TARNISHING THE TAJ MAHAL:
SELF-CONCEPTS OF ADULT CHILDREN OF HOARDERS AND NORMS OF
CLEANLINESS AND ORDER

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TARNISHING THE TAJ MAHAL:
SELF-CONCEPTS OF ADULT CHILDREN OF HOARDERS AND NORMS OF
CLEANLINESS AND ORDER

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Thesis

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ABSTRACT

Using a sample of the 2013 Interviews with Adult Children of Hoarders data set, this study draws a linkage between the social structures of class-differentiated norms of cleanliness and order to the individual self-concepts of Adult Children of Hoarders (ACoH), mediated by reference groups and the process of relative deprivation. The interview respondents were separated into four different categories for the purposes of analyzing what differences the various combinations of relative SES had on their self-concepts. The study found that ACoHs who shared a relatively high SES with their reference groups displayed lasting and highly salient negative self-concepts. Those ACoHs who share a similarly low SES with their reference groups reported mostly positive self-concepts. Similarly, the self-concepts reported by the ACoH who had higher SES than her reference group were also less salient to her identity. Those ACoHs who reported having a lower SES than their reference groups had very negative and highly salient self-concepts throughout their interviews. These men and women, because of their relative positions within the class structure and their experiences of comparison with their reference groups, resulted in strong negative self-concepts which shaped their feeling of self-worth, self-confidence, ideas about their own abilities, and of how the world could, should, and would treat them because they saw themselves as worthy of scorn. This is how an entire group of people could walk into a completely ‘normal’ house and feel, as Sabrina would say, as if they were tarnishing the “Taj Mahal” with their very presence.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Closed Windows

Driving down any arbitrary street in any neighborhood in Every-town USA, one will see a variety of houses with many different types of windows. Some windows are large with red storm shutters, others are small with wrought iron filigree, some will be cast-open wide hoping to tempt in a passing summer breeze, and others will be battened-down tight to conserve precious AC. Behind each type of window resides a family—a different family behind the wall-length, modern windows than the ones with the fussy, satin curtains. But, as you drive down that road, observing these various portals into different people’s lives, you will encounter certain houses with dark windows. All curtains are closed, all blinds are drawn, and often times the window treatments are pressed firm against the glass by something from within, suggestive of the secret stacked behind the pane. This is the house of a hoarder. If one were to draw back the curtains and take a look at the house and the family living behind the glass, one would discover a house stacked with piles of boxes and mountains of bags, of winding trails between towers of things, and a life of secrecy, shame, and hiding. Hoarding is a recognized mental illness and often compulsive behavior, but the deviant living conditions that result from the behavior create a miasma which engulfs an entire family when one member
suffers from the disorder. Growing up in this shuttered environment can have a particularly devastating effect on the identities of the children within these houses.

In the following study, I will draw a linkage between the social structures of social class differentiated norms of cleanliness to the individual self-concepts of Adult Children of Hoarders (ACoH), mediated by reference groups and the process of relative deprivation. ACoH were raised in a home with a parent who compulsively collected and kept items that appear to have limited value to anyone but the hoarder. To qualify as a hoarder, a person must collect to the extent that the items interfere with their house’s navigability and the activities of daily living (American Psychiatric Association 2013). Currently, there is a lack of sociological research on the effects of growing up in a hoarding household on a child’s developmental process and life-course. Living in conditions that are non-normative, stigmatized, and with a parent who has a recognized but usually secretive mental disorder may have lasting effects on a person well into adulthood; but, these effects are as yet unidentified and understood. In this project, I will be using a subsample of the 2013 Interviews with Adult Children of Hoarders data set to explore what effect the differing normative expectations about cleanliness and household appearance among various SES categories have on the formation of the self-concepts of an Adult Child of a Hoarder through their exposure to these norms via their reference groups.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Class Values

Confronting one of the longest running debates in the study of inequalities, Rodman (1963) examined the disagreement within scholarship as to whether society is based on a common value system or if society is made up of several class-differentiated value systems. He proposes the concept of the lower class value-stretch as a way of resolving the contradictions (1963). This concept suggests that both value systems exist simultaneously. He explains that as “a lower class person, without abandoning the general values of the society, develops an alternative set of values. Without abandoning the values placed upon success, such as high attainment, he stretches the values so that lesser degrees of success also become desirable” (1963:209). In essence, he theorized that individuals from the lower class had a wider definition of what they deemed successful and tolerable in life.

In response to Rodman, Della Fave (1974) further develops the concept of value-stretch into a set of six hypotheses to empirically test the theoretical concept on the aspirations of high school boys. The results of his study failed to support the value-stretch theory; instead he found support for the notion of a moderately class-differentiated set of success values. Della Fave argues that while standards of preference
are similar for all classes, standards of tolerance vary directly by class. In other words, most people in a society will have similar desirable goals but those from a lower class will find lower levels of success more acceptable than those of a higher class. For example, two people—one from a middle class background and one from a working-class background—may both aspire to owning their own home, as a standard of success. However, the person from the working class background would also tolerate living in a rented home, apartment, or subsidized public housing more readily than the person from the middle-class background. This is because of their socialized experience through family members and various reference groups about what is the lowest acceptable option of success. I will argue that these standards of preference and tolerance also apply to standards of household appearance by class.

Social Construction of Dirt and Cleanliness

According to cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas, dirt itself is a social construct. Whether or not something qualifies as dirty depends on its social context. “There is no such thing as dirt; no single item is dirty apart from a particular system of classification in which it does not fit” (Douglas 1967:xvii). While Douglas herself was concerned mostly with ideas of spiritual purity and pollution, her ideas concerning dirt offending against order and the reaction of a community against this disorder are relevant and important for conceptualizing why hoarding is considered a deviant practice. She theorizes that disorder poses a threat against the stability and moral fortitude of a community, hence the number of sanctions against it.
By tabooing situations of extreme disorder, such as hoarding, we are categorizing standards of unity, acceptability, and functionality. “In chasing dirt, in papering, decorating, and tidying, we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are [we] are positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea…it is a creative movement, an attempt to relate form to function, to make unity or experience’’(Douglas 1967:3). In this way, the taboo against hoarding serves a protective function for society; it also supposedly serves to establish a basis on which to stigmatize the practice of hoarding, the hoarders themselves, and, by extension, the family members that are forced to live in the disordered environment.

In her book, *Comfort, Cleanliness & Convenience: The Social Organization of Normality* (2003) Elizabeth Shove attempts to track the changing standards of household and bodily cleanliness and what she calls the “science of normality”. She traces how the expectations of the indoor living environment have substantially shifted over the course of less than one full generation. She also argues that comfort and cleanliness are subject to escalation (as in “degrees of cleanliness” [2003: 3]) and standardization. “Standardization implies that the reach of what counts as normal is more and more encompassing” (3). She tracks the first introduction of convenience products such as dishwashers, laundry machines, HVAC systems, and freezers as novelty items, used as status markers and indicators of capital, to standard expectations of any home. Post World War II these technological innovations were mass produced and prices became affordable for a wider range of people, making convenience and comfort just a spin-cycle away. These items made household chores less time consuming but they raised the expectation of what was considered a ‘normal’ level of cleanliness within a home
Corrigan 1997; Shove 2003); machine-washed clothes and streak-free, fresh from the dishwasher glasses became the expectation and not the exception.

Similarly to Douglas, Shove argues that failure to conform to modern standards of cleanliness engender feeling of disgust and revulsion. Cleanliness is a concept endowed with moral gravitas and those that do not qualify as ‘normal’ are marked as personally deficient. Shove notes that in this context “much depends upon changing ideas about how things should be and what people should do” (2003: 79). So, the standards about how many boxes of clutter qualify as ‘too many’ or at what point one’s house is deemed ‘too dirty’ is a subjective measure against an idealized image of the normal expectation. The normal expectation that Shove is describing is the ideal standards of Western upper and middle-class culture. Now, as markets for products are sought globally, these standards are affecting people of all classes and are increasingly aspired to beyond the geographic boarders of the Western world.

**Hoarding: How Much is too Much?**

Various epidemiological studies suggest that somewhere between 2.3% and 14% of the general population of the United States displays symptoms of clinical hoarding (Pertusa et al. 2010). The growing research on hoarders has largely focused on the elderly population—seen as those most at risk because of higher risk of illness and often lower levels of social resources. This is the population that has the most contact with social services and the mental health system and is the most visible. However, self-identified adult hoarders report that their hoarding symptoms often develop in early adulthood
This suggests that the majority of hoarders, and their families, are living in these deviant conditions in secret—hidden behind closed curtains and locked doors.

McGuire, Kaercher, Park, and Storch (2013) conducted a study involving social service and community code enforcement with hoarders. These social service representatives and code enforcers often act as the first point of contact between a hoarder and mental health services and/or governmental intervention. Their study examines the frequencies, outcomes, and characteristics that ‘first responders’ encountered in cases involving hoarding. On average, respondents reported that they encountered two or three cases of hoarding each year and 83% of respondents reported that they had not received any training on how to deal with a hoarding situation (2013). Hoarding cases were estimated to cost over $3,700, on average, in cleaning fees, to deal with the physical state of the house; however, survey responses suggested that hoarding situations often involved multiple social service and community agencies and were difficult to resolve. Overwhelmingly, current hoarding research is concentrated in the field of clinical psychology and is focused primarily on the individual hoarder - the causes of their illness, clinical treatments, and social service responses (Ayers et. al. 2011; Frost 1996; Frost 2000; Tolin et. al. 2010). Little attention has been paid to the effect that living in a hoarded environment can having on the family members, particularly the children growing up in deviant living conditions. Hoarding and its effects on the socialization of children have yet to be studied in the field of sociology.
Reference Groups & Relative Deprivation

Merton and Kitt (1950) define a reference group as a “…[frame] of reference held in common by a proportion of individuals within a social category sufficiently large to rise to definitions of the situation.” They go on to note that these groups are marked by larger institutional norms that encourage individuals to compare themselves to others within their categories. So, reference group is constituted by the people whose beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, values, and preferences are used as reference by the individual as basis for his or her conduct, beliefs, behaviors, and formation of self and self-concepts. Reference groups can be co-present with the individual, such as classmates and friend groups, and they can also be less tangible, such as media representations of women or social class standards of cleanliness. For the purposes of this study, the primary reference groups for the majority of ACoHs are their childhood friends, classmates, and acquaintances. Through these friends, many of the respondents first realized that their own living situations were abnormal through a process of comparison with their friends’ homes and the differing expectations about cleaning and chores. But, in other cases, primary reference groups can also be extended family members, church groups, and neighbors. Each of these groups serves as a socializing agent through which class-based norms are transferred to the individual level. They allow the child the opportunity to compare and determine where they fit ‘in reference’ to their comparative groups—whether they are measuring-up or falling short and whether they are relatively privileged or relatively deprived.

The term relative deprivation was first used to discuss the experiences of American soldiers in World War II (Davis 1999). This work was then the subject of
Relative deprivation is the idea that individuals do not exist and ‘suffer’ in universal conditions, they ‘suffer’ relative to the conditions and individuals that surround them. Moscatelli et. al (2014) conducted an experimental study which found that introducing relative deprivation into a setting of social comparison (a reference group) enhances intergroup acts of discrimination. The manipulation of inequalities within a group produced an environment in which individuals began to unequally allocate negative outcomes. In another instance, Pham-Kanter (2009) conducted a study to determine whether the psychological distress that resulted from the comparison process of relative deprivation when one has rich friends and neighbors can actually contribute to poor health outcomes. She found that only the extremes of relative position mattered and
that a very low relative position was associated with the worst physical and mental health. This idea of extreme contrasts in relative position applies to the ACoHs population in terms of their living conditions. It is important to note that individuals feel deprived not only when they make comparisons with those in their reference groups (those they are ‘like’) but also with those that are above them in the social-economic hierarchy (Hey and Lambert 1980; Kakwani 1984).

**Stigma, Self-Concepts & Personality**

Stigma, as presented by Erving Goffman, is the process by which an individual with a certain identifying attribute experiences social rejection, status-loss, shame, and self-devaluation because of that attribute. This reactionary process against the attribute results in a deviant or “spoiled identity” for the individual (Goffman 1963). In certain cases, this identity can be hidden through secrecy and self-isolation; however, there is always the threat of discovery looming. This fear of discovery by friends, family, or even the generalized other is called perceived or anticipated stigma (Luoma et. al 2007; Link et. al 1989). Kessler, Mickelson, and Williams (1999) conducted a study on the impact that perceived discrimination has on mental health outcomes. They found that the relationship between perceived discrimination and mental health had a comparable magnitude of association with other commonly tested stressors. Their study suggests that the act of discrimination itself is not what causes the negative mental health outcomes, but the *perception* of discrimination within the mind of the subject causes the negative outcomes.
In a similar vein, Wright, Gronfein, and Owens (2000) use modified labeling theory to suggest that the social rejection process inherent in stigmatization has lasting effects on a person’s self-concepts. They conducted a study on recently deinstitutionalized mental patients to examine the effects that the experience of social rejection had on their self-esteem and experiences after release over a two-year period. They found that the social rejection that former patients suffered was a source of constant social stress; the rejection also weakened their sense of mastery, or their belief in their own abilities (2000). These findings are supported in a later study on the ‘stigma sentiments’ toward the mentally ill (Kroska and Harkness 2006). Quinn and Chaudoir (2009) conduct a study to determine the effects that living with a concealable stigmatized identity can have on the psychological distress and health of an individual. They found that the effect of anticipated stigma was directly related to self-reported health outcomes of their respondents, including their feelings of depression, self-worth, and self-esteem.

In terms of the formation of one’s self-concepts, Festinger (1954) was one of the first scholars to theorize the relationship between the comparison process that occurs within reference groups and the self-appraisal and evaluation of one’s own abilities. In Elder’s seminal study of the children of the Great Depression, he investigates the effects that status loss, reference group behavior, the comparison process and relative deprivation have on the self-concepts (1999). Children who experienced a change in economic status, a source of status ambiguity, would often experience “conflict between socialized conceptions of self and the perceived or uncertain view of others” (1999:119). This was especially apparent in children who felt they had been devalued within their reference group. These children became more prone to self-consciousness and
hypersensitivity, leading to feelings of doubt and uncertainty in personal relationships with others. Families often attempted to hide their status loss by presenting “social fronts” or keeping up appearances as a protective measure against negative social outcomes (1999). Elder notes that when one does not live up to the desired version of self one has been socialized to strive for, that person often experiences feeling of shame, unhappiness, moodiness, depression, self-consciousness, anxiety, failure, and anger. Similar feelings and negative self-concepts were reported by the downwardly mobile families in Newman’s research (1988). I expect to find similar negative outcomes among the ACoHs who have relatively lower SES than those in their reference groups, due to feelings of failure and the stress of enacting a ‘social front’ that they will experience. The proposed model of relationships between SES, reference group, and the resulting self-concepts is demonstrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Model of Proposed Relationship between Class-Differentiated Norms, Reference Groups, and Self Concepts.
CHAPTER III
METHODS

Sample

The sample for this paper is a selection of sixteen interviews pulled from a larger project, Interviews with Adult Children of Hoarders. These interviews were theoretically sampled for diversity in gender, race, and age. Interviewee characteristics are recorded in Table 1. The sample consists of 2 (12.5%) male respondents and 14 (87.5%) female respondents. The racial composition of respondents is 12 (75%) White/Caucasian, 2 (12.5%) African American, and 2 who identified as mixed race, 1 (6.25%) White/Hispanic and 1 (6.25%) White/Native American. The age range of respondents is between 25 and 61 with an average age of 37. Of the sample, 2 respondents were between age 25-29, 11 respondents were between age 30-39, 2 respondents were between age 40-49, and 1 respondent was 61. The length of the interviews ranged from 1 hour and 8 minutes to 3 hours and 25 minutes, with an average length of 2 hours and 9 minutes.
### Table 1: Interviewee Characteristics and Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>SES v. RG*</th>
<th>hoarding parent</th>
<th>Interview length</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kimberly</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Diff. Lower</td>
<td>Gmother &amp; Mother &amp; Aunt</td>
<td>1:37:25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kendra</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>Diff. Lower</td>
<td>Mother &amp; Father</td>
<td>1:26:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J.R.</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Diff. Lower</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>2:59:55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leesa</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Same High</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>1:54:22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tara</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Diff. Lower</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>2:36:45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denise</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Diff. Higher</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>1:51:21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabrina</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Same High</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>3:05:21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmen</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>White/ Hispanic</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Same High</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>1:46:30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dee</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Native American/White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Diff. Lower</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>2:15:56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Diff. Lower</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>1:53:29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lola</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Same High</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>3:25:01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Diff. Lower</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>3:04:57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>39</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Same Low</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>2:03:47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Diff. Lower</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>1:37:55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morgan</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Same High</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>2:15:06</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dionne</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Same Low</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>1:08:07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*SES v. RG stands for Socioeconomic status in relation to Reference Group(s). The respondent can qualify as: 1. Having the same relatively high SES as their reference group (*Same High*); 2. Having the same relatively low SES as their reference group (*Same Low*); 3. Having relatively higher SES than their reference group (*Diff. Higher*); or, 4. Having relatively lower SES than their reference group (*Diff. Lower*).
Respondents self-selected into the study based on their self-identification as an Adult Child of a Hoarder. There were only three qualifications for participation in this study: the respondent must be over the age of 18; have spent a large portion of their childhood in what they identify as a hoarding household with a hoarding parent; and, have since moved out of that hoarding household. Because this population is a stigmatized and difficult to reach population, I recruited the project sample from the only prominent online support group available, "Children of Hoarders", (http://childrenofhoarders.com/wordpress/) a website which has over 3,000 active members from around the world. The community of the “Children of Hoarders” website seeks to build awareness, understanding, and support for children of hoarders. The majority of the interviews (9) were conducted over the phone, but others chose to communicate over a Skype call or Skype video chat (6), and one interview was conducted in person. With the respondents’ permission, all interviews were audio-recorded using a USB recorder. All interviewees were given pseudonyms of their choosing for purposes of publication or presentation to protect their identities.

**Interviewing**

The interview began with general questions pertaining to childhood memories of their family dynamics. I then asked the respondents to “take me on a tour” of their childhood home to better understand their living conditions and how they felt about these conditions. I then progressed into more detailed questions about their relationship with their hoarding parent, their concerns about secrecy, and their ideas and opinions about
hoarding and about themselves during different periods of their lives. Next, I asked questions concerning their relationships with others, ‘stuff’, home, intimacy, and trust. Towards the end of the interview, I asked what advice they would give to children currently living in hoarding household and what they wish other people understood about hoarding and hoarders. I concluded with demographics questions. As an ACoH myself and a proponent of feminist methodology, I ended the interview by offering the respondent the opportunity to ask me any questions about my life and my experiences with my own hoarding mother.

Coding

During the data collection, I adapted my interview guide in reaction to the themes and trends that I had begun to notice in previous interviews, in accordance with a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006, 2011). One of these themes was the effect of stigma and the fear and embarrassment that it caused, so I began probing for stories concerning the reactions of others. After I finished the interviews, I manually transcribed the 16 used in this sample and open-coded for emergent themes before returning for 3 subsequent rounds of selective coding looking for indicators of relative deprivation, reference groups, stigma, and self-concepts according to the definitions discussed in the literature review. The socio-economic status (SES) of respondents and their reference groups were determined through a subjective, cumulative process by combining the information about their parents’ occupation and educational achievement with information compiled throughout the interview; for instance, any discussion of finances,
bankruptcy, loss of income, worrying about money or mention of never having to worry about money. In addition, comparisons made about material possessions such as houses, cars, condition of clothing, and yards were used in determining the SES of reference groups.

I decided to use only two categories of SES—High or Low—for several reasons. First, because of the subjective measurement technique, it would be very difficult to make more precise categorizations, i.e. the common classifications of Working Poor, Middle Class, Upper-Middle Class. Second, using more categories would make the comparison process nearly impossible with a sample of 16. And finally, in this analysis, I would argue that it matters less what the actual SES standing of the respondent or their reference group was but rather the perception of their SES in relation to their reference groups that is the important factor. So, in essence, a distinction of higher, lower, or the same are the necessary measurements for these relationships. So, after determining all set of relational SES, I categorized each respondent into one of four characteristic statuses (shown in Table 1): 1. ACoHs and Their Reference Groups both Had High SES (Same High); 2. ACoHs and Their Reference Groups both Had Low SES (Same Low); 3. ACoHs had Higher SES Than Their Reference Groups (Diff. Higher); 4. ACoHs had Lower SES Than Their Reference Groups (Diff. Lower). These four different combinations of statues led to dramatically different types of self-concepts reported by the respondents, including not only differences between positive or negative concepts but also in how salient and long-lasting they were to the person’s identity.
CHAPTER IV
FINDINGS

Organization

The findings of this study are organized into four sections, first focusing on groups with similar SES and then focusing on those with differing SES. The first section will discuss those respondents who, along with their reference groups, had a similarly high SES. The second section will concern those who, along with their reference groups, reported a similarly low SES. The third section will focus on the one respondent who reported having a relatively higher SES than her reference groups. And, the fourth and final section will examine those who reported having a relatively lower SES than their reference groups. Each section will showcase examples from the interviews that demonstrate the relationship between the ACoH and individuals from their reference groups, the comparative process they engage in, and the self-concepts and lasting impact that these encounters and comparisons had on their identities.

ACoH and Reference Groups Both Had High SES

In this study’s sample, five of the respondents can be categorized as having a similar SES to the reference groups that they talk about in their interviews; they come
from a middle-to-upper-class background. These respondents were Leesa, Sabrina, Carmen, Lola, and Morgan—all women, four are White and one identified as mixed race (White/Hispanic). Each of the five respondents recounted times in which they compared their home situations to those of their friends, neighbors, or other relatives and found their situations to not be ‘living-up’ to the standards set as desirable or even tolerable by their reference groups. Because of this comparison, these women feared the reactions that would occur if others discovered the truth; or, as Morgan put it, “what if they saw?” So, they engaged in secrecy and lying to prevent others from discovering their true living conditions, putting up what Elder had called a “social front” (1999). Despite their efforts to hide, they recall feeling frustration and anxiety over the possibility of being discovered and the pressure of not living up to the normative standards of living expected of their social class. Lessa recalls the few times during her childhood when she was allowed to have friends over to her house:

It was very few and far between. And then it was still…it was an ordeal trying to get the—to get the house straightened up, like, for a birthday party of something like that. I mean…if I did things with friends, it was always at somebody else’s house. And, I think too because, um… even if the house was clean…on the surface…it wasn’t clean because you’d never know when a roach was going to crawl across the floor or something of that nature.—Leesa

In the above quote, Lessa talks about the discomfort she felt with having people in her house because of the fear that her house might not be as clean as her friends’ houses. When she visits her friends’ houses, she does not consider the possibility that a roach might crawl across one of their floors because it is not something that is part of her frame of normative expectations for her reference group and social class’s standards of cleanliness—either because she has never experienced it or because she has romanticized
and elevated the living situations of those around her. Yet, the idea of ‘even if it’s clean, it’s not really clean’ occurs in all five of the respondents who had similar high SES to their reference groups. Lessa goes on to articulate that, on those rare occasions that her house was clean, “For a brief moment you can probably appear to be a normal family…I guess as you start to see how other people live, then it’s just—I mean, you realize just how un-normal it is.” Again, Lessa is recognizing that there is normal standard, at a cultural and structural level, that she and her family are not living-up to. By glimpsing how ‘other people live’, she is engaging in the comparative process and finding that her situation is relatively deprived in contrast to the other people she knows. Sabrina recalls her reactions when she would go to friends’ houses as a child:

When I did go to a few friends’ houses, I treated it like it was the Taj Mahal. Like it was a castle! I was afraid to sit anywhere, I was afraid to touch anything because I was afraid that literally it would…be disgraced in some way. I was so afraid of just letting myself be comfortable. --Sabrina

Her recalling what was, in all likelihood, a ‘normal’ house as the Taj Mahal and treating it as if everything was sacred or made of glass highlights just how alien the environment felt to her, in comparison to her own home. She again romanticizes and elevates the normal living conditions of her friends and sees her situation and herself as humbled. She uses the word “disgraced” to describe what she fears will happen if she lets her guard down; this speaks to how she viewed herself as a child—as something dirty and unworthy. This speaks to the nature of hoarding or being the child of a hoarder as a stigma. Those like Sabrina, who had internalized the stigma, saw the hoard as something that they carried with them—on or under their skin—that seemed to tarnish or contaminate anything they touched. Sabrina also decided early on that her best course of action was to hide, least someone discover her mother’s hoarding (and that Sabrina
herself was a disgraceful and dirty person). So, she engaged in many evasive tactics to prevent others from discovering her living conditions.

Oh, I was good! I would tell bold-faced lies! And, I’d just come up with the best excuses—and they’d believe me! But, they took it. And, back then, people didn’t question. If a person said “Now’s not a good time” you took it at that…So, yeah. You learned to put on a persona that everything is perfectly fine, you have the perfect life, and nobody is the wiser. Every word that you say, every look you give, you just die a thousand death. And then, whenever you leave wherever you’re at, you just feel like crap because you knew that you lied.--Sabrina

So, not only was Sabrina living in a situation that was not consistent with the standards held as normal for her social class and reference groups, she was also suffering negative psychological effects from the process of hiding the disparity between them. Sabrina, like the other four respondents in this category, had clear ideas about what a ‘normal’ living situation was supposed to be and they were certain that they were not living in one.

Sabrina had the unique situation for part of her childhood in which her grandparents lived with her and mother—in the hoarded house, but not a part of it. As her mother filled every other room with stacks of newspapers from her job at the printing factory, to boxes of clothing, to bags of garbage that never made it past the living room, Sabrina had a very different example in the two rooms upstairs that her grandparents shared.

My grandparents, because we were raised old German, I look at them and I would see the clean environment. My grandparents would have a clean sitting area, they would have a clean living area. So, that was always there. So, I learned real quick that what my mom was doing was wrong, what my grandparents were doing was right. --Sabrina

While Sabrina’s grandparents saw their daughter’s deteriorating mental state first hand, they had their own failing health to attend to. Additionally, in the 1960s and 1970s, there was not much information about hoarding. However, this close exposure (under the same
of two extreme styles of living which she was able to distinguish as ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’. As seen in the above quote, these women often had specific examples from family members, friends’ houses, church members, or neighbors of how they thought a ‘normal’ family of their social class should be living.

**ACOH and Reference Groups Both Had Low SES**

Only two respondents, Dionne and Lilly, can be categorized as having a similar relative low SES with their reference groups. Both women lived in public housing during a portion of their childhoods, though Dionne’s mother eventually bought her own home. Both Dionne and Lilly were raised by single mothers and had significantly older siblings who left home early in their formative years. Both women were African American. Although these are the only two African American respondents in the sample, further research with a larger and more diverse sample is needed to determine if any inferences can be made about the significance of race in these findings. Instead, I will continue to focus on the similar class circumstances of the two women in this category. In contrast to the previous category, both Dionne and Lilly did not feel immense pressure to hide their mothers’ hoarding and their living situations from their friends. Dionne recalls:

> Yeah, I would let people in. (laughs) I would let them in. Because I was very much a social person and I loved school. School was my…way out. At school, I was at my best…So yeah, I would let them come—let them come over and I would just say “Ignore that mess, come to my room” you know, and we’d just go to my room, so… –Dione

In the above quote, Dionne calls school her ‘way out’ and just advises her friends to ‘ignore the mess’, so she obviously feels some negative effects in relation to the hoarded
environment; however, unlike the women in the previous group, the negative effects are not a result of the frustration she feels from comparison process she engages in with her reference group. She goes on to say that her friends had their own housing issues that put her own situation into perspective.

Some of my friends had been in low-income housing, which is really bad. So, I would say things like “Well, at least my mom does work” You know? Because they would have—you would go over to a friend’s house and their mom would be there and they didn’t know what they were going to eat and all that. And, to me, they had things on a grander scale than I had to deal with. And so, I would always kind of minimize my situation. I would say, you know, at least I have a house, first of all. I had a house and there was always food there, whether it was something that I wanted to eat or not. I was never coming home to an empty fridge, you know?” –Dionne

While Dionne regarded herself and her family as poor, she also had friends who more economically disadvantaged. By comparing her mother’s pension for keeping rooms full of piles of clothes and dead plants to a friend who might not be able to eat or have a place to sleep, she is positioning herself within her reference group and does not find herself to be deprived. Because of this, Dionne and Lilly do not report any of the internalized negative self-concepts that were present in the previous category. However, Dionne still recognized that her situation would not be considered ‘normal’ by society at large.

You know, my friends come in from the projects over to my house and they automatically thought “Man, you got it way better than I do.” You know? So, there was really not a lot that I could say that would really take off their rose-colored glasses, if you will. You know, because a lot of my friends, at their house they are battling roaches—and not just a little cockroach here and there, they’d have a roach infestation. And then, they come to my house and my first complaint is that my mom has too many clothes thrown over the couch and they’re like “What? Like, really? Go live in my house and let me have your mom with all the clothes”. --Dionne
While she is able to engage in the self-reflexive process of recognizing that some of her friends had larger problems than she did, she still wanted someone to recognize that her situation was not normal. This ties into the concept of lower class value-stretch which states that while those from a lower class may accept lower standards as tolerable, they still recognize the dominant values of success (standards of cleanliness and normality) as the most desirable.

**ACOH Had Higher SES Than Their Friends**

Only one respondent, Denise, fell into the category of having higher SES than her reference groups. Denise’s parents were divorced and both parents had successful careers. Her father lived out of state and paid child support to her mother. While Denise and her brother would visit her father several times a year, her father was not allowed inside their house as the hoarding worsened over the course of her childhood and adolescence. Denise recalls feeling embarrassed and confused about the situation as a young child, but as she grew older her opinions changed.

I think I was, you know, 13—but at the time when I was—I had finally cleared my bedroom out and it was all mine, I had really just gotten to the point where I just didn’t care, I was just tired of it. So, I would start bringing friends in and, um…I remember I had one friend who had a really, really rough childhood where his dad was on all sorts of drugs and the first things he said when he came in and saw my house was, like, “Wow… is your mom on one? What is she on that makes her do this?” Because it had gotten really bad at that point, stuff was, um…she was failing to maintain things. Like, I remember for a couple years when I was in high school, the bathroom sink… leaked when you tried to use it. You’d wash your hands and there’d be a bucket under the sink that would fill up and then you’d have to empty it into the toilet when it got too full. Like, that’s how you’d brush your teeth, that’s how you washed your hands—I remember him seeing that and seeing, like, the house and just being, like, “What is your mom on?” —Denise
While Denise technically belonged to a high social class, her experiences are more in line with those of Lilly and Dionne because of her assessment of herself within her reference group. Denise engaged in a comparative process of her home situation with the situation of those of her friends (particularly the friend from the quote above whose father had a bad drug problem) and determined that she was not deprived. Again, because she did not see herself as ‘lacking’ in comparison to her friends, she did not feel the need to hide and did not internalize the negative self-concepts that others did. Interestingly, the shift that she experiences from childhood into adolescence where she stops feeling embarrassed could be tied to her shifting primary unit of socialization. In the formative years, socialization comes mainly from the family and using her high SES family and extended family as a reference group, she would exhibit characteristic more in line with those respondents in the first classification category. However, during the school years, the task of primary socialization switches to peer groups, explaining the shift of her frame of reference.

ACOH Had Lower SES Than Their Friends

Far and away, the most common classification for ACoHs were those who had lower SES than their reference groups with half of the sample, eight respondents: Kimberly, Kendra, J.R., Tara, Dee, Robert, Andrew, and Jennifer. I believe there are several possibilities for this occurrence. First, because of their deviant home environments, I believe that ACoHs may have a tendency to perceive themselves and their families as ‘poorer’ and their friends as ‘richer’ simply based on the relative
conditions of their homes. Second, many hoarders do have financial issues because of the cost that accumulation incurs which can contribute to their financial situations and periods of mounting economic hardship over the life course. These ideas will need further investigation in future research.

The eight respondents in this category share many similarities with the respondents in the first category (those who had high SES and so did their reference groups). Having people over was a ‘rare-to-never’ occurrence in their households. And, if people knew or ‘found out’ about their living situation, it was a source of great embarrassment. Kimberly recalls, almost bitterly “Oh yeah. Oh yeah, people knew” before explaining that her mother, grandmother, and aunt didn’t seem to mind having people over. The people that were allowed into her house were their friends and were also of a lower social class. However, when I asked Kimberly how it made her feel that people knew, she responded:

Oh, so embarrassed! I hated it! I couldn’t have friends over. And, when I did have any friends over, they stayed outside. I would not let them in the house. If they had to go to the bathroom, they had to go home to go to the bathroom. --Kimberly

This quote suggests that Kimberly was unlike her mother and was comparing herself to a different reference group. She refused to let her friends into her house, even to use the restroom, for fear of judgment because she did not live up to their ‘normal’ standard. This fear of being ‘found-out’ and the uncomfortable recognition of being unable to reciprocate events like sleepovers and birthday parties are markers of an ACoH in this category.
Robert recalls a time when a friend’s father dropped him off at his house and remarked jokingly “Next party should be at your house!” Robert attempted to laugh it off while internally panicking at the possibility of having people inside his home. He notes that while he was invited over to other boys’ houses often during his early years, he had never—not once—had a friend over inside his own house. He told me that when he was young and his grandfather passed away he had left Robert’s family a small amount of money specifically to build a pool, for sentimental reason’s tied to Robert’s father’s own childhood. So, for about three summers, Robert had an above ground pool to swim in until his family lapsed on the upkeep. At the time of the interview, Robert hypothesized that the pool was still in his parent’s backyard and not been cleaned out since the last summer he’d swam in it as a kid.

I remember I had, I had this weird thing happen where I was really good friends with this guy and I would go—he would have, like, sleepovers at his house and so we would all go to his house and a bunch of us would stay over and watch movies that we weren’t supposed to watch [laughs].. But, then I remember one time he came over, I think to swim in our pool. And, it was like—we like, didn’t go inside after that. And, I just remember feeling like, you know, we shouldn’t go in but it was weird to not go inside, even though we were swimming in our pool.. And, I just remember being, like, “Wow, that’s really weird.” --Robert

This frustration Robert felt at not being able to reciprocate highlights how influential his reference group was in his life. He was engaged in the comparative process within his group of friends and found that his home and his ‘friendship-contributions’ were not measuring up the expected standard. He would often give his friends the excuse of “we’re remodeling!” when they asked why they could not come over to his home. “Yeah [laughing] because you try to think of something that’s positive, you know. So it’s like “Yeah, we’re—everything’s great. Like, we’re doing so well, that we’re actually –
improving our house” [still laughing] when really, like, everything’s just kind of gone to shit.” As an adult, Robert engages in a lot volunteer work and has a career that focuses on human interest and development. He states that:

As an adult I have an over-developed sense of responsibility and I think a lot of that is because of this, like, guilt and shame and blaming….That’s the feeling that I get. Like, I get a feeling of anxiety and feeling guilty about not being—not being adequate. —Robert.

These feeling of ‘guilt’, ‘shame’, and ‘inadequacy’ are self-concept plague most ACoH who had high SES reference groups far into adulthood. These individuals not only deal with the strain on not living up to the desirable normative standards set as a cultural goal, but also suffer from relative deprivation through direct contact with their peer groups. Also, because of the secrecy surrounding their homes and their parent’s mental illness they often suffer in isolation. The combination of these factors leads to such negative personality self-definitions as Robert mentioned above.

Andrew is a highly educated man in his late thirties with a pronounced stutter. He informs me that research on stuttering is inconclusive as to the root causes but childhood traumas have been theorized. From an early age, Andrew was very aware of not only the hoarding but also the economic differences between his family and those of his friends and classmates.

Yeah…for some of the kids that I knew were wealthier…Who’s houses I had been in before or had seen before, um, I had trouble relating, just because I didn’t c-c-come from that. You know. And, I was intimidated by them too um…where I actually thought that they w-were better than me…I thought that, um…because they were richer. And, rich meant smart to me. And, you know, that I probably shouldn’t be talking with them. And, if they f-f-found out h-how I lived, that they would look down on me further than-than I already was. —Andrew
Not only did Andrew recognize that his family was not living up the standard of cleanliness that he saw demonstrated by those in his reference group, but he also attributed them with having more positive personality characteristics (being smarter and better) because they were richer. Andrew had engaged in a comparison process with his friends and not only found himself to be ‘less’ but also seemed to view himself as morally deficient because of the combination of his SES and his concealed stigmatized identity as a child of a hoarder. Because of his negative self-perceptions, Andrew continued to engage in isolationist tactics, concluding that he did not even deserve to speak with those ‘other’ kids. J.R. also recalls a childhood of loneliness and isolation. She revealed that she did not feel that she had any memorable friends, but she still felt the overwhelming pressure to keep the conditions of her childhood home a secret from her classmates and well into adulthood.

Honestly Laura? I thought we were the only ones in the world that lived like this. Because I lived with this and I—I was going to therapy for years and ...I never talked about the hoard because I thought it was so unique and so embarrassing and so horrible and the shaming that comes from all of that. I never talked about it. And so, now that I know what it is and I know what the name of it is and what it’s called-- now I’m having all of these sort of reactionary thoughts and feeling that came from that... (her voice becomes teary) I was so isolated. And then, of course, being the child of a hoarder, when you’re in it now you’re this weak fragile thing because you have this monster of a parent who does nothing but psychologically fuck with you. So, now you’re weak. And, the others kids at school, they smell it a mile away. So, now you get bullied and now you don’t have any friends. You know, it’s not like you have one or two friends and you just don’t know how to act, but you have —no— friends because you are picked on because you stink, your clothes are dirty. You’re dirty….And, it’s such a sense of isolation and neglect that comes from this stuff. And, nobody gets it… But, at the end of the day, I look at my life and I say “I’m 35 years old and there are still times when I feel that I don’t deserve to be successful…” –J.R.
The above quote perfectly demonstrates how social structure can affect personality characteristics through reference groups. Because of the comparison process that J.R. engaged in with her classmates, she came to recognize that her living situation was deviant and did not live up the normative standards of cleanliness for higher class individuals. Fearing judgment and stigmatization, J.R. hid her situation to the best of her abilities. This process of comparison, fear, shame, and hiding led J.R. to internalize that she was “weak” and “dirty” and “fragile” and that, even at 35 years old—well after moving away from her mother’s hoard and after years of therapy—she still feels like she is undeserving of success. The internalization of these negative self-concepts is the result of the failure to live-up the social-class standards set by J.R.’s reference group; this pattern is reflected in a similar fashion through all 8 respondents in this category.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Discussion of Findings

In this paper, I have drawn a link between the social structures of social class differentiated norms of cleanliness to the individual self-concepts of Adult Children of Hoarders, mediated by reference groups and the process of relative deprivation. The interview respondents were separated into four different categories for the purposes of analyzing what differences the various combinations of relative SES had on their self-concepts. A summary of these relationships and findings can be observed in Figure 2. The relationship between ACoHs with high SES, reference groups with similarly high SES, and the resulting types of self-concepts can be seen in Figure 2.A. Due to their failure to live up to the norms of their own social class and those found in their reference group, these individuals displayed lasting and highly salient negative self-concepts. These women felt ‘abnormal’ and ‘dirty’ in comparison to those in their reference groups and as if they carried the stain of their homes with them wherever they went.

In Figure 2.B, we see that that ACoHs who share a similarly low SES with their reference groups reported mostly positive self-concepts. These two women were able to separate their personal identities from the situation in which they were living because they were not made to feel that their living standards were too abnormal in comparison
with those of their friends. This relates back to the idea of differing levels of tolerance proposed by Della Fave (1974). Similarly, the self-concepts reported Denise, the only respondent in Figure 2C were also less salient to her identity once her primary group of socialization shifted from her nuclear family to that of her friend group who came from a Lower SES. At that point, she began to just not care.

**Figure 2: Findings Separated into Four Models by SES and Reference Group Self Concepts**

- **Mostly Negative Self-Concepts**: Highly salient to identity. - "Dirty" “disgraced” “abnormal” - Something they carried with them. Contaminant.
- **Mostly Positive Self-Concepts**: Less salient to identity. - “good at school” “social person” - Able to separate their identity from the situation
- **Shifting of self-concepts**: Less salient to identity primary group shifts to friend group. - “Shame” to “I just didn’t care anymore”
- **Highly Negative Self-Concepts**: Highly salient to their identity - Long lasting, into their adulthood - “Shame” “Guilty” “Inadequate” “Not as smart” “Not as good” “Dirty” “Embarrassment” “Weak” “Unworthy” “Fragile” “Undeserving of success”
The most interesting and compelling findings are found in the fourth group of respondents who reported having a lower SES than their reference groups (seen in Figure 2D). These respondents reported high rates of very negative self-concepts throughout their interviews. Not only were these concepts and their identity as a child of a hoarder highly salient to their identity but they were also long-lasting often well into their adult lives. These men and women, because of their relative positions within the class structure and their experiences of comparison with their reference groups, resulted in strong negative self-concepts which shaped their feeling of self-worth, self-confidence, ideas about their own abilities, and of how the world could, should, and would treat them because they saw themselves as worthy of scorn.

The findings of this study support the class-differentiated value system proposed by Della Fave and advance this theory by linking it with Merton’s concept of reference groups. This study shows the importance not only of one’s own SES but also of the relationship between the SES of an individual and the relative SES his or her reference groups in the formation of personality and identity characteristics. Particularly, these findings suggest how perceived stigma can result from not living up to class proscribed norms of cleanliness and order. In addition, whereas most studies which examine values differentiated by social class typically focus on monetary or educational achievement, this study opens the field up to the possibility of standards of living as markers of success which can be related through reference groups. And, at its core, this study begins to advance the scholarship on an understudied, stigmatize, and hard to reach population, the Adult Children of Hoarders.
While this study makes several contributions to the existing scholarship, it is limited in several ways, most significantly the sample. The sample size is small (16) and is also composed of mostly white females in their 30s and 40s. While qualitative methods do not aim for generalizability, the validity of this argument would be much stronger with a larger, more diverse sample. In the future, I plan to attempt to replicate these findings using the full Interviews with Adult Children of Hoarders data set (n=68). With this larger sample, I also hope to determine if there are any differences in the internalization of self-concepts by gender and whether or not the nature of the hoarding-parent/child relationship has any impact on the self-concepts internalized by the ACoH.

**Conclusion: Tarnishing the Taj Mahal**

In summation, children often internalize lasting self-concepts during their childhood. However, these self-concepts will differ depending on their SES, the SES of their reference groups, and their experiences with relative deprivation. If in their childhood they come to view themselves and their homes as dirty, shameful, abnormal, and deviant then these individuals may also see themselves as contaminated. This is how an entire group of people could walk into a completely ‘normal’ house and feel, as Sabrina would say, as if they were tarnishing the “Taj Mahal” with their very presence.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Office of Research Administration
Akron, OH 44322-1962

NOTICE OF APPROVAL

April 25, 2013

Laura M. Nishius
13224 Weatherwane Lane Apt. 2D
Akron, Ohio 44313

From: Sharon McWhorter, IRB Administrator

Re: IRB Number 20130342 "Interviews with Adult Children of Hoarders"

Thank you for submitting an IRB Application for Review of Research Involving Human Subjects for the referenced project. Your protocol represents minimal risk to subjects and has been approved under Expedited Category #7.

Approval Date: April 5, 2013
Expiration Date: April 5, 2014
Continuation Application Due: March 21, 2014

In addition, the following is/are approved:

- Waiver of documentation of consent
- Waiver or alteration of consent
- Research involving children
- Research involving prisoners

Please adhere to the following IRB policies:

- IRB approval is given for not more than 12 months. If your project will be active for longer than one year, it is your responsibility to submit a continuation application prior to the expiration date. We request submission two weeks prior to expiration to allow sufficient time for review.
- A copy of the approved consent form must be submitted with any continuation application.
- If you plan to make any changes to the approved protocol you must submit a continuation application for change and it must be approved by the IRB before being implemented.
- Any adverse reactions/incidents must be reported immediately to the IRB.
- If this research is being conducted for a master’s thesis or doctoral dissertation, you must file a copy of this letter with the thesis or dissertation.
- When your project terminates you must submit a Final Report Form in order to close your IRB file.

Additional information and all IRB forms can be accessed on the IRB web site at:
http://www.uakron.edu/research/crssp/compliance/IRBHome.php

Cc: K. Felley - Advisor
Cc: Valerie Callanan - IRB Chair
☑ Approved consent form's enclosed