



Hidden costs of hiding stigma: Ironic interpersonal consequences of concealing a stigmatized identity in social interactions



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Stigmatized individuals often hide the stigma to avoid bias and rejection.
- We hypothesize that hiding (vs. revealing) a stigma can ironically reduce belonging.
- Participants expected to benefit interpersonally from hiding a stigma.
- However, hiding a stigma from an interaction partner in fact decreased belonging.
- Hiding a stigmatized identity can impair interpersonal interactions.

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ABSTRACT

People who possess a concealable stigmatized identity (e.g., minority sexual orientation; history of mental illness) often hide this identity from others in order to avoid bias. Despite the possible benefits of this identity management strategy, we propose that instead of increasing acceptance, hiding a stigmatized identity can result in a lowered sense of belonging and even actual social rejection. Across four studies, we show that although individuals living with concealable stigmatized identities report a preference for hiding (vs. revealing) the identity during social interactions, hiding in fact reduces feelings of belonging—an effect that is mediated by felt inauthenticity and reduced general self-disclosure (i.e., disclosure of self-relevant information not limited to the stigmatized identity). Furthermore, the detrimental interpersonal effects of hiding (vs. revealing) a stigmatized identity are detected by external observers and non-stigmatized interaction partners. Implications for understanding the predicament of people living with stigmatized social identities are discussed.

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Introduction

People who are socially stigmatized possess an identity that is devalued by others (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998). Stigmatized identities can be immediately visible to others (conspicuous; e.g., minority race/ethnicity or obesity) or invisible unless revealed (concealable; e.g., minority sexual orientation or a history of mental illness). Thus, an individual who possesses a concealable stigmatized identity is not immediately discredited but is “discreditable” (Goffman, 1963): Keeping the identity hidden may protect the individual from devaluation, but once the identity is revealed, the individual risks facing prejudice

and discrimination. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the majority of existing work on concealable stigmatized identities has focused on the (anticipated) benefits of hiding one's identity and “passing” as a member of a non-stigmatized group (Goffman, 1963; Jones et al., 1984). However, we suggest that hiding a stigmatized identity has important costs. Specifically, we propose that instead of increasing social acceptance, hiding a stigmatized identity can enhance feelings of rejection and may impair intimacy and acceptance within social interactions. In the present research, we thus extended past work by examining the *interpersonal ramifications* of hiding a concealable stigmatized identity from interaction partners.

People living with stigmatized identities regularly face prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination, biases that have a considerable negative impact on wellbeing and life outcomes (Crocker et al., 1998; Jones et al., 1984). Because it is possible to keep a concealable stigmatized identity hidden from others and thereby attempt to avoid stigmatization, it is often assumed that concealable stigmatized identities are less problematic than conspicuous ones (e.g., Jones et al., 1984). Similarly, passing, or hiding a concealable stigmatized identity in order to present the self as

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possessing a more valued social identity (Goffman, 1963; Katz, 1981), is typically viewed as a primary coping strategy among members of stigmatized groups. For instance, as noted by Goffman (1963), “because of the great rewards in being considered normal, almost all persons who are in a position to pass will do so on some occasion by intent” (p. 74). Indeed, researchers have recommended keeping a concealable stigmatized identity hidden unless concealment is causing considerable distress (Kelly & McKillop, 1996). Thus, the majority of previous research has focused on the *desire to secure acceptance* as a central reason why individuals hide a stigmatized identity from others. Accordingly, previous research implies that concealing a devalued identity is likely to have *positive* interpersonal consequences. In fact, a considerable amount of prior work has documented that individuals living with concealable stigmatized identities themselves believe that they will benefit from keeping their devalued identities hidden. For example, people anticipate that hiding their stigmatized identities will allow them to make a more positive impression on others (Barreto, Ellemers, & Banal, 2006).

Despite these anticipated benefits of concealing a stigmatized identity that are suggested by past research, we propose that these expectations may not actually be borne out, and that, in contrast, concealment may be detrimental to social interactions. Supporting our reasoning, previous work has found that hiding a stigmatized identity can involve important costs, including negative affect, anxiety, and depression (Frible, Platt, & Hoey, 1998) and an elevated risk of physical (Cole, Kemeny, Taylor, & Visscher, 1996) and mental illness (Meyer, 2003). Additionally, experimental research has revealed that hiding a devalued identity during social interactions reduces cognitive resources (Smart & Wegner, 1999) and increases negative self-directed affect (Barreto et al., 2006). Accordingly, as suggested by Meyer (2003), “concealing one’s stigma is often used as a coping strategy, aimed at avoiding negative consequences of stigma, but it is a coping strategy that can backfire and become stressful” (p. 681) and may therefore result instead in reduced wellbeing.

Although prior research has examined cognitive (Smart & Wegner, 1999) and emotional (Barreto et al., 2006) costs of hiding a stigmatized identity, the *interpersonal* costs of this identity management strategy have as yet to be the focus of systematic empirical examination. In the present research, our aim was to add to existing knowledge regarding the consequences of “passing” by experimentally examining how hiding (vs. revealing) a stigmatized identity affects belonging and acceptance in social interactions. Specifically, although people may believe that hiding a stigmatized identity will help them secure *social inclusion*, we propose that it can ironically increase feelings of *exclusion*, and even actual exclusion by others. Whereas researchers have acknowledged the importance of issues of acceptance for individuals living with stigmatized identities (e.g., Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010; Goffman, 1963; Rodriguez & Kelly, 2006), existing empirical work has not directly examined belonging and acceptance in interpersonal interactions (as noted by Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010). Accordingly, we extended prior work by examining the effects of hiding (vs. revealing) a devalued identity during interpersonal interactions, including face-to-face interactions in the lab, and by investigating the complementary perspectives of stigmatized individuals, external observers, and non-stigmatized interaction partners.

In addition, we sought to understand the psychological processes that may help explain the hypothesized interpersonal consequences of hiding (vs. revealing) a stigmatized identity. Specifically, we propose that hiding a stigmatized identity makes an individual vulnerable to lack of belonging and rejection because hiding one’s true identity curbs both general *self-disclosure* and feelings of *authenticity*. First, one could plausibly expect that disclosure of self-relevant information to an interaction partner might be *increased* when an individual is attempting to conceal one aspect of the self (i.e., a devalued identity); for instance, one might seek to increase disclosure of other information about the self in order to direct the conversation to “safer” topics. However, because hiding a stigmatized identity is associated with the fear of

being “found out” (Ragins, Singh, & Cornwell, 2007) and with careful monitoring of one’s behavior to avoid exposure (Frible, Blackstone, & Scherbaum, 1990), we propose that individuals who hide (vs. reveal) a stigmatized identity are likely to self-disclose to a lesser extent during social interactions. That is, hiding a stigmatized identity (e.g., minority sexual orientation) requires one to limit the amount of personal information (e.g., the name of one’s romantic partner) to which others have access, including personal information *not* associated with the stigma, in order to ensure that the identity is not unintentionally revealed. Self-disclosure is critical for developing intimacy and belonging in both interpersonal and intergroup relationships (Collins & Miller, 1994; Turner, Hewstone, & Voci, 2007), and relative lack of disclosure may result in awkward and distant social interactions (Herek, 1996). Accordingly, we hypothesized that hiding (vs. revealing) a stigmatized identity results in a reduced sense of belonging and an increased likelihood of social rejection in part because it generally inhibits disclosure of self-relevant information to interaction partners.

Second, as noted by Barreto and Ellemers (2003), “passing” involves both presenting oneself as a member of a non-stigmatized group and covering one’s true, socially devalued identity. Whereas positive self-presentation may be expected to incur benefits (e.g., protection from bias; Quinn, Kahng, & Crocker, 2004), the act of deceit implicated in denying one’s true identity has negative psychological consequences (Barreto et al., 2006). Specifically, hiding a concealable stigmatized identity may restrict the degree to which one can experience a sense of authenticity, of being true to oneself (Goffman, 1963; Leary, 1999; Major & Gramzow, 1999; Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis, & Joseph, 2008). The fact that hiding compromises one’s self-image as moral (Barreto et al., 2006), coupled with the crucial role morality plays in self-definition (Schwartz, 1992; Van Lange & Sedikides, 1998), leads us to suggest that hiding (vs. revealing) a stigmatized identity is likely to result in feelings of inauthenticity. Supporting this reasoning, authenticity involves living in accordance with one’s values and beliefs (i.e., significant facets of one’s true identity) rather than conforming to others’ expectations (Wood et al., 2008). Accordingly, hiding a devalued identity is likely to be associated with experiences of inauthenticity (Lenton, Bruder, Slabu, & Sedikides, 2013). Thus, we hypothesized that hiding (vs. revealing) a stigmatized identity results in a reduced sense of belonging in social interactions in part because it is inconsistent with being true to oneself.

In summary, in the present work we examined the interpersonal consequences of hiding (vs. revealing) a stigmatized identity. Individuals who are motivated to avoid rejection are less likely to reveal their concealable stigmatized identities (Garcia & Crocker, 2008). Ironically, however, the very act of hiding one’s stigmatized identity from an interaction partner is hypothesized to *increase* feelings of rejection. We tested these hypothesized processes across four studies. First, in *Studies 1a and 1b*, we sought to demonstrate that individuals living with a variety of different concealable stigmatized identities (i.e., LGBT identity; a history of mental illness; a history of physical illness not directly visible to others; and poverty) would report that they would choose to hide (rather than reveal) their identity during social interactions, and believe that *revealing* the identity would have *negative* interpersonal consequences. The aim of *Studies 2 and 3* was to demonstrate that these anticipated interpersonal consequences of revealing (vs. hiding) a devalued identity are not borne out during actual face-to-face social interactions. In particular, in *Study 2* we sought to show that feelings of inauthenticity and reduced general self-disclosure mediate the effects of hiding (vs. revealing) a contextually devalued identity on lack of belonging and social rejection, and that the consequences of hiding (vs. revealing) can be detected both by the stigmatized individuals themselves and by external observers. In *Study 3*, we examined social interactions between stigmatized and non-stigmatized participants (specifically, participants with and without a history of mental illness), seeking to demonstrate that non-stigmatized participants experience reduced levels of intimacy during the interaction when their partner hides (vs. reveals) their

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