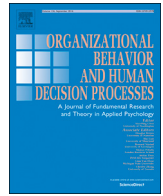




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Sacrificing status for social harmony: Concealing relatively high status identities from one's peers

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ABSTRACT

Given strong human desires to be respected and understood, we demonstrate a surprising tendency: individuals consistently conceal relatively high status identities (sacrificing status and authenticity) to preserve social harmony. We experimentally demonstrated that, contrary to third-party observers' expectations (Study 1), individuals were more likely to conceal relatively high status identities, compared to similar status identities, from their peers (Studies 1–5). Concealment was an effort to mitigate interpersonal threats (to the self, others, and belonging; Study 3) and continued even when individuals could not be held responsible for disclosure (Study 4). We found modest evidence that relative status still impacted concealment in settings encouraging status hierarchy (Study 5). Thus, individuals have a persistent discomfort with elevating their status above others. We conclude by considering the promising implications of identifying conditions that encourage high status individuals to prioritize social harmony, as well as caveats regarding how identity concealment may inadvertently reinforce inequality.

1. Introduction

When an individual belongs to a relatively prestigious group, is he likely to make this identity known or keep it to himself? Scholarly work delineating the human desire to be known and understood suggests the former, stating “*If people are to succeed in laying claim to a particular identity, it is critical that they look the part. By ... acquiring a grandiose title, or accumulating a curriculum vitae that is too fat to fit into a normal-sized briefcase, people may leave their interaction partners few doubts concerning who they are and how they expect to be treated*” (Swann, 1983: 37). This quote represents a common intuition: people readily disclose identities that have the potential to elevate their status above others. This assumption is rooted in the notion that greater status affords greater opportunities (Magee & Galinsky, 2008), making high status identity disclosure appealing and perhaps even prudent.

While high status identity disclosure may have enticing benefits associated with authenticity and status, such disclosure may also have negative interpersonal ramifications. Revealing relatively high status identities highlights differences in where people stand in a broader societal hierarchy, and thus has the potential to trigger concerns with a host of negative social processes, including discrimination, conflict, and homophily (Allport, 1954; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Because these harmful dynamics disadvantage

those lower in the social hierarchy, scholars have focused almost exclusively on how concerns with these interpersonal processes lead individuals to conceal relatively *low* status identities from their peers (Clair, Beatty, & MacLean, 2005; Dumas, Rothbard, & Phillips, 2008; Goffman, 1963; Hewlett, Luce, & West, 2005; Yoshino, 2006). Yet, given that high status individuals also experience interpersonal concerns in cross-status interactions (Blascovich, Mendes, Hunter, Lickel, & Kowai-Bell, 2001; Vorauer, Hunter, Main, & Roy, 2000), surprisingly little is known about whether individuals manage these concerns by concealing relatively *high* status identities. This lacuna in our knowledge has resulted in many open questions. Does the burden of easing cross-status interactions fall squarely on the shoulders of people lower in the social hierarchy, with them concealing status-related differences while their more advantaged counterparts proudly trumpet their true selves and reap the benefits? Or, are high status individuals also motivated to conceal status-related identities, sacrificing personal benefits in order to facilitate social harmony with their peers?

The present paper delves into this understudied realm of high status identity concealment, examining whether individuals intentionally conceal relatively high status identities, more so than relatively similar status identities, when interacting with peers. A professor may decide to tell a fellow parent that he is a teacher, or a student from a prestigious school may withhold her affiliation when meeting a new acquaintance.

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Past theoretical work has considered the possibility that high status identity concealment takes place (Phillips, Rothbard, & Dumas, 2009). An open question still remains regarding the frequency of such behavior given the potential for status-related incentives to outweigh interpersonal concerns, leading to disclosure. Further investigation into high status identity concealment’s psychological underpinnings and boundary conditions can provide valuable insight into when and why such concealment occurs, illuminating whether this behavior is rare – perhaps occurring only in a limited set of circumstances or among a small subset of people – or whether this behavior is in fact quite common.

We introduce a framework supporting our hypothesis that high status identity concealment is a prevalent, deeply-ingrained behavior that transpires in many contexts. The foundation of this prediction is that a multitude of interpersonal threats, several of which have yet to be explored in the context of high status identity management, work together to encourage concealment. An individual may conceal a relatively high status identity in order to shield oneself from interpersonal threats that are unique to people in high status positions (threats to the self, e.g., concerns with being envied and eliciting hostility), protect peers from the very same threats that have been shown to prompt low status identity concealment (threats to others, e.g., concerns that the lower status peer will feel stigmatized; Goffman, 1963), and mitigate concerns that are common to both parties (threats to belonging, e.g., concerns that the two individuals will seem too different to get along). Thus, we expect individuals to perceive high status identity concealment as a means of avoiding not only self-relevant threats, but also threats that are relevant to their peers, suggesting that the appeal of concealment is the ability to promote a mutual experience of social harmony in which both parties feel at ease in the interaction. These benefits of fostering harmony are expected to outweigh concerns with downplaying status and forgoing authenticity, resulting in concealment. The present paper examines these predictions regarding high status identity concealment and its mechanisms, as well as a potential boundary condition concerning the importance of status hierarchy. Fig. 1 provides a summary of key processes that we investigate.

Understanding the nature and scope of high status identity concealment speaks volumes to how people prioritize basic human motives: the desire for status (Anderson, Hildreth, & Howland, 2015) and authenticity (Swann, 1983) on the one hand, and social harmony on the other (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). To the extent that individuals sacrifice status and authenticity in order to promote social harmony, the present paper makes important advances in understanding how members of high status groups – whose interests are often depicted as

conflicting with members of lower status groups (Dahling, Wiley, Fishman, & Loihle, 2016; Hideg & Ferris, 2014; Shteynberg, Leslie, Knight, & Mayer, 2011) – can be motivated to advance a common goal of social harmony with their cross-status peers. To determine whether this may be the case, we consider in greater detail the personal costs of concealment that may make such behavior seem unlikely at first glance, followed by the manifold interpersonal benefits that may ultimately make concealment the preferred behavioral choice. Finally, we consider a boundary condition that may impact this cost-benefit ratio, as well as the consequences for high status identity concealment.

2. Costs of high status identity concealment: Sacrificing self interests

Previous research suggests that high status identity concealment may be unlikely due to several potential self-oriented benefits to disclosure and corresponding costs of concealment. The status of a person’s identities has implications for his or her status as an individual (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972), meaning his or her ability to achieve a fundamental human desire for respect and prestige in the eyes of others (Anderson et al., 2015). If a man at a conference shares that he is a pharmaceutical technician and asks a surgeon about her profession, she may feel most comfortable replying, “I work at a hospital.” But if she is mistaken for a nurse’s aide, she will be viewed as lower status and, consequently, less competent (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002); her opinion will be discounted (Berger et al., 1972); and she will receive less help from others (Van Der Veegt, Bunderson, & Oosterhof, 2006). Recognition that one has concealed an identity or allowed the identity to be combined with a larger group (e.g., hospital employees) may call into question the identity’s value and distinctiveness, diminishing a positive source of pride and self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Hiding a part of oneself is likely to feel inauthentic and dirty (Gino, Kouchaki, & Galinsky, 2015), undermining a desire to be known and understood by others (Swann, 1983). Thus, high status identity concealment can be costly in terms of sacrificing status (*Do others value me?*) and authenticity (*Do others see me for who I truly am?*).

High status identity concealment may seem particularly unlikely due to a tendency for people who occupy high status positions to prioritize self-serving goals and behaviors over more interpersonally-oriented goals and behaviors. People with higher status and greater access to power are more accustomed to standing out, asserting themselves and their interests, and expressing their authentic selves (Kifer, Heller, Perunovic, & Galinsky, 2013; Kraus, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rheinschmidt, & Keltner, 2012; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle,

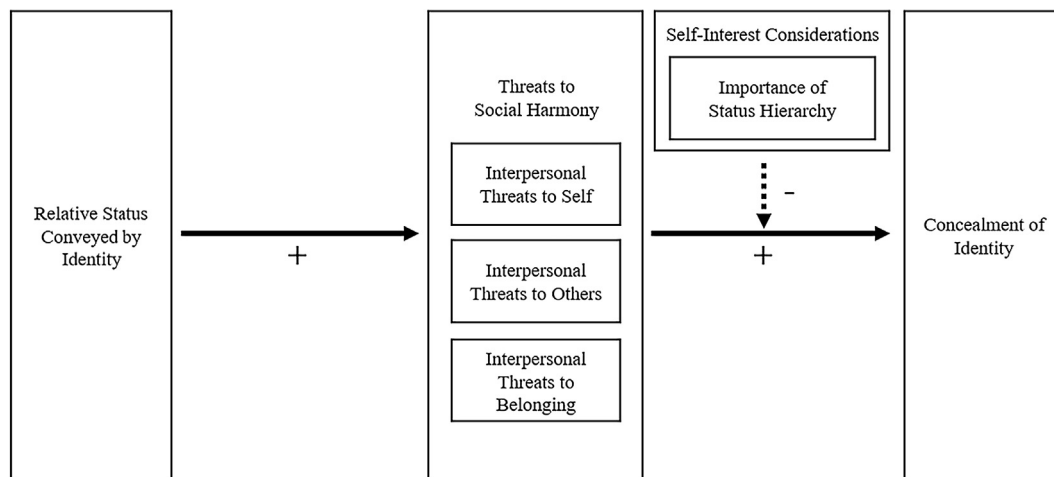


Fig. 1. Process of high status identity concealment, including theoretically-relevant mediators and moderator. Plus signs represent expected positive relationships, minus signs represent expected negative relationships. Solid lines represent hypotheses we tested and found support for, dotted lines represent hypotheses we did not find support for in the present paper.

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