

Dismantling Bias Conference Series

Complexities of concealable stigma: Identity management in the workplace

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Abstract

All individuals hold a series of identities that help to shape how we view and experience the world (Kang & Bodenhausen, 2015). Despite robust advances in identity management scholarship, limited scientific work explores the complexities of people living with concealable stigmatized identities (CSIs). Much of the stigma and identity management literature investigates the outcomes of visible stigma and a limited range of concealable identities (Follmer et al., 2020). Visible stigmatized identities (VSIs) refer to the social categories that are visibly apparent to others (e.g., race, gender, physical disability, etc.) but are also devalued within a given social context and cause a variety of stressors (Miller & Kaiser, 2001). Identities are marginalized if experiences of discrimination, prejudice, and ostracism take place solely because a person carries an identity outside of a given society's prototypical standard (Moradi, 2017). For example, white heterosexual Christian men with no physical or psychological disabilities and no criminal record are considered the prototype in America (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Individuals with identities outside of these parameters are found to experience disproportionate amounts of psychological distress caused by experiencing discrimination, hostility, and oppression at a greater frequency because of their devalued social standing (Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013).

However, many identities or social categories have the potential to remain concealed from others. CSIs are marginalized attributes that individuals can choose to keep invisible or hidden (Jones & King, 2014). Sexual orientation, disability status, ethnicity, and AIDS/HIV status are among the most discussed CSIs within the stigma literature (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). In many cases, a person's CSI becomes visible to others if they choose to disclose their identity. However, researchers have found that a person will continue to conceal their identity if they expect negative outcomes to occur following the disclosure event (Lynch &

Rodell, 2018). Therefore, identity management is an ongoing and reoccurring complex process for individuals who carry one or many CSIs (Poindexter & Shippy, 2010).

Unfortunately, limited work has explored the greater complexities of possessing stigmatized identities beyond a limited range of visible and concealable stigmas. Such as the intersectional impact of possessing both visible and concealable stigmatized identities and the multifaceted process of CSI disclosure when multiple stigmas are present. Such complexities include total concealment, total disclosure, partial disclosure (e.g., concealing in some environments, while disclosing in others), or signaling to others (e.g., dropping hints or clues during ambiguous interactions to test potential disclosure reactions) (Jones & King, 2014; Newheiser & Barreto, 2014).

We have previously uncovered significant group differences in coping strategies, turnover intent, and psychological outcomes including stress, feelings of belonging, and perceived social support among students who possess only VSIs compared to those who possess both visible and concealable stigmatized identities (reference omitted for blind review). However, there was a lack of significant group difference when comparing students who possess only concealable stigma to those with both visible and concealable stigmas. These findings suggest that concealable stigmas may have a greater adverse effect on students who possess multi-dimensional devalued identities than that of visible stigmas. Our current work seeks to address a remaining gap in the literature to expand our knowledge on CSIs and intersectionality by evaluating the complexities of identity disclosure decisions in the workplace following times of social uprising.

Given the upsurge in social activism and organizations taking a public stand against discrimination and inequality, now is an important time to address the pivotal role organizations

play in fostering feelings of inclusion, belonging, and comfort among their diverse workforces. During the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, many organizations and brands utilized social platforms to release statements condemning injustice and supporting social movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM) and Stop AAPI (Asian American Pacific Islander) Hate (Johnson, 2021). However, we believe organizations must make meaningful and structured change that is consistent with their public statements to produce an environment that encourages employees to be their authentic selves in the workplace. Therefore, when individuals believe they will be accepted and respected for who they are, they may be more inclined to disclose their CSI to colleagues, supervisors, and subordinates.

This paper will address what CSIs are, the choices people with CSIs must make while managing their identities, and the outcomes of CSI disclosure decisions. This paper will also address what internal and external factors contribute to CSI disclosure, and how organizations can play a pivotal role in creating a conducive environment that encourages employees to disclose their CSI by way of organizational consistency, workplace culture and justice (distributive, procedural, interactional).

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