

Multicultural America: A Multimedia Encyclopedia

Passing/Covering

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Many contexts in the United States tend to favor, or implicitly adhere to, standards associated with race, religion, ability, sexuality, gender, and/or socioeconomic status. These standards are often considered, or informed by, white, Christian, able-bodied, heterosexual, male, and/or middle-class standards, for example, having easy-to-pronounce names and easy-to-access spaces, “God” being printed on the currency, and English being the language in which most “official” business is conducted (that is, in the government, on Wall Street, and in many universities).

When a person does not meet these standards in particular contexts, then the person might be expected to hide or minimize possible deviations, such as a man changing his (Hispanic) name from Jorge to George, a woman in a wheelchair who does not mention that she cannot comfortably and privately access a (able-bodied) bathroom, a man downplaying the (Islamic) holidays he celebrates, or a woman who fears letting people know that she does not, or cannot, speak English.

When a person tries to hide or minimize perceived, nonstandard differences, the person negotiates possible stigma. Many people think of stigma as either socially taboo classifications or obtrusive physical disabilities or defects. However, according to Erving Goffman, [p. 1680 ↓] stigma applies to any identity that people might find undesirable or offensive. The perception of stigma varies with context—an identity that is stigmatized in one situation may not be a stigma in another, according to Amir Marvasti. Furthermore, a person can manage stigma through passing and covering.

Passing involves hiding, lying, and/or invisibility. According to Harold Garfinkel, passing happens when a person has, or is perceived to have, an identity that the person does not claim as her or his own; she or he exudes a false or inaccurate self and may even try to convince others of this self by keeping particular information secret. Examples of passing could include a lesbian who lies to her parents about her same-sex attraction, a man not talking about his color blindness at work, or parents choosing not to discuss their atheism with their child's teacher. In these situations, people pass—that is, withhold information—in order to escape ridicule from others.

Covering happens when a person feels pressure to conform to (perceived) contextual standards. Covering can apply to identities that are either obtrusive or generally known but that are minimized out of a desire or need to assimilate. Unlike passing, secrecy does not necessarily exist with covering, in that a person allows others to know about her or his nonstandard identity; rather, the person cannot or does not care to emphasize this identity with these others.

Examples of covering could include a woman rarely mentioning her children in (male-dominated) corporate environments, a man who is deaf limiting his affiliation with deaf others, or an interracial couple who downplay their status as a couple by refraining to hold hands in public out of a fear of others' negative responses to their relationship. In these situations, persons cover by minimizing or not calling attention to particular identities.

Passing and covering intersect in a variety of ways. Both involve two identities—one (perceived) nonstandard identity and one (perceived) standard identity. Both require the management of personal information, and both rely on personal and social awareness; a person must recognize not only her or his difference but also that the difference is contextually marginal, and devalued, and that there might be risks in talking about this difference with others. What makes passing and covering difficult to distinguish between, however, is the challenge of determining intentionality, a difficulty that Goffman marks as “in effect or by intent.”

For instance, consider a man born to a Mexican father and a Caucasian mother. Based on contemporary labeling practices in the United States, this person would be part Mexican, part Caucasian. If the man tried to hide his Mexican ethnicity even to the point of denial, and instead identified only as Caucasian, then the man would attempt to pass as Caucasian. However, if the man were comfortable with others knowing about his Mexican ethnicity and chose to not talk about or emphasize this ethnicity because of particular Caucasian standards, then the man would engage in covering; he would be okay with people knowing about his Mexican-ness, but the identity would not need to be discussed.

However, if a woman felt that the man were hiding his Mexican ethnicity (even though he did not intend to hide it), then the woman might think that the man was trying to pass

as Caucasian. Inversely, if the man did not ever claim his Mexican ethnicity, wanting instead to pass as Caucasian, but a family member knew of the man's ethnicity, then the family member might perceive the man as trying only to cover—that is, minimize—his Mexican-ness, not hide from it. As such, while a person may intentionally try to pass or cover, other people may, in effect, perceive the person differently.

Although the benefits of passing and covering include safety, a (false) sense of acceptance and belonging, and material benefits such as employment or citizenship, passing and covering can also be detrimental for a person. With passing, a person might, as Goffman says, “pay a great psychological price” and have a “high level of anxiety” of “living a life that can be collapsed at any moment.” Furthermore, should the person's secret ever become known, others might consider the person dishonest or manipulative.

With covering, a person might feel, or be perceived by others as, dishonest and manipulative for trying to conform too much; as a form of (coerced) assimilation, Kenji Yoshino writes that covering can seem like an “assault on our civil rights,” given that people are able to be different [p. 1681 ↓] as long as they do not talk about or call attention to their differences.

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See Also:

Further Readings

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