning disabilities were a personal problem in which an individual had to develop his or her own strategies to succeed. They did not actively seek out information or read literature on learning disabilities.

One of the narratives that also emerged the interviews was the critical discourse on LD and medicalization. Respondents were aware of the criticisms of dyslexia and ADD receives in the popular press. Some of the respondents took on these social criticisms in their own experiences with LD programs and medication. Taking on the criticisms of learning disabilities these respondents were able to emphasize their own personal self (Gubrium and Holstein 2000) as opposed to constructed images of LD that are common in contemporary society.

A narrative that was missing in the interviews was the noticeable lack of a collective identity or political activist narrative. None of the respondents expressed a collective identity among the learning disability in the same sense that other stigmatized groups have done. Since many of the respondents did not view their LD

as traumatic stigma, many of the respondents did not see themselves as having much in common with other LD students. The main focus in the interviews was how they as individuals learned to cope with problems through their own efforts. Many of the respondents did not spend much time learning more about learning disorders and simply relied on their own experiences to understand them.

Future Research

This research is limited to the study of college students with learning disabilities at four-year institutions. The interviewees represent one segment of the population of persons with LD. Most of the respondents in this study could be considered successful students due to the fact that they have been accepted into selective universities. This could limit how much one can say about the stigma of LD and the development of personal academic strategies among people diagnosed with LD. Many people with LD are not able to develop successful academic coping strategies that would allow them to enter college. Individuals with LD attending community colleges or universities with open admission policies may have different ways of dealing with the problems with schooling. One item for future research would be to examine how individuals at other universities experience their disability. Do they see it affecting them in the same ways that individuals in this study did? Are they more or less likely to experience stigma? Have they been able to develop a set of coping strategies to become successful in school?

APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

Background Information:

What is your specific learning disability?
How does your learning disability affect your school work?
How did you discover you had a learning disability?
When were you diagnosed with a learning disability?
In what ways did your diagnosis change the ways you approached school work?

How do you explain your learning disability to others? Teachers? Friends?

What tasks do you find most difficult?
What tasks do you find easy/easier than most? What tasks do you enjoy doing?
What school subject/courses you do you like the most?
What subjects or courses do you avoid?
What aspects of school/college do you enjoy?

College Experience

What did you look for when applying to college? Why did you pick the college you are currently attending?
Have you ever considered some thing other than college?
How does your disability help you or hinder your course work in your major? Areas of interest?
Do you ask for accommodations for a class? What types of accommodations do you receive?
Do you every tell people other than your instructors or administrators about your learning disability?
What situations do you tell someone about your learning disability?

Have you ever taken (or avoided) a course on the basis of its requirements (workload)?

Coping Strategies - Studying

How many hours a week do you spend studying?
What studying techniques have you found to be helpful when studying for an exam?
What do you do when you prepare for an exam? How do you study for different types of exams such as multiple choice compared to an essay exam?
What types of studying techniques do you helpful?
How did you develop your studying skills? Where did you pick up your particular studying/writing skills?

Coping Strategies – Stigma Management

Do you ever hide your disability from others?

Do you ever discuss your school work with other students?

Do you conceal your school work from others?

Do you know anyone else with a learning disability? Do you ever associate with other people with learning disabilities?

Do you every avoid reading aloud? Writing notes to others? Spelling in front of others?

How do you avoid reading aloud? Spelling or grammatical mistakes?

What do you do when you noticed you make a mistake? Mispronounced word? Misspelled word?

What happens when you receive a paper or test back from an instructor?

Do you ever tell people about your disability in order to explain a poor grade or a mistake in writing or reading?

If someone asks you about a grade or a mistake, how do you explain it?

APPENDIX B

Respondents by sex, age, major, class, and disability.

Sex/age	Major/Class	Disability
Male/20	Anthropology	Attention deficit disorder
Male/22	Biology/senior	Dyslexia and attention deficit disorder
Male/19	History/sophomore	Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder and dysgrapha
Male/19	History major/ political science minor/ senior	Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder and dyslexia
Male/24	Political science major/economics minor/senior	Dysgraphia, dyslexia, attention deficit disorder + obsessive compulsive disorder and depression
Female/20	Accounting student switching to Nursing/ sophomore	Written expression and reading comprehension and attention deficit disorder
Female/20	Anthropology/sophomore	Dyslexia
Male/22	Sociology/senior	Written expression
Male/23	Vet student/ first year	Dyslexia
Male/19	Broadcast journalism/sophomore	Reading comprehension and written expression
Female/19	Biochemistry switching to secondary education/between freshman and sophomore years	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (inattentive type)
Female/20		Attention deficit disorder
Female/40	Social work/senior	Dyslexia
Male/22	Social work/sophomore	Eye-hand coordination,

		dyslexia, and sequential order of things
Male/24	Law school student/second year	Not specific/ written expression and maybe attention deficit disorder
Female/20	Marketing/second year junior	Dyscalculia and test anxiety
Male/21	History/Sophomore	Reading and written expression
Male/22	MIS and business administration/ third year student	Dysgraphia and dyslexia and "somewhat" attention deficit disorder
Male/19	English/freshman	Attention deficit disorder
Male/19	Education switching to business	Dyslexia
Female/22	Journalism (advertising)/senior	Dyscalculia
Male/19	Business administration/freshman	Reading and written expression
Male/19	Undecided/freshman	Auditory

N=23

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