

Social identity and self-presentation at work: how attempts to hide a stigmatised identity affect emotional well-being, social inclusion and performance

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The context of work offers both a strong motivation and a good opportunity to present the self as favourably as possible. A range of social stigmas such as certain medical conditions, a mental illness, homosexuality, or a lower class social background may threaten that positive self-presentation. However, members of stigmatised social groups can choose to actively manage the impression they make by hiding those social stigmas which are not readily visible to others. Although this self-presentational strategy is intended to avoid negative expectations from others, and is even expected to optimise performance at work, there are different ways in which it may backfire against those who use it. Based on a review of empirical research in this area, we examine the social psychological mechanisms involved, and conclude that attempts to be positively evaluated at work by hiding a stigmatised social identity are likely to undermine well-being and cause people to feel socially excluded and perform sub-optimally. (*Netherlands Journal of Psychology*, 62, 51-57.)

Self-presentation at work

In modern Western societies, the general belief is that hiring and promotion decisions are and should be solely based on the work-related skills of the individual worker under consideration (Barreto, Ellemers, & Palacios, 2004; Wright, 2001). This belief is anchored in legislation prescribing equal opportunities in work settings, regardless of ethnic background, social class, age, political preference, religious conviction or sexual orientation. Despite these strong beliefs in the meritocratic nature of modern Western societies, there is consistent evidence that members of socially stigmatised groups generally have lower chances of getting hired or advancing at work. For instance, statistics and legal records show that members of ethnic minorities have lower chances of finding employment to match their

level of education, and indicate that women are generally paid less than men when performing the same job. In other words, the idea that individual merit is the only relevant criterion to judge and reward people at work is widespread, but it is more of an ideal than a reality (Ellemers & Barreto, in press).

In summary, the meritocratic ideology that characterises modern organisations has the double effect of limiting opportunities for members of socially stigmatised groups, and promoting a strong focus on individual success. To deal with this situation and ensure individual success in the face of existing discrimination, minority group members can choose to hide their stigmatised identity in the work context. For example, it has been established that members of ethnic minorities try to adapt their accent or style of speaking (Giles, 1977), and that homosexuals tend to hide their sexual orientation from colleagues at work (Croteau, 1996). In fact, members of stigmatised groups are often encouraged by others to follow this strategy. For instance, career counsellors commonly advise people who seek

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employment to change their clothing habits (such as wearing a head-scarf), or advise them not to reveal aspects of their personality or life history that might be regarded unfavourably by a prospective employer (see also 'Mohammed heet nu Peter', *NRC-Handelsblad*, 26/8/2004). Moral considerations as to whether or not such behaviour should be encouraged set aside, in this paper we will present a social psychological analysis of this phenomenon, and review empirical evidence to assess the extent to which attempts to hide a devalued identity at work are likely to be effective. In doing this, we will first consider how hiding one's true identity may help people to manage other people's expectations about the self. Subsequently, we will examine the consequences of hiding for well-being, and finally, we will assess how hiding one's true identity affects people's feelings of social inclusion, self-confidence and performance at work.

Coping with a stigmatised social identity

In social psychology, theorists and researchers have made substantial efforts to understand and predict how people deal with a stigmatised social identity. An overarching theoretical framework to address this issue is provided by social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This theory specifies that the relative standing of the social groups to which one belongs is relevant to individuals, because this tends to reflect (either negatively or positively) upon the self. As a result, being regarded as part of a low status or otherwise stigmatised group is considered to represent a threat to the (social) self (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002). In order to cope with this particular threat, three classes of identity management strategies have been proposed (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Van Knippenberg & Ellemers, 1990).

At a cognitive level, people can re-define the situation by focusing on different dimensions of inter-group comparison, or different comparison groups, to achieve a more positive view of their own group (social creativity). At a more instrumental level, group members can engage in collective action, or compete with other groups, in order to improve the status rank of their own group (social competition). Both these strategies address the position of one's group as a whole. Alternatively, regardless of what others do, any given group member has the option to individually (cognitively or physically) dissociate the self from the stigmatised ingroup, and pursue inclusion in another group that reflects more positively upon the self (individual mobility).

There is converging empirical evidence demonstrating that each of these different identity management strategies are used by the stigmatised (e.g., Ellemers, 1993; Ellemers et al., 2002), and that they also apply to the way people cope with stigmatised social identities in work contexts (Ellemers, van den Heuvel, De Gilder, Maass, & Bonvini, 2004; Haslam & Ellemers, 2005; Schmitt, Ellemers, & Branscombe, 2003). Some have proposed that of these different classes of strategies, individual mobility is likely to be the primary option that people pursue, arguing that attempts at improv-

ing the standing of the group as a whole through social competition or social creativity only emerge among those who have been unsuccessful in their attempts to improve their individual position (Taylor & McKirnan, 1984; Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990). Whether or not this is the case, given the general belief that work organisations provide a context in which people's success and standing depends on individual merit only (Barreto & Ellemers, in press; Ellemers & Barreto, 2001), it is likely that under these circumstances individual mobility will be the primary strategy people adopt to cope with a stigmatised identity.

Indeed, the individual mobility strategy reflects meritocratic ideals in our society, and implies that people can try to leave the devalued group to gain entry into a more prestigious group, for example as when an employee leaves his under-performing organisation (Haslam & Ellemers, 2005). Although hiding a stigmatised identity does not involve an actual change in group membership, it can be seen as one way in which people pursue individual mobility because it implies presenting oneself to others as a member of a more positively valued group (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1997). Moreover, when it comes to social group memberships that cannot be easily changed (e.g., those based on sexual orientation or mental health), hiding or 'passing' (Goffman, 1963) constitutes the only possible way through which individual mobility can be pursued. It is important to note that the endorsement of this strategy does not necessarily imply that people subjectively dis-identify with the stigmatised group. People may choose to hide their devalued identity simply because they realise that it makes them vulnerable to discrimination, and expect that not revealing who they really are will reduce this vulnerability (Clair, Beatty, & MacLean, 2005; Croteau, 1996; Ostfield & Jehn, 1999). However, this will still be considered a strategy of individual mobility because it only aims at changing the evaluation of the individual, and not that of the group as a whole. Still, it is possible to conceive of situations in which hiding is done when people are afraid of reflecting badly on the group as a whole, which would not qualify as an individual mobility strategy, but the literature in this area suggests that this will not often be the motive underlying the choice of this strategy (see e.g., Goffman, 1963; Griffin, 1992).

Hiding as a way to manage other people's expectations

Members of stigmatised social groups are frequently exposed to negative stereotypes and expectations (e.g., Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998). When others in the workplace have negative expectations about the self, even if this is based on the mere fact that one belongs to a stigmatised social group, this can have severe consequences. For instance, when employers have the stereotypical expectation that women are generally less ambitious than men, they are less likely to offer training or other career development opportunities to their female employees (Ellemers, Van den Heuvel, & De Gilder, 1996). However, such expectations can become self-fulfilling in that a lack of development of

career opportunities in turn leads employees to reduce the amount of time they invest in their work, or even causes them to leave the organisation (De Gilder, Van den Heuvel, Ellemers, & Blijleven, 1998). Indeed, there is by now a large body of empirical research, carried out in different contexts and with different social groups, showing that the awareness that one's identity is devalued depresses people's self-confidence, and leads to poorer performance than when there is no exposure to such negative group-based expectations (see Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002 for a review).

Past research on the effects of the negative stereotypes and expectations held about members of specific groups mainly focused on the effects of visible group memberships. However, as we argued above, people often have a choice of whether or not to make their (stigmatised) group membership known to others. Under those circumstances, hiding the stigmatised identity, and trying to pass as a member of a more positively evaluated group can be used as a strategy to avoid raising negative group-based expectations from others, in the hope of preventing the negative consequences associated with group-based discrimination (Croteau, 1996). Accordingly, empirical research confirms that hiding a stigmatised identity is often used as an identity management strategy by minority group members who wish to counteract the negative stereotypes and expectations that are commonly associated with their category membership (Croteau, 1996; Goffman, 1963; Jones, Farina, Hastorf, Markus, Miller, & Scott, 1984; Katz, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

There is also some evidence that hiding a devalued identity can help to protect against prejudice and negative expectations (Croteau, 1996; Link, Mirotznik, & Cullen, 1991; Waldo, 1999). In fact, this is often the main reason why people choose to adopt this identity management strategy - choosing to hide because they generally expect to be more valued and accepted by others when doing so (see Clair et al., 2005; Ostfield & Jehn, 1999 for reviews). In our own research we addressed this issue in two different ways (Barreto, Ellemers, & Banal, 2006). In a first study, we asked research participants to think of a situation when they had chosen to, or would choose to hide their identity. Although typically stigmatising identities based on religion, ethnic identity or gender were mentioned by a substantial number of participants (44%), many participants (34%) also mentioned their sexual orientation, or a devalued profession or study subject as representing an identity they would try to hide in certain contexts. Furthermore, when asked to describe their motives for hiding, the majority of participants indicated that they expected that this would protect them from prejudice and discrimination, raise other people's expectations about them, or would make them more valued and respected. We further examined this issue in a set of two experimental studies, where participants were induced to hide a contextually devalued identity (their study subject) from someone they had to collaborate with in a simulated work context. In both these studies we found that hiding (rather than revealing the contextually devalued identity) led participants to think that this would improve the expectations their partner had of them (Barreto et al., 2006).

In sum, when people hide a stigmatised identity, they intend to escape the threat presented by negative stereotypes (see Steele et al., 2002 for a review) and hope to even reap the benefits of positive ones, by presenting the self as associated with a more positively valued group instead (Quinn, Kahng, & Crocker, 2004; Shih, Pittinsky, & Ambady, 1999). For this reason, people hope that hiding a devalued identity can protect them from the threat of negative group-based prejudice (Quinn et al., 2004), and the anticipation of these benefits is often what leads them to endorse this strategy in the first place (Goffman, 1963; Jones et al., 1984). However, there is also reason to believe that hiding a stigmatised identity may be accompanied by important costs, for well-being, as well as performance. We now will consider these costs.

Consequences of hiding for well-being

People who hide a stigmatised identity in order to pass as members of a more highly valued group are both covering their stigmatised identity and actively adopting another identity (Barreto & Ellemers, 2003; Croteau, 1996; Goffman, 1963; Griffin, 1992). Such intentional self-presentation thus involves deception, which can either fall in the category of omissions (e.g. not mentioning one's political preference to a prospective employer) or falsehoods (e.g. falsely presenting oneself as healthy to colleagues; Baumeister, 1982; Ekman, 1991). While the act of positive self-presentation may lead to the benefit of protecting the individual from negative expectations and stereotypes, we argue that the act of deceit is associated with important costs (Barreto et al., 2006).

Evidence from past research is suggestive of this process. In fact, research shows that generally, people with stigmas that are not immediately visible (e.g., mental illnesses) report lower psychological well-being than people with visible stigmas (e.g., physical handicaps; Crocker et al., 1998; Frable, Blackstone, & Scherbaum, 1990). This finding can partly be associated with the fact that those with non-visible stigmas have the extra burden of choosing whether or not they reveal the stigmatised identity, and when they do choose to hide, they are vulnerable to the costs of doing so. In support of this latter point, studies that have addressed the consequences of hiding indicate that people who hide a stigmatised identity report worse physical health (Cole, Kemeny, Taylor, & Visscher, 1996; Pannebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988) and more negative affect than people who choose to reveal a stigmatised identity (Harris, 2001; Major & Gramzow, 1999; Paxton, 2002). In our own research, when recounting their own experiences with hiding a devalued identity, the vast majority (85%) of participants reported experiencing a variety of negative feelings (guilt, tension, shame, insecurity), while only a small minority (4%) indicated that they felt 'good' as a result of hiding. Additionally, when participants in our research were experimentally induced either to hide or to reveal a devalued identity in a simulated work context, hiding clearly caused people to feel negatively about the self, as it elicited feelings of shame and guilt (Barreto et al., 2006).

In another study, we examined well-being among a sample of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals (Barreto, Ellemers, & Tiemersma, 2005), who were randomly asked either to reflect on their experiences with revealing their homosexuality at work, or to describe their experiences with passing as heterosexual in the work context. Results of this study also confirm the emotional costs of hiding: those who described a situation in which they attempted to hide their homosexuality reported feeling less positive and more negative affect, and indicated more anxiety and depression, than participants who revealed their homosexuality in a work context.

In sum, although people may decide to hide a devalued identity because they anticipate that this will raise the expectations others have of them, empirical research shows that the act of hiding incurs important emotional costs, and undermines the well-being of those who try to hide.

The effectiveness of hiding

So far we have seen that people may hide a stigmatised social identity because they wish to protect themselves from the negative expectations associated with this identity. We have shown that this strategy seems to be successful in convincing those who hide that they are in fact associated with more positive expectations than they would have been had they revealed the stigmatised identity. Despite this clear benefit, we have also reviewed some of the important costs associated with hiding. The question that remains to be answered is: given that it is associated both with costs and with benefits, can we consider hiding a stigmatised identity to be an effective strategy to deal with stigmatisation in the workplace?

The first step we need to take towards answering this question is to carefully consider what an effective strategy would be in this context. Clearly, expectations are very important in the work context, but they appear to be mainly important to the extent to which they determine the target's emotional well-being, social inclusion, and performance-related outcomes at work. We have already seen that hiding does not appear to improve well-being, and in fact it appears to undermine it. In this section we examine whether hiding can successfully increase feelings of social inclusion and improve performance at work.

Our research suggests that despite the expectation that hiding will ensure social inclusion (Barreto et al., 2006), it in fact increases feelings of social exclusion (Barreto et al., 2005). Specifically, we found that homosexual workers who described a situation where they had hidden their sexual orientation at work reported feeling more isolated and less accepted, and reported that their colleagues had a lower regard for homosexuals (public collective self-esteem) than those workers who thought about a situation when they had revealed their homosexual identity at work (Barreto et al., 2005). Additionally, hiding was associated with weaker team and organisational commitment, which are also indicators of the extent to which workers feel they fit

in their work context, and with lower work satisfaction, which can partly be a result of the same process.

It is, however, possible that hiding has the particular benefit of increasing performance-related self-confidence and performance. In fact, self-confidence and performance may benefit when others have positive expectations about the self, and this is the main reason why individuals choose to hide a devalued identity. However, we argue that hiding does not protect individual performance, and may even undermine it, because it is associated with important emotional and cognitive costs that interfere with performance.

We have already shown that hiding is associated with negative emotions. There is empirical research to suggest that the experience of negative emotions can even be necessary for people to engage in behavioural efforts and improve their performance (Ouwkerk & Ellemers, 2002). However, we argue that some of the specific emotions associated with the act of hiding, namely guilt and shame (Barreto et al., 2006), typically elicit the conviction that the self is inadequate, and tend to result in self-defeating behaviour, instead of self-improvement (Frijda, 1986; Frijda, Kuipers, & Ter Schure, 1989). This reasoning was empirically confirmed in our experimental research, where mediational analyses demonstrated that the guilt and shame elicited when people tried to hide their true identity from someone they collaborated with caused them to experience lower performance-related self-confidence (Barreto et al., 2006). Thus, whereas the act of hiding led people to think that their partner would have more positive expectations about the self, it undermined their self-confidence at the same time.

Furthermore, when we examined actual performance on the focal task, no performance benefits of hiding could be observed. Indeed, it turned out that the act of hiding caused task performance to be associated with lower self-confidence, but not with improved expectations of the partner about the self (Barreto et al., 2006). Likewise, in actual work contexts, it appears that the emotional costs of hiding outweigh its performance benefits, as people who hide a devalued identity report lower work satisfaction, lower productivity, and lower loyalty to the organisation (e.g., Powers & Ellis, 1995). In sum, there is no empirical evidence of performance improvement due to hiding. On the contrary, the nature of the negative emotions experienced due to the act of hiding, and the resulting decrease in self-confidence, is more likely to undermine than to bolster work performance.

In addition to the ways in which affective responses may undermine self-confidence and performance, the act of hiding may also elicit cognitive costs which are not conducive to showing optimal task performance. It has been established that those who hide their true identity experience apprehension and concern about the possibility of being exposed as impostors. As a consequence, they tend to carefully and painstakingly monitor their thoughts and behaviours to avoid revealing their true identity (Frable et al., 1990; Smart & Wegner, 1999). This increased self-monitoring increases cognitive load during task performance (Frable et al., 1990; Kelly & Kahn, 1994). Additionally, the cognitive efforts of suppressing inappropriate thoughts or

behaviours can elicit thought intrusion (Wegner & Wenzlaff, 1996). This is not only disturbing in itself, as it leads to the increased salience of the devalued identity (Smart & Wegner, 1999), but it is also likely to distract people from the task at hand and thus constitutes an additional factor that undermines their actual work performance.

A final consideration when examining the effectiveness of hiding is that even when this strategy is successful at the individual level, it will not help other members of the stigmatised group. As long as people hide their true identity as a means to cope with the fact that their group membership is devalued, they implicitly endorse the legitimacy of the system in which group-based devaluation occurs. Indeed, even if they are successful in avoiding negative group-based expectations, this still does not challenge the validity of prejudicial views – and this does not only affect other members of the group, but it will also affect the self in other situations (Barreto & Ellemers, in press; Ellemers, 2001; Ellemers & Barreto, in press). As a result, those who hide in fact contribute to the belief that the system is meritocratic, even if this is clearly not the case. In such a system, people are held individually accountable for their failures. Hence, members of a stigmatised group will find it more difficult to support each other (Adnopo, Forsyth, & Nagler, 1994), to challenge unfair employment policies, or to demonstrate the invalidity of negative group-based expectations with regard both to members of their group and to themselves.

In sum, we think there are at least four reasons why hiding should not be considered an effective strategy: it undermines well-being, it increases feelings of social exclusion, it leads to cognitive and emotional costs that undermine performance, and it constitutes an individual-level strategy that does nothing to challenge the illusion that the social system is meritocratic.

Conclusion

In this contribution, we have focused on hiding as a strategy that may be used to manage self-presentation at work. We reviewed empirical evidence to show that members of stigmatised groups are vulnerable to negative stereotypes and social exclusion in the workplace, and demonstrated that their work performance

and career success is likely to suffer as a result. Subsequently, we addressed hiding as an identity management strategy that people may use to cope with a stigmatised identity at work, in the hope that it raises the expectations others have of them. In doing this, we showed that there are important emotional and cognitive costs associated with the act of hiding. These costs are so severe that they may have the paradoxical effect of increasing (instead of alleviating) the stress experienced by the stigmatised (Miller & Major, 2000). As a result, empirical evidence indicates that both social inclusion and individual performance are likely to be undermined – instead of enhanced – by the act of hiding. We argue that this has important implications not only for the individuals concerned, but also at a broader societal level, as it confirms unfavourable stereotypes, promotes social inequality and perpetuates the disadvantage of minority group members in the work place. It seems that some people at least are aware of these negative implications of hiding, as they may prefer to project an authentic but negative view of themselves rather than present themselves positively but untruthfully (e.g., Swann, 1990).

Thus, even though research shows that hiding seems to be a very commonly used identity management strategy, the theory and research reviewed here indicate that it is difficult to escape the negative consequences of a stigmatised group membership by hiding one's true identity. In addition, hiding seems less desirable from a societal point of view, as equal career opportunities and fair work conditions would benefit more from acknowledging the existence of negative group-based expectations and exposing the existence of prejudice and discrimination rather than continuing to define and address these systematic forms of injustice as an individual level problem.

That being said, it is clear that in some contexts and societies the costs of revealing a stigmatised identity (e.g., imprisonment or even death) clearly outweigh the costs of hiding it (see also Joling, Bos, & Sandfort, 2003). Taking this into account, our message is clearly not that those who are stigmatised should not hide their identity. Instead, our goal is to further underline the difficult conditions under which the socially stigmatised live, forced to choose between different types of costs, and thereby to demonstrate that the solution can lie only in the creation of social climates where the costs of revealing are diminished.

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