

# Workplace Stigma Toward Employees with Intellectual Disability: A Descriptive Study

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*Gathering in Glendale - 2015*

# Overview

- Individuals with ID face intellectual and social challenges and are one of the most highly stigmatized groups in society;
- Transition-age youth with ID face specific challenges as they seek employment in mainstream organizations;
- Challenging behavior manifested by some individuals with ID often makes other people uncomfortable, rendering it an important barrier to acknowledge in the discussion on social inclusion;
- Stigma affects mainstream hiring practices but relatively little is known about the sources of stigmatizing attitudes, especially the ways in which this phenomenon plays out in the workplace.

# Purpose

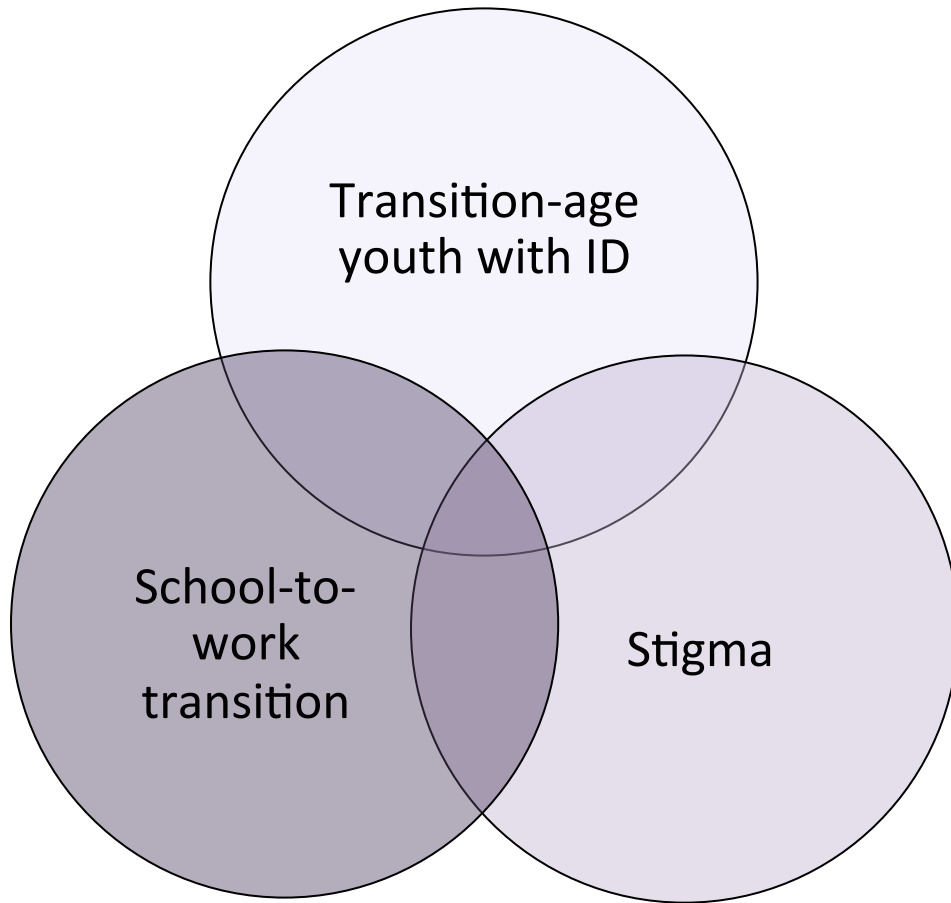
The purpose of this study was to explore workplace stigma toward employees with ID as assessed through coworker perceptions over time.

# Significance

This study...

- explored coworker perspective, an understudied phenomenon related to employment of individuals with ID;
- contributed to discourse on employment challenges by taking an ‘inside the organization’ perspective;
- pursued a deeper understanding of the challenges facing these individuals;
- shifted the focus to the contributions of disabled people in organizations and how they provide value; and,
- offered important alternative to quantitative literature.

# Conceptual Framework



Research Question:  
In what ways do coworkers describe their perceptions over time of transition-age youth with ID hired in a coworkers' unit within the context of a formalized, school-to-work transition program?

# Data Collection Instrument

Part 1 – Background Information

Part 2 – Interview Questions

## Three subsections by time frame of coworker perception:

- 1) Prior perceptions – what coworkers anticipated it would be like to work with an individual with ID prior to the youth joining the work unit;
- 2) Perceptions during transition – coworkers' perceptions of the youth during the time in which the individual first arrived in the work unit as an intern through the first year as a new hire; and,
- 3) Current perceptions – coworkers' perceptions after having worked with the youth for at least one year.

# Coworker Perceptions of Youth

(Prior to meeting youth)

Negative

## Negative

- Concerned
- Skeptical of own ability to mentor
- Low expectations

Neutral

## Neutral

- Uncertain
- Open-minded
- Curious

Positive

## Positive

- Excited
- Privileged
- Humbled
- Hopeful

# Coworker Perceptions of Youth

(Upon meeting youth through first year)

## Negative

### Negative

- Frustrated (at time commitment to mentor)
- Uncertain (as to how to deal with behavior)
- Questioning (of how much support to provide)
- Need for patience

#### *Observations:*

- Poor personal hygiene

## Neutral

### Neutral

#### *Observations:*

- Shy
- Nervous
- Afraid
- Needed Assurance

## Positive

### Positive

- Favorable first impression
- Exceeded expectations
- Valued members of work unit

#### *Observations:*

- Hard-working
- Eager to help and learn
- Highly competent
- Growth in job skills and independence
- Productive



# Coworker Perceptions of Youth

(After having worked with youth for at least one year)

Negative

## Negative

- Frustrated (at time commitment to mentor)

*Observations:*

- Poor personal hygiene

Neutral

## Neutral

- Uncertain as to how best to communicate

Positive

## Positive

- Valued employees
- Remarkable abilities
- Gratified and rewarded by mentor role
- New respect for diversity
- Differences 'blended in'

*Observations:*

- Confident
- Caring
- Proud
- Loving
- **Special contributions**

# The Progression of One Coworker's Perceptions

## QUOTES FROM ROSE RED...

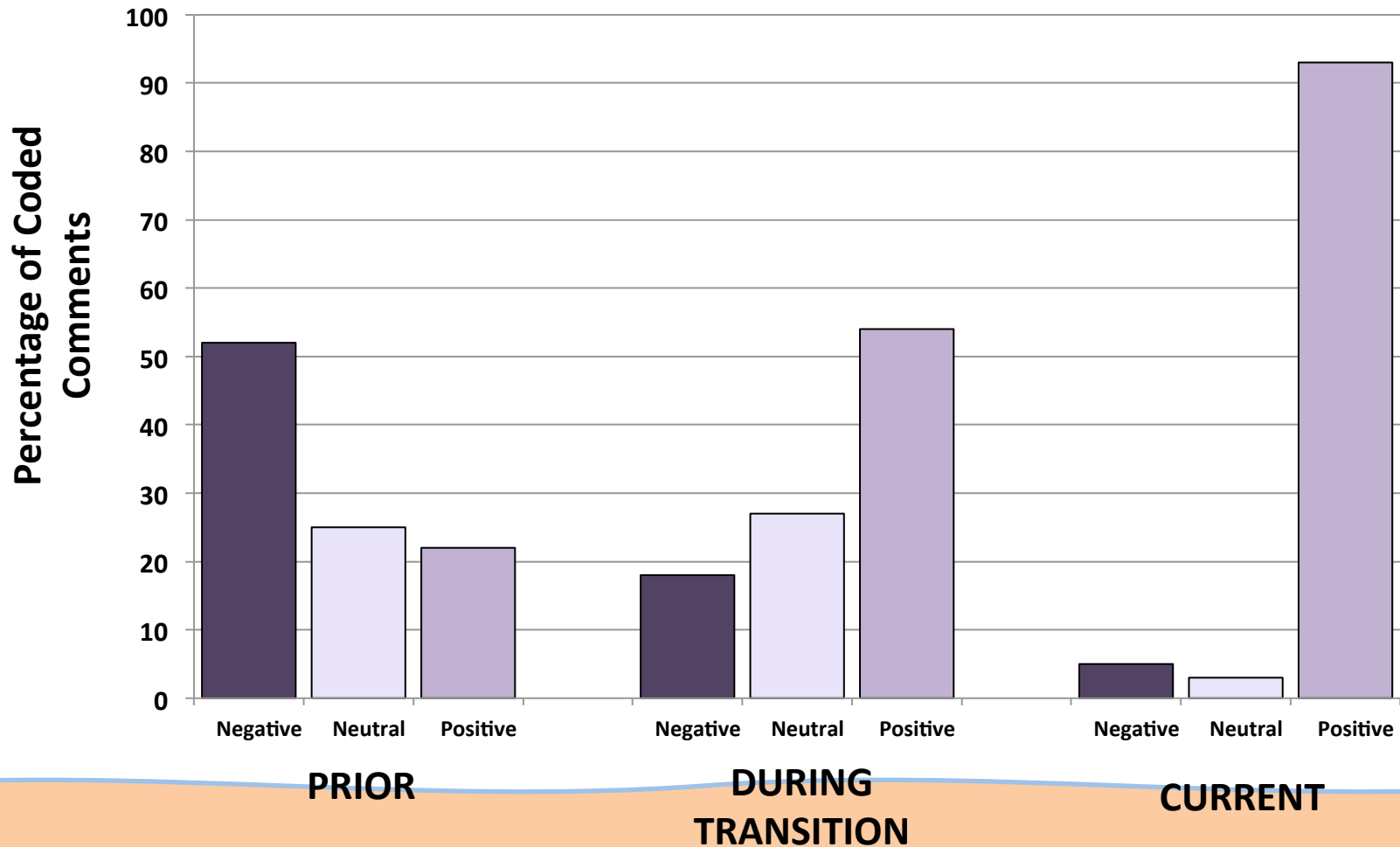
PRIOR: "At first, I didn't think that it was going to work because I did not have time to train anyone. I didn't have time to do any training. I just needed to get the work done. I thought that it would take me more time in dealing with them. I was doubtful that they could do it and that I would have the necessary skills to work with them."

DURING TRANSITION: "She began to fit in more and I realized that she had a lot...if I asked her to do things beyond the simples, she was able to...I was concerned at first about communicating what I wanted her to do, if she was really picking that up. And I found that she was able to."

CURRENT: "They really have more to offer than what I originally expected. Similar desires and abilities; really have greater abilities than we realize...we try to make them too different. It was a very good learning experience of what expectations I had for myself and for the other person. And my patience grew and did their seeing and learning what they really can do."

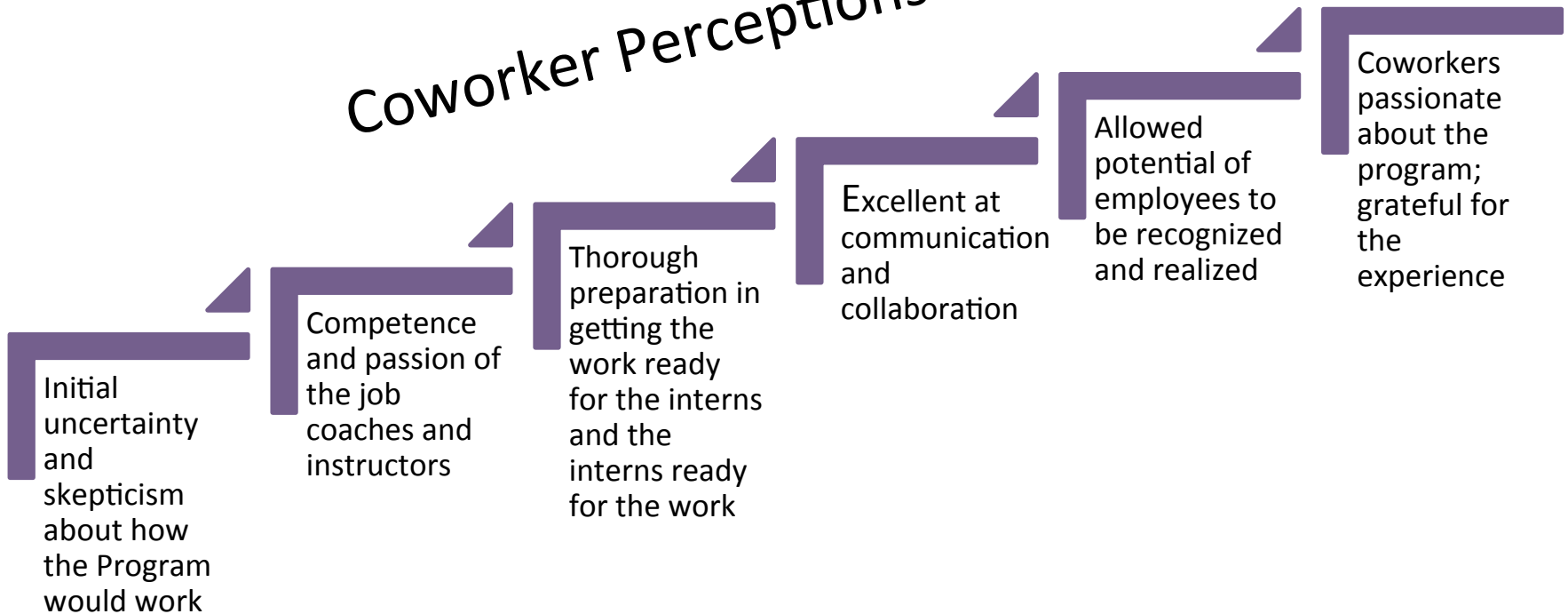
# Coworker Perceptions over Time toward Youth with ID in the Workplace

Percentage of Coded Comments in Each Time Period  
(N=314)



# Overall Experience with the Program

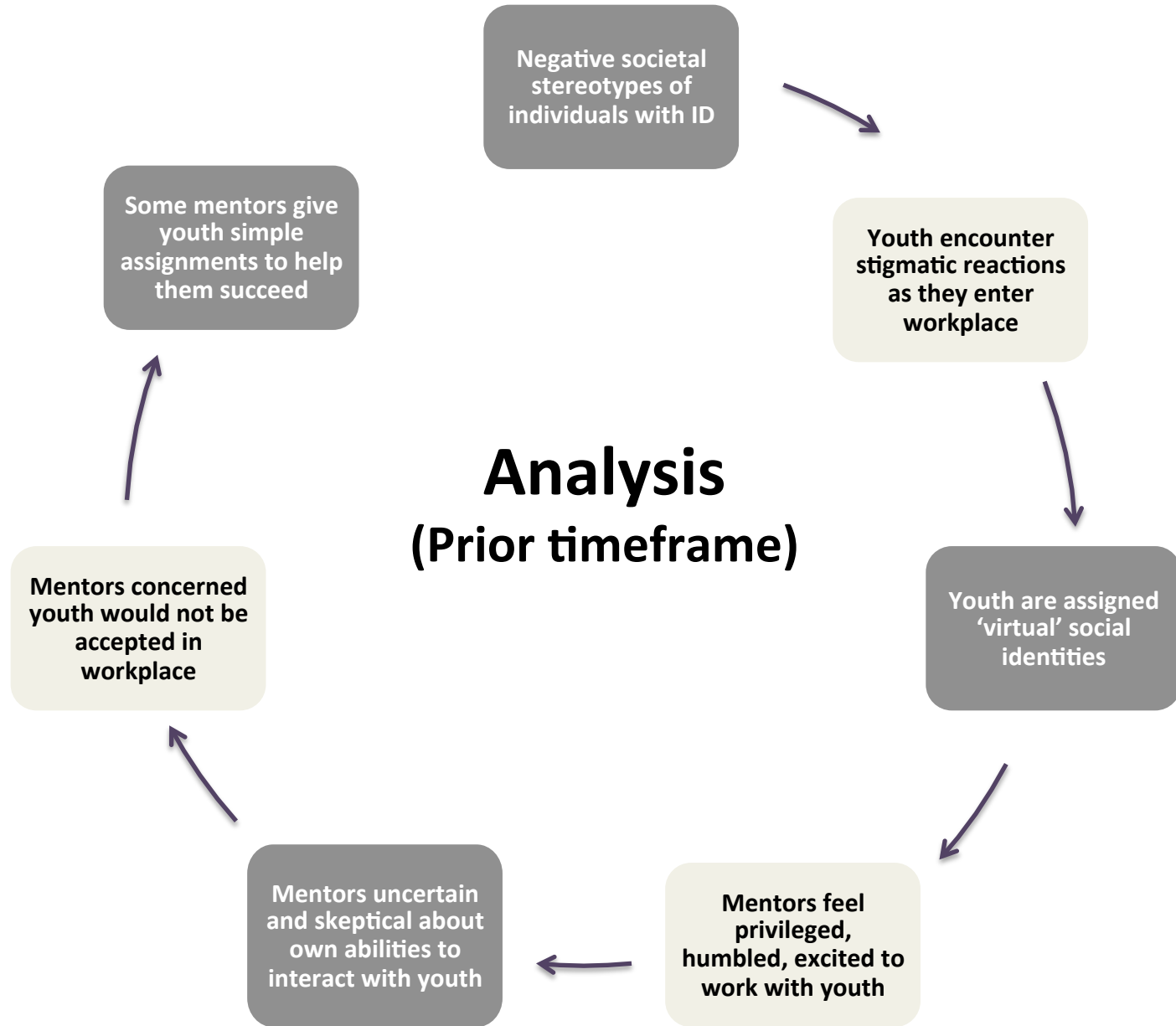
## Coworker Perceptions Over Time



# Stigma

**Margaret:**  
“I was a little concerned about perceptions of our patients - how they would be perceived from a patient standpoint. I just did not know what the – how patients or visitors may look at this not knowing.”

## Analysis (Prior timeframe)



# Stigma

Youth observed to be shy, fearful, anxious; likely aware of stigma



Possibility of self-stigma



Personal contact and demonstrated proficiency in workplace lead to initial acceptance



'Virtual' social identities replaced by 'actual' social identities



Youth seen as capable with individual gifts



Acceptance emerges among coworkers

**Analysis**  
(Transitional timeframe)

*Thelma*: It was like...I would give him a task that he needed to do, and initially I found myself kind of outlining it, every minute step by minute step, kind of *ad nauseam*. One time he looked at me, he said Miss Thelma, I know how to staple."

# Stigma

Mentors focused on youth's skills, abilities

Stigma resolved but who has changed?

Appropriate workplace behaviors become the norm

**Analysis**  
(Current timeframe)

Stigma as a normative predicament

Mentors report perceptions have shifted markedly

Tension dissipates between youth and mentors

"I would have never thought that someone with any type of disability would be one of my top performers in a job that requires critical thinking."

# **Special Workplace Contributions**

**DIVERSITY THROUGH INDIVIDUALITY**

**SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS**

**INSPIRATION**

**HOPE**

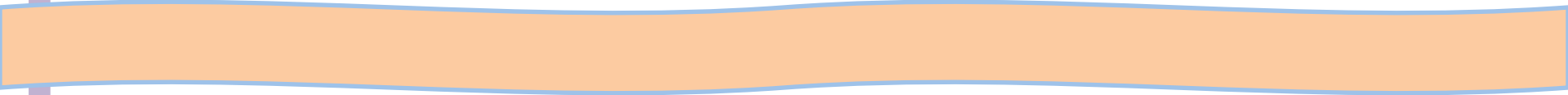


# Analysis (Over time)

**Youth with ID**



**Organizational  
Mentors**



# Summary

- The literature is scant with studies on how stigma manifests inside organizations;
- This study takes a qualitative look at how stigma plays out over time through the lens of coworker perceptions and within the framework of a formalized, school-to-work transition program;
- Coworker perceptions shifted over time from skepticism with low expectations to positive with a focus on workplace productivity, among other highly valued contributions of youth with ID;
- The school-to-work transition program provides a “bridge” between youth and mentors, facilitating youth’s ability to perform and leading to their eventual acceptance as full workplace members.

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