Contesting Stigma: On Goffman's Assumptions of Normative Order

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Goffman’s classic analysis of stigma tacitly suggests that it has a conditional nature. An important shortcoming, however, is that his analysis proceeds from the existence of a normatively shared understanding of the criteria for and the distribution of stigma assignment. I use data from Somali immigrants to Canada to further that argument by showing that stigma as a social object cannot be created when its cultural and structural contexts are disjunctive. Through reverse stigmatization, counter devaluation, and rejection of discrimination, Somalis reveal the problematics of stigma establishment and therein raise the question of who is stigmatizing whom.

In this article I undertake a reexamination of the nature and source of stigma by analyzing an instance whereby, contrary to Goffman’s assumed existence of normative order, a collectively shared understanding of stigma-normal processes cannot be empirically validated. Since Goffman’s (1963) classic work, research on the nature and source of stigma has generated important insights into how stigmatized individuals and groups manage to avoid potentially discrediting encounters. Researchers have applied Goffman’s insights to a variety of instances, ranging from conditions of mental and physical illness (Davis 1961; Link 1987) to studies of the homeless (Snow and Anderson 1987), first-generation Irish immigrants (Field 1994), welfare recipients (Rogers-Dilon 1995), topless dancers (Thompson and Harred 1992), and childless women in South India (Riessman 2000).

In spite of this diverse body of sociologically informed research on stigma (for a recent review, see Link and Phelan 2001), very few scholars have focused on the potential ways in which certain groups or individuals not only disavow dominant perspectives regarding stigma but also impose their own version of stigma on the dominant society. The basic assumption that informs much of the existing research pertains to the question of “how ... the stigmatized person respond[s] to his situation” (Goffman 1963:9) and thereby ignores or deemphasizes the role of the historical
and cultural contexts that may mediate the assignment of stigma-normal categories (Kusow 1998, 2001; Riessman 2000). More important, the majority of research concentrates on what Goffman referred to as “information management” rather than on the contested nature of stigma. Snow and Anderson (1987) provide one example of information management techniques by describing how homeless people hide their “virtual social identities” (Goffman 1963:2) from the public so as to avoid the public confrontation of shame. According to Snow and Anderson, homeless people use “distancing” by actively disassociating from similarly situated individuals or the institutions that serve them; “narrative embellishment” of past, present, and future expectations by fictive storytelling; and “embracement” through the expressive confirmation of the social roles and statuses associated with homelessness.

The concentration on information management overlooks several empirical and substantive problems. First, it ignores the role of social class or the mediating effects of the historical and cultural factors that may shape stigma-normal processes (Dovidio et al. 2001; Oyserman and Swim 2001; Riessman 2000). In a study among childless women in South India, for example, Riessman (2000) argues that social class differentially mediates the stigma attached to being childless by showing that middle- and upper-class childless women are more able to resist or even reject the stigma associated with childlessness than are lower-class women. She concludes that the import of childlessness as a potentially discrediting attribute “should vary depending on the position of the woman, the context in which she leads her life, and the material and interpretive resources she can bring to bear” (2000:114). The methodological and theoretical implications of these findings are that in order for stigma to make empirical sense, it is important to go beyond individual-based analysis and identify the cultural as well as the structural conditions in which it exists (Kusow 1998; Oliver 1992).

Second, the literature on stigma assumes the existence of a normatively shared understanding of the criteria for and the distribution of stigma. This assumption can be traced to Goffman’s (1963:27) contention “that a necessary condition for human life is the sharing of a single normative expectation by all participants” about who is stigmatized and who is not. Of course, Goffman did not simply divide society into stigmatized and normals without considering sociological factors that may mediate such a distinction. For example, he identifies a number of situations in which “the perceived undesirability of a particular property and its capacity to trigger off these stigma-normal processes has its own history, a history that is regularly changed by purposeful action” (1963:138). In other instances, he refers to situations in which groups or individuals normatively regarded as stigmatized in turn stigmatize the “normal” members of society. In fact, Goffman defines stigma as a relationship between an attribute and a stereotype, and points out that a particular attribute is neither creditable nor discreditable on its own but rather is determined by the nature of the stereotype that corresponds to it. It is also important to point out that Goffman acknowledged the role of history and social structure, particularly in situations involving racial and cultural groups. He writes, “Sociologically, the central issue
Concerning these groups is their place in the social structure; the contingencies these persons encounter in face-to-face interaction is only one part of the problem, and something that cannot itself be fully understood without reference to the history, the political development, and the current policies of the group” (1963:127).

Although Goffman acknowledges that the determination of stigma-normal processes are complicated by the historical, social, and individual contexts in which such assignments are made, his central argument is primarily concerned with theorizing about the experiences of stigmatized groups. In other words, he did not emphasize the relevance of situations in which the existence of stigma-normal processes cannot be assumed, at least not with the same breadth as Howard Becker, who recognized the sociological difficulties that underlie the definitions of deviance. In fact, Becker’s equally classic Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance (1963), written at about the same time, exists as an important contrast to Goffman’s work. According to Becker, the definition of deviant-normal processes varies depending on the different groups and social classes that constitute society.

One important development that may provide a useful corrective to some of the problems of stigma theory is the fact the current social, political, and economic contexts in which social identities are assigned in Canada are substantially different from those existing in 1963 when Goffman wrote, “in an important sense there is only one unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, height, and a recent record in sports” (p. 128). Following changes in the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1976 (see Boyd 2002), which shifted the main source region of immigrants from primarily Europe to Latin America, Asia, and Africa, Canada is today a society in the midst of demographic transformation from a largely white population to one with a significant number of foreign-born and ethnic and racial communities (Bourne and Rose 2001). This shift in the ethnic and racial composition of Canadian society has created a sociological moment where what Goffman described as the tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion is no longer methodologically sustainable as an empirical reality. As Adams (1997, quoted in Wainright 1998:56) aptly pointed out, “everyone is now an outsider or eccentric in some sense.” This condition also stimulates a rethinking of Porter’s (1965) “vertical mosaic,” where the founding groups (British and French) can no longer dictate the conditions under which nonwhite or black immigrants groups are assimilated. More important, this demographic shift creates a situation in which the notion of “who and what is Canada” (Dyck 2001:417), and by extension, “who stigmatizes whom” on the basis of skin color, is constantly under revision.

Reflecting that problematic, a small but growing number of researchers have alluded to the existence of a conceptual gap between how blackness is defined in North America and in other parts of the world (Charles 1992; Foner 1987; Laquiere 1998; Maines and Kusow 2001; Stafford 1987; Waters 1999; for a discussion of the historical conditionality of color-based categories, see Reynolds and Lieberman 1996). Charles (1992:100) asserts that the multiple identity categories Haitian immigrants
display in the United States represent “an expression of the different meanings of blackness that inform their consciousness and identity.” Writing about Jamaican immigrants in New York City, Foner (1987) proposes that these immigrants reject blackness by appealing to ethnic-based identity categories that emphasize national origin as a way of distinguishing themselves from African Americans. According to Stafford, Haitians claim they do not understand skin color–based derogatory terms, ignore any discriminatory acts against them, or regard the U.S. system of racial classification as illegitimate. The most extensive elaboration of the disjuncture between the definition of blackness in North America and the racial views contemporary black immigrants bring with them has been provided by Waters (1999). Using data from both Caribbean immigrants and black natives, Waters argues that since they migrate from societies that organize race relations differently, they see racial identity placements or racism in different ways from those employed in North America. Because their understanding of social stratification is mainly derived from class differences, they do not readily accept the use of skin color as a stratification device. As one of Water’s respondent’s explained after being asked about race relations in Jamaica, “We did not have race, we had class. Yeah, we have class” (Waters 1999:146).

In sum, most research on stigma relies on Goffman’s focus on stigma management and ignores his statement that “in some instances, individuals and groups who are normatively regarded as stigmatized, in fact, perceive the ‘normals’ as the stigmatized ones” (1963:6). Using data from Somali immigrants in Toronto, Canada, I examine one such instance that challenges a normatively shared understanding of a stigma-normal processes (Davis 1961; Killian 1985). I describe and analyze how Somali immigrants disavow dominant perspectives on the nature and source of color-based racial stigma and impose their own version of stigma on the dominant Canadian society. The disavowal of the dominant perspective is enabled by the existence of mutually incomprehensible social and cultural systems. In other words, the social structure, particularly the social stratification system Somali immigrants rely on, is incomprehensible to Canadians, and, correspondingly, the Canadian social and identity categories are incomprehensible to Somali immigrants. This disjunction exists because the historical and cultural conditions that inform the two systems are quite different from each other—a situation that leads to mutual incomprehensibility or reality discontinuity. Thus, instead of assuming a normative order of values, meanings, and labels that confer consensual understanding of the stigmatized person, my central concern here is, who stigmatizes whom?

METHODS AND DATA

My main research question asks: How do Somali immigrants in Toronto react to dominant color–based stigma. Canada, particularly the Toronto Metropolitan Area, represents one of the most racially and culturally diverse population centers in North America. In fact, the level of racial diversity in Toronto is much higher than in any other city in the United States, including New York. More than 50 percent
of the current resident population of Toronto is nonwhite and foreign born and accounts for one hundred spoken languages (Buzzelli 2000; Gee 2000). The total Somali population of Toronto is estimated at twenty thousand, although some Somali community advocates insist that it is nearly sixty thousand. Based on my experience and common knowledge that immigrant communities are usually undercounted (Anderson and Fienberg 2000), the Somali population is no doubt larger than the number reported by the census and smaller than the advocates claim. What is more interesting, however, is the simultaneous inclusion of Somalis in the total black population and their categorization as a cultural or ethnic group. This dual classification is consistent with my argument that the Somali case represents a different situation than just “black versus white.” Therefore, it has the potential to complicate certain taken-for-granted identity categories, that is, the meaning and applicability of color-based stigma.

My interest in the Somali immigrant community in Toronto began with my brothers’ migration there in late 1980s, at which time I began to travel to Toronto frequently to visit them over the next several years. During that period, I observed the Somali immigrant community grow from several hundred scattered individuals to a substantial number. What interested me the most about the Somali immigrant community was its members’ confrontation with the notion of blackness and their reactions to it. When I started my fieldwork in 1996, I had assumed that since I was a Somali and an immigrant myself, I would have no problem gaining access to the community and finding willing informants. I decided not to ask community leaders for assistance finding individuals to interview. Instead, I would hang around the tailor shop of a friend who told me I could contact people there. In other words, I had decided that since I was a member of the community, I could refrain from using formal channels of access and cooperation from community leaders and other noted individuals. In less than few weeks, however, it became clear that I was not able to find potential interviewees on my own. I realized that being a member of the community, an insider, did not necessarily mean automatic access to its members. In other words, an ethnographic insider’s demographic or cultural similarities to participants do not guarantee entrée to the community (Kusow 2003).

One clear instance of insider advantage, however, pertained to matters of race and its potentially stigmatizing effects. As a Somali immigrant, I had already encountered the Western racial classification system and had personally struggled with it. This personal experience constituted a kind of acquaintance knowledge (House 1934) that became an entry point into my research problem and a significant topic of consensual understanding between Somali immigrants and me. As I discuss below, this experience-based knowledge also provided a measure of validity to the analytic categories I derived from the interview data.

I collected the data for the present study through a combination of purposive and snowball or chain referral sampling (Babbie 1992) from thirty Somali immigrants in Toronto in 1996. The primary interview schedule comprised thirty-nine open-ended questions and a face-sheet containing sociodemographic questions. I
interviewed respondents in their homes or in agreed upon locations. Some of the main questions I asked were “Have you ever thought about color-based identity differentiations in Somalia?” “What ethnic or racial group do you consider yourself in Canada?” “Do you have Canadian friends with whom you associate?” “Have you experienced color-based discrimination in Canada?” I transcribed interviews verbatim, stored them in computer files, and assigned an identification number to each case. The initial coding consisted of a detailed reading of each interview (open coding) followed by axial and selective coding (Charmaz 1990; Glaser and Strauss 1967). In the open coding phase, I organized the data into discrete units and examined those for similarities and differences. In other words, I used open coding to fracture data so as to identify important categories, their properties and dimensions. Once I identified those, I examined the data for connections between categories and subcategories. This process resulted in the development of the master categories, which I used to set the parameters of the overall analysis. Finally, by employing selective coding, I compared all the categories for similarities and differences until I found a central theme or category. This resulted in the identification of the following categories: premigration awareness of racialized identity, postmigration awareness of racialized identity, identity devaluation, and stigma reversal.

Table 1 presents the social and demographic characteristics of the respondents. The average age of the respondents (not presented in the table) range from nineteen to forty-nine, and the sample is equally divided between men and women. Almost all the respondents were born in an urban area. Their education levels ranged from less than high school to a master’s degree. Nearly 83 percent of the respondents graduated from high school before migrating to Canada. Forty-three percent graduated from college before migrating to Canada, and almost 7 percent had a master’s degree before leaving Somalia. The higher educational achievement among the sample is not unique to Somalis in Canada but is rather a common characteristic among African-born immigrants in North America, who, as a whole, are among the highest-educated immigrant groups on the continent. With regard to respondents’ income levels, almost 57 percent earn less than $10,000 Canadian per year, and only one person earns $70,000. About 43 percent of the respondents are married; 40 percent are single. The length of time immigrants had resided in Canada ranged from three to twenty-three years.

IDENTITY CATEGORIES IN SOMALIA AND CANADA

The social structure of Somali society is divided into five major clans. Clan differences, however, are not determined by color-based racial characteristics but rather by what social anthropologists have referred to as a segmentary lineage structure (Lewis 1961). These clans are organized along a treelike structure whose branches spread from top to bottom. At the top of the tree stands a common ancestor whose male offspring diverge into several branches, which, in turn, grow into more diverging lines and end with the family unit. One of the main characteristics of the segmentary
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lineage system is that all groups at the same level of the tree stand in a balanced opposition. This is not to suggest that the notion of social stratification is altogether irrelevant in Somali society. Such a system exists and is derived from several myths. One such myth maintains that once upon a time, two brothers set out on a long journey through a barren environment. Before they left, their father advised them that if they ran out of food they could eat whatever food they found on their way, even the meat of dead animals. The father also warned his sons that once they reached their final destination, they should force themselves to vomit so as to cleanse their bodies. As the story goes, midway through the journey, the brothers ran out of food and ate the meat of a dead cow. After they reached their final destination, the younger brother followed his father’s advice and induced vomiting, but

TABLE 1. Sample Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
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<td>No response</td>
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<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school</td>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>7</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>College degree</td>
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<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
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<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
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<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Income (Canadian $)</strong></td>
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<td>0–9,999</td>
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<td>10,000–19,999</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20,000–39,000</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40,000–59,999</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70,000 or more</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Marital Status</strong></td>
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<td>43</td>
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<tr>
<td>Single</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Occupational Level</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>27</td>
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<tr>
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<td>17</td>
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<td>Student</td>
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<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 30.
the older brother refused to do so. As a result, the descendants of the younger brother became the noble groups, while those of the older brother became outcasts. Today, the descendants of the older brother are variously known as Yibir, Tumaal, or Midgaan and remain stigmatized. They are not allowed to intermarry with members of other clans and in some situations cannot even shake hands with them. Here the basis for stigma is purely cultural, since members of the outcast clan are physically similar to members of the “noble” ones. In fact, it is next to impossible to physically distinguish the stigmatized group from the nonstigmatized one. Thus social differentiation in Somalia is based on clan affiliation rather than skin color.\(^1\)

My interviews with Somali immigrants pervasively reflect the absence of a color-based classification. In responding to my question about whether or not Somalis think in terms of color-based racial categories, a majority (57%; see Table 2) indicated that they were not aware of color-based racial categories in their homeland. Hassan’s response is typical: “We never had anybody who was superior or inferior in terms of color. But if I think about ethnicity in terms of tribes, we had that problem, but not color.” The following interaction with a female immigrant reveals Somalis’ level of awareness of color-based racial categories before their migration:

A.K.: How about issues of race?
Huburrow: Back home?
A.K.: Yeah.
Huburrow: [Hesitates]
A.K.: Remember, in Canada, we think in terms of black and white.
Huburrow: Right, right, here yes, but there no, no, I never, never, never heard of that word before I came to this country, never, race, I have never heard of that word before actually before I came here, that is the time when I heard about it.

The hesitation indicates that Huburrow did not grasp the question until I reminded her that in Canada people think in terms of racial categories. In contrast, the idea of race, or color-based differentiation, as a device of social classification or a social reality or identity marker is not available in her cultural narrative resource (Holstein and Gubrium 1995).

By contrast, and despite strong pushes for multiculturalism, the Canadian social stratification system, is in many ways, similar to Davis’s (1991) “one-drop rule” that characterizes the United States. Canada is, of course, historically different from the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Frequencies</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aware</td>
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<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat aware</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
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<td>No response</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 2. Premigration Color-based Identity Awareness
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United States. It did not experience officially sanctioned slave-based institutions, and the majority of the black population in Canada arrived through recent and voluntary immigration from the Caribbean, Asia, or Africa. In general, though, because of their geographic proximity, Canada’s cultural and social organization of race relations is very similar to that of the United States (Peake and Ray 2001). Like the white/nonwhite dichotomy operating in the United States, Canadian society employs white versus visible minorities. Despite differences in appearance, the two categories perform the same inclusionary and exclusionary functions. Moreover, in Canada, the notion of blackness has been conflated with Jamaicaness. As Levin points out, “despite the existence of white Jamaicans [and] blacks who are not Jamaicans . . . Jamaicaness has become a euphemism for black” (quoted in Jackson 1998:28).

PERCEPTION OF IDENTITY DEVALUATION

Once in Canada, Somali immigrants confront a cultural context that organizes stigma-normal processes primarily along color-based categories. For the first time, they become aware that they may be stigmatized because of their skin color. One of the first contexts in which Somali immigrants learn about this process of social exclusion and inclusion is the mass media—newspapers, news broadcasts, daytime and prime-time television shows. What they learn is that blackness is not a particularly desirable identity category. As Warfa pointed out:

Well, I am not a white person, but when I watch TV like the Jenny Jones show and the like [laughs] they see blacks as dirty that do not want to work. Even if you look at the dictionary and examine the word black, it says dirty, ignorant, all the negative stuff, at the same time, if you look white in the same dictionary, you will see clean, honest, you know. Even the way they describe in the dictionary, you know, instead of them using dirty why not just say black, or color. Well, you know, some dirt is white too, if you want to see it that way.

Others learned about color-based stigmatization through actual experiences. One respondent told me that an officer who gave him a parking ticket and a parking lot cashier referred to him to as a “nigger.” The majority of the respondents, however, perceive they are stigmatized on the basis of their immigrant or refugee status, or their religious values, particularly women who wear the Islamic hijab. Saalah eloquently expresses the multiple and complex ways in which Somali immigrants perceive they are perceived:

I am beginning to realize that it has something to do with the identity and label of color, having a different heritage, being from a different race, being black and all the above. So when we come to perceptions, all of these labels are playing part of it. . . . I don’t know which one of these labels is behind the view. But what makes things more difficult is that the Somalis are first blacks in Canada who do not speak English as opposed to the Caribbeans who used to come to Canada before. They are the first blacks that are not Christians. So it is an African, non-Christian, it is an African and Somali.
Each of the above labels, being black, immigrant, and refugee carries a certain degree of stigma. For example, the perception that one is a refugee may induce the feeling of helplessness or of being “a victim, a client in need of assistance” (Dorsh 1981:89). As one respondent remarked, “Once Canadians have seen the famine and the horrible things that occurred in Somalia, they see us as lacking the intelligence to settle our own conflicts.” Also, understanding that one is perceived in terms of racial categories, particularly as black, conjures images of laziness and/or criminality. These perceptions illustrate Goffman’s insight that “the tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion” (1963:4) devalues all their attributes—be it immigrant, refugee, African, black, or Muslim. The majority (60%) of the respondents believe they are perceived by white Canadians in terms of devalued identities (see Table 3).

This perception, however, does not stop Somali immigrants from disavowing the process of color-based stigma. As one respondent commented, “I don’t accept that there is an inferiority or that the whites believe they are superior. No, no, I don’t, I mean I don’t accept for the simple reason because that is not the way I grew up, that is not the system of values I have.” The nonracialized cultural identities Somalis bring to Canada afford them a kind of insulation from the effects of racial stigma through what Goffman (1963) refers to as an alien culture on which they can depend. By “alien culture,” Goffman means a value system that is at variance with the North American system of normative expectations, thereby problematizing the process of stigma-normal assignment. This complex situation results from Somalis representing the first large wave of non-Christian, non-English-speaking black immigrants in Canada.

### CREATING A SEPARATE SYSTEM OF HONOR

Despite Goffman’s (1963:7) contention that “[i]n America at present . . . separate systems of honor seem to be in decline,” Somali immigrants respond to their experiences by reinstating separate systems of honor. They do this by constituting an enclave that reproduces the cultural and identity categories they brought from their homeland. These categories pertain to both appearance (Stone 1962) and everyday cultural and value announcements. For example, women wear colorful non-Western dresses and, in most cases, the *hijab*, while men distinguish themselves from the rest.

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**TABLE 3. How Do You Perceive White Canadian Perceptions of You?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
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<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>30</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
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</table>
of the black population by gathering at certain places in the city, particularly at the Islamic Centers, thereby emphasizing identifiable Islamic traits rather than skin color. Neither men nor women tend to attend any of the social and dance clubs that typically attract members of mainstream society. They create their own social gatherings and dance parties featuring Somali music and culture. One such case is the wedding ceremonies (Ademola-Bjork 2001) that serve as the main venue of social gatherings and celebration of Somali culture. In essence, Somalis maintain a closed social enclave that attempts to create a complete cultural community separate and distinguishable from mainstream Canadian society. More important, Somalis tend to limit their social interactions with native Canadians, reject Canadianness as a possible identity, and ignore the existence of color-based discrimination or stigma. Since Somalis reject the assignment of devalued identity markers, they by necessity have to avoid social interactions with members of the majority group, a strategy that leads them to both reject the existence of discrimination and refuse a Canadian identity. In other words, they perceive that accepting Canadian racial categories will force them into the Canadian racialized identity system that, in their view, marks them as racial others and therefore stigmatizes them. In what follows, I present the ways in which Somalis create separate systems of honor for the purpose of staying outside the racialized identity system of the Canadian society.

Limiting Social Interaction

One way that Somalis attempt to create a separate system of honor is by limiting their interaction to the confines of their communities. Table 4 depicts the degree to which members of the Somali immigrant community interact with members of mainstream Canadian society. The table shows that the majority of the respondents (50%) do not have any Canadian friends, as opposed to only 36 percent who indicate they do. Jamila explains his different interactions in the following manner:

I usually do my shopping at this shop where all the customers are Somali. The only time that I went to the house of a Canadian person was a few years ago when the owner of where I used to work had a death in his family. That is the only time.

Burhaan echoes this pattern:

Somalis associate with each other, number one, it is very rare for a Somali to become friends with a stranger, and they usually keep their relations among themselves.

Even those who report that they have Canadian friends admit that their associations tend to be limited to the professional or casual level. As Derrrow explains:

It is interesting, I am a typical Somali. I have a lot of Canadian friends. I think I am one of the few Somalis who deal with a lot of Canadian people. But come to think of it, all of them are mainly professional, job related, or community related. I don’t think I have a very personal friend.
There are various reasons why Somalis do not have white Canadian friends. Some of the respondents point to cultural reasons that do not allow mutual understanding; others point to the lack of opportunities to meet individuals outside their community. Despite the reasons they provide for their lack of interaction with members of mainstream Canadian society, a significant number of Somalis do not venture much beyond the confines of their community. Individuals who mainly practice Somali cultural values and remain within the confines of the community will hardly tend to make friends outside of it. In still other situations, and more consistent with the overall argument of this article, some Somalis have no desire to associate with white Canadians.

Rejecting Canadian Identities

The strategy of rejecting a Canadian identity seems consistent with my previous argument that Somali immigrants perceive that accepting Canadianness as an alternative identity relegates them to a minority and thus stigmatized status. As shown in Table 5, the majority of respondents (76%) prefer a Somali identity as opposed to a Canadian, a Somali Canadian, or any other identity that associates them with Canadian society.

This is not to suggest that none of the respondents embrace a Canadian identity. As one respondent observed, “Of course, yeah, I will be Canadian any time.” Another remarked that he is a “Somali Canadian.” As the following interaction suggests, some of the respondents indicate that they would like to consider themselves Canadian, but experience a constant struggle between the demands of their own culture and their fear that they may not be accepted as Canadians.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Somali</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>76.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canadian/Somali</td>
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<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>4</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 5. Preferred Identity in Canada
A.K: Okay, do you think you will consider yourself Canadian?
Maadey: I want to, but I don’t think so. I am in a constant fight with my identity and the host country’s fight not to accept me. It is a two-way street.

As the following exchange illustrates, others consider themselves Canadian when they are outside Canada.

A. K.: Do you think you will ever consider yourself Canadian?
Alasow: The first that I considered myself as Canadian was last year’s Christmas. I went to England with a Canadian passport. They said, “Where are you from?” I said, “I am Canadian,” simple, I said that, nothing else, and then they said, “Where is your passport?” It was an empty passport with no visa and nothing. I could not even believe it, the way we used to be refused visa, I remember. They just said, “How long are you going to be there?”

Rejecting Color-Based Discrimination

The third strategy that Somalis use to create a separate system of honor is to reject the existence of discrimination. Table 6 shows that the majority of the respondents (46%) acknowledge the existence of discrimination, while 40 percent deny its existence. On initial inspection, one is led to believe that the data presented in the table contradict my argument that Somalis reject the existence of discrimination. However, on probing this apparent contradiction with in-depth interviews, it seems that Somalis mainly define discrimination along non-color-based categories such as language, immigrant status, religion, or appearances.

Mahadalla’s response is typical of those who reject the existence of discrimination:

Well, if it is what is said on the news, or the reality, I myself, I have no experience in terms of jobs in terms of management positions, but the lower jobs, I haven’t seen any discrimination, or that we are seen as inferior, or looked down upon, or something, no I haven’t seen that, but a lot of people who came before us, who are black or Africans, the most things that I hear from blacks, those came before us, who faced some problem in the 1970s or the 1960s who did not have any rights in this country. As Africans, the majority are people who came after the 1980s. By that time, governments have pressured organizations to reduce discrimination so I haven’t seen any discrimination in the public.

This does not mean that respondents deny the existence of discrimination altogether but rather, as Salaado observes, discrimination based on color categories:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>46.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>40.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I have experienced, I think, more than the racial discrimination based on color, discriminations based on language barriers and not being able to speak the language and because of that, being spoken to in a such a way that suggests because you are foreigner, because you don’t speak the language that in the eyes of whoever it is that you are speaking to, they don’t see you as someone with an opinion, or someone with a mind, they really don’t.

Another respondent, a Muslim woman wearing the traditional *hijab*, suggests that the kind of discrimination she experienced was directed against her religion. As she comments, “From there they tell you point blank we have a dress code. They ask, ‘Is this the way you are going to dress?’ If the answer is yes, then you won’t get the job.” Others, like Ali Dheere, recognize the existence of discrimination but try to ignore it:

I think, yes, I have seen it. I have a lot. I think it has different scales, some of them I deliberately ignored them and I tried to convince myself that it is not a racism but, I think because of my faith and background and believe I came with it doesn’t affect but I see it in a daily basis. It doesn’t affect me. I ignore it. So far I try to succeed that it doesn’t affect me, it don’t internalized but it continues.

Ceebla, on the other hand, accused the Somalis of trying to ignore discrimination when they are experiencing it:

And this is one of the problems. . . . I am doing a research now, where there are hundreds and hundreds of Somali professionals with their credentials being unrecognized, they are being literally curtailed and excluded, yet I took a questionnaire with the question, Have you experienced racism? More than 50 percent say no, because, and I wonder if this is data conducted on other groups of black refugees, they would have said, like Ugandans, 70 or 80 percent, yes I have experienced racism, he apologizes for the racism, because he thinks the person is mistaken, because of him as black, and of course he is not black, he is Somali.

However, when I asked her whether she herself had experienced discrimination, she said, “No, I have always had literally what I wanted. People have always been nice to me. There were times, you know, but not overtly, I think people have been kind to me.”

What is clear from the above data is that Somalis in general do not acknowledge the relevance of color-based identities or the fact that they are stigmatized on the basis of skin color. What they acknowledge is the existence of cultural and value system differences between them and mainstream white Canadians. The acknowledgment of the latter allows Somali immigrants to construct the boundaries of stigma on the basis of symbolic attributes rather than skin color. The construction of stigma boundaries on this basis allows Somali immigrants to impose their own stigma on mainstream white Canadians.

**STIGMA REVERSAL**

Thus far, I have documented the cultural and racial identity mismatches between Somali immigrants and mainstream Canadian society. I have also shown that Somali
immigrants construct a separate system of honor so as to reject the imposition of stigma. Here I examine how Somalis impose their own stigma on the dominant group through stigma reversal. According to Killian (1985:9), stigma reversal is defined as “the imputation of guilt and moral inferiority to the members of a dominant group on the basis of descent when the moral justification of the group’s position of advantage is being redefined” (original emphasis). To impose stigma on the dominant group, Somalis see their moral and cultural values as different from those they assign mainstream Canadian society. One respondent offered the following comparison of his cultural values and those he believes characterize mainstream Canadian society: “I have my own religion, they have their own religion, they have a different idea, I have a different idea, they have a different culture, I have a different culture big time, the way they think, the way I think, the way they behave, the way I behave are totally different.”

This assertion of cultural and moral differences allows Somali immigrants to construct a morally superior “symbolic boundary” (Lamont and Molnar 2002) and illustrates “how the margins imagine and construct the mainstream in order to assert superiority over them” (Espiritu 2001:416). The following comment illustrates Somalis’ assertion of cultural superiority: “Well, I see myself as better than them. Who has a better culture, better color, and who came from a good family and quality people?” Huburrow provides another example of Somalis’ construction of the stigmatizing Canadian value system: “Everybody is going their own way. The father is walking to one direction, the son to the other direction. . . . They do not have any family values, and therefore we are very happy that we are not Canadians.”

Another respondent remarked, “I have never seen people with false smiles. In Somalia, if you are the enemy, you are the enemy, you know it and I know it.” As Timcade’s remark also illustrates, some of the respondents stigmatize Canadian value systems in terms of trust:

So these people you can never trust, I mean, a person who came from Africa you can trust them very dearly. You see, your friend is your friend, but with the Canadians, you don’t know whether this person is your friend, I mean people will use the slightest opportunity, you know, to feed on what you give them, you know, I mean, you know, someone can claim anything on you so as to get media attention or any other thing, you know. Look at the incest, look at the people coming to television claiming someone has sexually abused them seven or eight years ago simply to get attention, you know. How many people are serving jail time for consensual sex and have been accused of rape, so I hope nobody takes it personally and I want my Somali friends to be very conscious. Be fair with the whites, socialize with them, but be on the guard, expect anything, you know.

What I mean by “stigma reversal” is illustrated in the following comment by a respondent: “I kind of reverse it upon them [white Canadians]. I always reverse what they are thinking of another human being like that.” According to some of the respondents, stigmatizing someone else on the basis of skin color is itself stigmatizing. In other words, Somalis engage in reverse stigmatization directed at those who, they
claim, cannot see other human beings as equal. What is clear from the above remarks is that Somalis use a moral discourse to draw a symbolic boundary between themselves and mainstream Canadians and to stigmatize them (see Espiritu 2001). As noted earlier, this does not mean that Somalis do not stigmatize others but that the criteria they use to do so are different from those they confront in North America. By stigmatizing Canadians on the basis of cultural rather than racial criteria, Somali immigrants reproduce the cultural categories they brought with them from Somalia.²

CONCLUSION

Although considerable attention has been devoted to how stigmatized individuals or groups manage potentially discrediting encounters, no coherent theoretical perspective accounts for the ways in which certain groups not only disavow the stigma enforced on them but also impose their own stigma on the dominant group. I have provided an empirical instance that challenges the assumption of a normatively shared understanding of stigma-normal processes. I have argued that instead of assuming normative values, meanings, and labels that confer a consensual understanding of the stigmatized person, we should pay more attention to the contested nature of stigma.

One way to reveal the contested nature of stigma is to examine whether or not stigmatized persons and “normals” operate from a normatively shared understanding of who stigmatizes whom. The results of this study show that whereas Canadians employ color-based identity as a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion, Somalis do not. They further show that when the two types of identity formulations do not fit, the nature and source of stigma cannot be consensually validated. Instead, what emerges is a condition of mutual devaluation, which leads to stigma reversal whereby, in this study, Somali immigrants in Canada not only reject stigma but also impose their own stigma on members of the majority group. As Blumer aptly pointed out, this process of stigma reversal is enabled by the possibility that “individuals who are labeled in a certain fashion can talk among themselves about how they are characterized and collectively engage in a process to offset the label, and even impose their label on the other groups” (quoted in Maines 1997:151).

Blumer’s point underscores the contested nature of stigma and supports Becker’s (1963) argument that the meaning of deviance does not necessarily depend on collectively shared understanding. In certain situations, deviant groups and those who label them operate from two different cultural systems. This mutual incomprehensibility about the appropriateness and assignment of stigma categories also supports Stone’s (1962:93) argument that “it is in the coincidence of placements and announcements that identity becomes a meaning of the self.” As Stone explains, the acknowledgment and establishment of shared and collectively understood identity categories are created when we “assig[n] him the same words of identity that he appropriates for himself or announces” (p. 93; original emphasis). As my data show, Somali immigrants’ experiences indicate that their own identity announcements do not correspond to the identity placements Canadians assign them.
Taken together, both Stone’s insight about the collective realization of identity and Becker’s definition of deviance provide a theoretical corrective for the problems of stigma theory. Thus, while Goffman’s (1963:9) concept of stigma has provided a powerful analytic category for understanding how stigmatized individuals manage the everyday problems attached to their spoiled identities, his treatment does not go far beyond the issues of identity management. My approach attempts to move beyond his analysis by identifying the social and social structural conditions that shape those processes of identity management. Without such an undertaking, the concept of stigma itself can become reified through the tacit assumption that stigma processes are embedded in a single normative order.

More important, Goffman’s emphasis on normative order becomes historically problematic in light of the social and racial demographic transformations that have taken place in Canada during the past several decades. Since Goffman’s analysis some forty years ago, increased migration from non-Western countries coupled with “a sustained political commitment to multiculturalism” (Dyck 2001; Qadeer 1997) have transformed Canada from a predominantly white society to a multi-racial and multiethnic one. The profound transformation of Canada’s ethnic composition requires that we revisit Goffman’s “tribal stigma of race,” just as it will also enable us to increasingly contest color-based stigma. We are witnessing a new moment in which nonwhite immigrants not only maintain their racial and cultural identities but also insist on the moral virtue of those identities, and thereby raise the question of who stigmatizes whom.3 Understanding the theoretical ramifications of this very simple question can provide a powerful analytic perspective with which we can extend the full implications of the stigmatization process.

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NOTES

1. This not to suggest that Somalis are totally unaware of the existence of racialized stigma around the world, or even in Somalia. One group that is racially distinguished in Somalia is the so-called Bantu or Jareer. They are characterized as Adoon, meaning “slave,” or Jarer, meaning “kinky hair.” In other situations, they are referred to as Gusha (people of the jungle) or Shabelle (people of Shabelle river). Despite the variations in naming, all such references are derogatory and stigmatizing in nature. They are also stigmatized in narratives that suggest they originated from the importation of slaves from East Africa during the nineteenth century. None of these categories, however, are similar to the purely color-based stratification system found in North America.

2. For a good discussion of the importance of symbolic boundaries in the construction of social identities and moral categories, see Lamont and Molnar 2002.
3. The study is based on first-generation Somali immigrants and therefore cannot be generalized to what the reactions of second-generation Somalis in Canada will be. Research on black immigrants from the Caribbean shows that those who were born in the United States have merged and adopted some of the racial values of African American youth.

REFERENCES


