

Symposium S-B6

Identity Concealment: A Normative Social Psychological Phenomenon

Friday, February 14, 2014, 11:15 AM - 12:30 PM, Room 17

Chair: Jonathan Cook, The Pennsylvania State University

Co-Chair: Diane Quinn, University of Connecticut

We draw attention to new methodological, theoretical, and empirical advances in studying identity concealment. Presentations cover antecedents to and consequences of concealment and the intersection of visible and concealable stigmatized identities. We discuss a wide variety of concealable identities, including mental and physical illness, sexual orientation, and domestic violence.

Antecedents and Consequences of Concealing Chronic Illness: The Case of Multiple Sclerosis

Jonathan E. Cook, Gertraud Stadler, Valerie Purdie-Vaughns, Niall Bolger

The Pennsylvania State University; Columbia University

Nearly half of American adults have a chronic illness (Wu & Green, 2000), yet the effect of chronic illness on social psychological processes has received little attention. We focus on identity concealment, specifically concealment of multiple sclerosis (MS), a progressively debilitating neurological disease. Because MS symptoms are often initially subtle, MS provides a valuable window into identity concealment and disclosure processes. Moreover, MS is less confounded with issues of controllability associated with other diseases (e.g., HIV). Among 53 participants with MS (ages 23-71), the vast majority reported some degree of active concealment (e.g., at work) or negative consequences of disclosure (e.g., losing jobs). Concealment was predicted by perceptions of stereotypes about people with MS, being a target of stigma, and having more internalized stigma ($ps < .01$). Active concealment, predicted more frequent alcohol consumption ($p = .04$). Ongoing longitudinal research and implications for social stigma theory will be discussed.

The Impact of Law in Reducing Interpersonal Discrimination against Lesbian and Gay Job Applicants

Mikki Hebl, Laura Barron

Rice University

Concealment of sexual orientation may be influenced by the presence or absence of protective ordinances and laws. Some legislators have questioned the efficacy of Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) legislation and we examine this. In Study 1, data from 111 households reveal heightened awareness and support of ENDA in communities with (vs without) antidiscrimination legislation. In Study 2, gay/lesbian or assumed heterosexual individuals applied for jobs at 295 retail stores in neighboring cities with or without legislation. "Gay" versus assumed heterosexual applicants who applied for jobs experienced much less interpersonal discrimination in areas with (versus without) protective legislation. In Study 3, interviewers who were (versus were not) trained about legal protection exhibited significantly less discrimination toward 295 gay/lesbian job applicants. Taken as a whole, the results inform legislative debate by showing that there is efficacy of pending national legislation (i.e., ENDA), which we believe will also decrease pressures to conceal.

Stigma Concealment and Social Avoidance Goals

Laura Richman, Micah Lattanner

Duke University

People with concealed stigmatized identities can feel disconnected even within their close relationships. Rejection or fear of rejection due to stigma is among the factors that can motivate people to regulate their behavior by adopting avoidance-oriented social goals. People who conceal stigmas may be particularly likely to use such avoidance strategies to protect against rejection, embarrassment, or conflict. We propose a model of social self-regulation that describes how people with concealable stigmas are likely to adopt social avoidance goals, which predict increased relationship dissatisfaction and decreased well-being. Two mTurk experiments demonstrate support for our model. People who concealed their treatment for mental illness from others were more likely to endorse social avoidance motives in their close relationships as compared to those who were not concealing. Concealment was also related to negative expectations about future relationships. We discuss the consequences of adopting these interpersonal strategies on well-being.

The Intersection of Visible and Concealed Stigmatized Identities

Diane M. Quinn, Michelle K. Williams, Nicole M. Overstreet

University of Connecticut; Yale University

Historically, research on social stigma has focused on one stigmatized identity at a time, without consideration of how multiple stigmatized identities interact. We examine how experiences of discrimination based on a racial/ethnic minority identity might sensitize people to anticipate increased discrimination related to a second, concealed stigmatized identity. In a community sample of African American and Latino American adults who also possessed a concealed stigmatized identity (mental illness, substance abuse, domestic violence, sexual assault, or childhood abuse), we found that more experiences of racial/ethnic discrimination over the lifetime predicted increased anticipated stigma about the disclosure of the concealed stigmatized identity. Experiences of racial/ethnic discrimination predicted higher levels of both psychological distress and chronic illness but only the effect on psychological distress was mediated through increased anticipated stigma about the concealed identity. Understanding the full ramifications of social stigma requires more research into the interplay between concealed and visible stigmatized identities.