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## OUT OF SIGHT BUT NOT OUT OF MIND: MANAGING INVISIBLE SOCIAL IDENTITIES IN THE WORKPLACE

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*Invisible social identities influence social interaction in distinct ways and create unique dynamics in terms of identity management. We integrate research from the sexuality, illness, and racial diversity literature, as well as the stigma, disclosure, and identity literature, to create a generalized model of invisible identity management. We focus specifically on revealing and passing strategies of identity management and conclude by discussing the implications of invisible differences for diversity research.*

Demographic diversity, defined as any characteristic that serves as a basis for social categorization and self-identification, comes in two types: visible and nonvisible (Tsui & Gutek, 1999). Visible characteristics usually include sex, race, age, ethnicity, physical appearance, language, speech patterns, and dialect. Nonvisible characteristics usually include differences like religion, occupation, national origin, club or social group memberships, illness, and sexual orientation. Most organizational scholarship on diversity in the workplace has focused on such visible social identities as age, race, and gender (Williams & O'Reilly, 1998), but left relatively unexplored are the dynamics of invisible social identities.

To understand the importance of invisible social identities in the workplace and how these identities can influence social interactions, consider the following workplace scenario. A job candidate is interviewing for a tenure-track position with the chairperson of a history depart-

ment. As a way to ease into the conversation, the chairperson mentions that it looks like the job candidate has recently gone on a vacation, since his skin looks tanned. In fact, strangers frequently make this comment because the job candidate is multiracial and appears to be Caucasian,<sup>1</sup> except for his tanned-appearing skin tone. The job candidate must decide whether or not to reveal his multiracial background and risk offending the chairperson by making her appear naive. In a second example, a woman with multiple sclerosis (MS) is asked to take notes on a flipchart in front of a group of people she doesn't know at a work-related conference. On this day her MS symptoms are flaring. Her hands are shaky and uncoordinated, and it is quite difficult for her to write quickly and legibly. Instead of declining the request or explaining her situation, she muddles through the awkward task and wonders what the others think of her (Beatty, 2003). Finally, a woman seeks time

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<sup>1</sup> We recognize that the language we use to refer to particular social identity groups impacts shared understandings of that group. We also acknowledge that people have a variety of opinions about which terms are appropriate or inappropriate when referring to certain social identity groups. We choose to draw from popular usages at the time this paper was written to refer to particular social identity groups.

off from work for the birth of her child, which should be a routine request. But she must explain her situation because she is a lesbian and her child is being carried by her partner. Thus, the woman must "out" herself in order to receive standard parental benefits (Reimann, 2001). These examples illustrate how invisible social identities influence and complicate workplace interactions. Such situations force individuals to make quick strategic decisions about self-presentation regarding an invisible identity.

Invisible social identities are common in organizations. One study suggests that about one in every fifty people in the workplace is gay, a statistic that rises to one in every ten to twenty persons in major metropolitan areas (Michael, Gagnon, Laumann, & Kolata, 1994). Chronic, disabling conditions cause major limitations in activity for more than one in every ten Americans (Centers for Disease Control, 2002). Chronic illness is often invisible and is the leading cause of disability in the United States, accounting for 44 percent of disabled people age 15 and older. Yet many people with chronic illnesses are active participants in the workforce (e.g., Pinder, 1988; Vickers, 2001). Finally, 6.8 million people reported more than one race on the 2000 U.S. Census (Jones & Smith, 2001). Employees from a mixed-race heritage can have an invisible or ambiguous racial identity, because they may not "look like" someone with a particular racial background to others.

While organizational scholars who study workplace diversity have mostly overlooked invisible social identities, there have been studies of particular types of invisible social identities within the literature on race (Leary, 1999), on sexual orientation (Herek, 1996; Reimann, 2001; Woods, 1994), on chronic illness (Pinder, 1995; Schneider & Conrad, 1980; Vickers, 2001), and on disabilities (Matthews & Harrington, 2000). These studies suggest that individuals with stigmatizing invisible social identities have different interaction experiences at work than those with visible differences.

In particular, management of information about the invisible social identity is a central issue for these people. The focus on information management is shaped not only by the threat of stigmatization but also by concerns of authenticity and legitimacy. People experience a feeling of authenticity when they can be fully "themselves" in public. Conversely, concealing

personal information to avoid stigma interferes with one's authentic self-presentation (Creed & Scully, 2000; Moorhead, 1999; Reimann, 2001).

In addition, individuals with an invisible social identity may also struggle to acquire and maintain legitimacy within social interactions at work. For example, research on invisible illness and disability suggests that individuals may need to perform their tasks in different ways—for example, by sitting down or taking more frequent breaks. They must either explain these differences or bear the negative reactions from others who think they are strange or simply lazy (e.g., Charmaz, 2000).

Those with invisible differences also struggle to balance conflicting relationship demands. For example, individuals in mixed-race relationships may seek to keep this aspect of their lives hidden at work so as to avoid stigmatization and discrimination. These individuals fear negative stigma associated with interracial dating or marriage, which others may see as deviant or abnormal. However, these individuals can isolate themselves as well as their partners in an attempt to keep their relationship hidden in the event of work-related social events that include family and significant others.

The consequences of stigma in the workplace are readily quantified: the literature on organizational diversity documents how women, racial minorities, older workers, and others bearing a stigmatized identity have suffered job loss, limited career advancement, difficulty finding a mentor, and isolation at work (Cox, 1993). To avoid negative consequences, those with stigmatized invisible social identities may struggle with whether or not as well as how to reveal their difference in an organizational setting, causing them stress and anxiety in workplace social interactions. For this reason, invisible social identities invoke some distinct issues that cannot be easily collapsed under traditional organizational diversity research that focuses on visible differences.

To advance research, in this article we use identity, disclosure, and stigma theories, as well as the gay, illness and disability, and ethnoracial diversity literature, to draw attention to the influence of invisible social identities on workplace interactions. We highlight workplace challenges faced by those with stigmatizing invisible social identities. Additionally, we reveal

how these individuals manage their invisible social identity in workplace interactions.

We organize the article as follows. First, we introduce the concepts of invisible social identity and stigma. Second, we discuss two strategies people use to manage their invisible social identities at work: passing and revealing. Third, we explore antecedents influencing whether a person decides to pass or reveal in a workplace social interaction. Fourth, we consider outcomes for the individual who chooses to pass or reveal. Finally, we consider implications of our ideas for research on diversity at work.

Before moving forward, we wish to highlight several important assumptions made in this paper. First, we distinguish our work from recent diversity research focused on "deep-level" diversity characteristics (e.g., Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998; Harrison, Price, Gavin, & Florey, 2002). Deep-level diversity characteristics are less visible psychological features of individuals, such as personality traits, values, and attitudes (Harrison et al., 2002). Here we explore those social identities that are derived from such individual differences as race, chronic illness, and sexual orientation, which are invisible. However, though not the focus of this article, we acknowledge that deep-level diversity characteristics are also likely to be invisible.

Second, while we assume that invisible social identities can be a basis for status as well as stigmatization, we focus here on the challenges associated with stigmatized invisible identities.

Third, we avoid taking a normative stance in this article regarding whether a person should be "out" at work. We believe that a person's choice to reveal or pass at work is contingent on a range of factors, a number of which we consider in this article. In fact, while scholars sometimes implicitly or explicitly support being "out" at work (i.e., Creed & Scully, 2000), threats of prejudice and discrimination offer significant reasons for a person with an invisible stigmatizing social identity to avoid disclosure in the workplace (i.e., Schneider, 1987). We seek to expose these factors influencing disclosure decisions.

Finally, we focus on situations where individuals have at least some free choice to make a disclosure decision, even though in practice individuals may not always have full discretion to pass or reveal at work. For example, Sullivan (2001) asserts that inquiries about one's personal

relationships by straight colleagues can put the gay or lesbian person into a situation where he or she must reveal his or her sexual orientation. Conversely, an individual may wish to reveal a difference at work but feel that he or she lacks control over this choice. For example, Clinton's "Don't ask, don't tell" policy in the U.S. military made it difficult, if not impossible, for gay soldiers to openly reveal their sexual orientation. An individual's choice to reveal information may also be constrained by relationships with significant others if socially damaging information compromises or violates relationships with these persons (Bernstein & Reimann, 2001). For example, people with an invisible illness may face resistance from family members about revealing potentially stigmatizing conditions such as epilepsy (cf. Schneider & Conrad, 1980).

## INVISIBLE SOCIAL IDENTITY AND STIGMA

A person's social identity is derived from the groups, statuses, or categories that the individual is socially recognized as being a member of (Rosenberg, 1997). Social categorization (Tajfel, 1981) and social identity (Turner, 1982) theories assert that individuals classify themselves and others into social categories using salient and available characteristics such as age or race (Triandis, Kurowski, & Gelfand, 1994). Others easily recognize visible differences in social interaction (Stangor, Lynch, Duan, & Glass, 1992; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998). Thus, the way people think about identity and differences (including many scholars) is largely formulated along visible lines.

As Schlossberg explains:

Theories and practices of identity and subject formation in Western culture are largely structured around the logic of visibility. . . . We are subjects constituted by our visions of ourselves and others, and we trust that our ability to see and read carries with it a certain degree of epistemological certainty (2001: 1).

For example, Pisares (1999) notes that skin color, facial features, dress, and hair are used in combination with other factors, such as preconceived notions of race, immediate context, a person's name and accent, and his or her apparent social class or education, to determine a person's racial identity. In general, people take each other's social identities at face value based on cultural norms of expected behavior

(Pinder, 1995) and assume membership in particular identities in the absence of visual or behavioral cues that would alert them otherwise. Goffman (1963) has called these expected character attributes "virtual social identity." Heterosexuality and able-bodiedness are examples of common virtual social identities.

Visible cues become problematic in social interactions when they lead to a person's stigmatization, as pointed out by Goffman (1963) and subsequent researchers. "Stigmatized individuals possess (or are believed to possess) some attribute, or characteristic, that conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context" (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998: 505). Stigma is a relative phenomenon; thus, certain characteristics considered stigmatizing in one culture are not considered so in another. For instance, in the United States obesity and old age are devalued and stigmatized, yet in other cultures they are revered. Stigma is also collectively defined and recognized, meaning that people within a culture tend to agree on stigmatized characteristics.

Being stigmatized is harmful for targeted individuals because it leads to stereotyping, status loss, and discrimination (Link & Phelan, 2001). Stereotyping influences social interactions by shaping what we notice in an encounter, how we evaluate ambiguous information, and how we remember an event or person (Crocker & Lutsky, 1986). We negatively evaluate others who bear a stigma, regardless of the truth or merit of the negative evaluation.

In the workplace, stigma can stifle an individual's advancement and personal development opportunities and can lead to social isolation (Cox, 1993). It can interfere with the development of relationships, which are critical for networking and career advancement (Day & Schoenrade, 1997). These issues can lead to poorer job performance (Stephan & Stephan, 1985). Some of the most stigmatizing differences also lead to difficulties in being hired and maintaining a job. For instance, job loss is a common concern for gays and lesbians (Woods, 1994; Woods & Harbeck, 1991), people with epilepsy (Iphofen, 1990; Schneider & Conrad, 1980), and people with AIDS (Leary & Schreindorfer, 1998; Weitz, 1990).

Visibility is a key dimension of stigma (cf. Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Jones et al., 1984), and scholars assert that people with concealable differences are relatively "better off" (Jones

et al., 1984). This traditional perspective of stigma focuses on the social reactions of others to a person with a stigma and on the fact that invisibility helps the stigmatized individual avoid problematic social interactions that may occur because of the stigma. Yet for people with invisible differences, issues arise *prior* to social interaction. These issues are psychological, occurring within the individual as he or she considers how to manage his or her stigma in public. The dyadic social interaction, which has been the focus of most stigma research, comes into play after the psychological issues have been addressed (although not necessarily resolved). In particular, given the possible costs associated with being stigmatized, people with these invisible social identities are likely to think strategically about whether, when, and how to reveal their difference (Frale, Blackstone, & Sherbaum, 1990). Thus, the decision to reveal or conceal information about the self is central and significant in interpersonal interactions at work.

In the next section we consider the dilemma people with an invisible social identity face in social interactions at work regarding whether they should pass or reveal their difference, and how they should do so, given risks associated with being stigmatized as a result of revelations.

## TO PASS OR REVEAL AT WORK

Based on our review of the literature, in this section we explore two basic strategic choices in social interactions at work that individuals with stigmatized invisible social identities can make: to hide or to disclose their invisible social identity. We call the first choice "passing" and the second choice "revealing." A person must make decisions about whether and how to reveal over and over again across many social interactions (Friskopp & Silverstein, 1995; Schneider, 1987). For instance, an individual who has already revealed that he has epilepsy to a coworker or to a project team will have to decide again and again whether to reveal his chronic illness to new people and, if so, how and when to do so.

The degree to which an individual reveals or passes at work translates into an overall state of being totally "in the closet" (i.e., he or she tells no one about his or her difference), being "par-

tially out" or revealed (i.e., he or she tells only a select number of others, who keep the secret among themselves), or being entirely "out of the closet" or revealed (this person indiscriminately reveals his or her difference).

### Passing

Passing is "a cultural performance whereby one member of a defined social group masquerades as another in order to enjoy the privileges afforded to the dominant group" (Leary, 1999: 85). Passing leads a person to be classified incorrectly by another person as someone without a discredited or devalued social identity; for example, in the workplace, chronically ill people pass for healthy, gay people pass for heterosexual, and people from a multiracial background (e.g., white and Asian-American) pass for white. The above definition suggests that passing is intentional, but passing may also occur unintentionally (Conyers & Kennedy, 1963). For example, passing occurs when someone is the subject of another's mistaken assumptions. Bowman (2001) describes how physical features of individuals who have white and African-American heritage—such as straight hair, light skin, or blue eyes—may lead them to pass every time they walk into a room, step into a cab, or are with a new group of coworkers and choose not to announce their racial background.

In this article we focus on intentional passing tactics. The ability to intentionally pass depends on both the degree to which one can conceal a social identity and on its ambiguity. One must be physically and culturally able to fit into another social identity group and to hide revealing information about oneself from coworkers. For example, a person with an invisible chronic illness can pass at work if symptoms are minimally intrusive. As Goffman states, "He who passes will have to be alive to aspects of the social interactions which others treat as uncalculated and unattended" (1963: 88). The intentional passer must be vigilant of social cues in their work environment and take care to avoid situations where markers of his or her real social identity become evident to others. For instance, gay people must be careful not to display personal photographs of their partner, and chronically ill people must carefully hide intrusive symptoms while at work (Thorne, 1993).

People use different tactics to pass. Herek (1996) identifies three: fabrication, concealment, and discretion. Differences among these three approaches are subtle; however, we believe that each represents a distinct passing tactic. *Fabrication* occurs when a person deliberately provides false information about himself or herself to others. In other words, one creates a new identity through deception by presenting fabrications about one's life. For example, Woods (1994) describes how gay men actively construct heterosexual identities in the workplace by bringing platonic, opposite-sex friends as dates to organizational functions.

*Concealment* involves actively preventing others from acquiring information about oneself (Herek, 1996). Those who use concealment hide personal information in order to pass as a dominant group member. For example, during the Jim Crow era, multiracial individuals who were light skinned and appeared white evaded discrimination by hiding personal information, such as where they were raised, what churches they attended, or where their relatives lived, so that their African-American heritage would not be revealed.

Finally, *discretion* occurs when a person avoids queries related to the invisible identity or social group membership in question. Differences between discretion and concealment are subtle, but important nonetheless. Those who use discretion do not actively hide personal information, as with concealment, but instead "dodge the issue" (Woods, 1994). Individuals avoid opportunities where they would need to hide or share such information, and they "elude personal questions, talk in generalities or change the focus of conversation" (Chrobot-Mason, Button, & Declimenti, 2001: 323). For instance, many gay people reveal nothing at all about their sexual identity to their coworkers, thus appearing asexual. No matter what tactic is used, passing requires a person to live a "double life" and to adopt different personas within and outside of work.

### Revealing

Those who reveal disclose an identity that would otherwise be invisible or unrecognizable to others. *Coming out* is a term commonly used to describe when one reveals one's homosexuality. The term is also used to describe how

persons reveal other stigmatized differences, such as religion (Delbecq, 2002) and social class (Rothenberg & Scully, 2002).

As with passing, people rely on different tactics to reveal an invisible social identity. Three tactics include signaling, normalizing, and differentiating. *Signaling* straddles the line between going public and remaining private about one's invisible social identity. Individuals who signal disclose their invisible social identity by sending messages, dropping hints, and giving clues. Signals may involve the use of ambiguous language, specific conversational topics, and various symbols or nonverbal cues. For example, a person from a particular ethnic or religious heritage may choose to retain a distinctly ethnic name to signal this heritage, or gay people may use conversations about particular books, music, and vacation spots as ways of disclosing their homosexuality. These clues "invite speculation . . . encouraging their peers to read between the lines" (Woods, 1994: 176).

People can choose signals that are meaningful among "insiders" but that can be ambiguous and innocuous to others. For example, devout Christians place "Jesus fish" plaques on their cars to signal their affiliation or beliefs to others. By using this signal, people make their invisible social identity visible to knowledgeable others. Further, even if others do know the meaning, signals are ambiguous. For example, does a rainbow bumper sticker mean that one is gay or that one is a heterosexual person who supports gay rights? Some signals are more widely known than others, so people can choose strong signals or weak signals, depending on the context and motives in their situation. Signaling minimizes the risk of explicitly revealing an invisible stigmatizing social identity and provides an interim step to see if it seems safe to reveal more.

*Normalizing* is a second approach to revealing one's invisible social identity. Individuals employ normalizing by revealing their invisible social identity to others and then attempting to make their difference seem commonplace or ordinary. Those who normalize attempt to assimilate into local organizational culture, behave in accordance with the norms of the organization, and may deny that their invisible difference matters. The invisible social identity is subtly acknowledged, but its significance and stigma are minimized. Thus, normalizing represents at-

tempts by an individual to establish, maintain, or pretend to be living as "normal" an existence as possible (Joachim & Acorn, 2000; Register, 1987; Royer, 1998; Strauss, 1975). Royer (1998) asserts that normalization helps a person preserve emotional balance, cope with possible alienation, and adjust his or her expectations to incorporate the limitations of an invisible identity.

For example, a lawyer with MS who experiences vision and balance problems that affect his courtroom performance can normalize his situation by saying that others get ill in the courtroom too. He notes that although illness is an unusual event, there are general procedures in place to cope with them in the courtroom: lawyers leave temporarily and return to complete the trial when they are well (Beatty, 2003). Thus, the lawyer can cope with his illness on days when it flares and not feel that he must hide it.

Research suggests that gay people also normalize by presenting information about an unfamiliar sexuality and lifestyle in familiar, heterosexual terms (Woods, 1994). Creed and Scully cite an example of a lesbian woman who works for a Fortune 50 company and normalizes by saying, "Lots of other people have had troubles with their teenage sons. We've got a problem. Think of something mundane. We mow the grass, we call Roto-Rooter for plumbing" (Creed & Scully, 2000: 23). She shares these everyday difficulties with others to underscore the commonality of their life experiences.

Finally, *differentiating* occurs when people highlight their invisible social identity and how it differentiates them from others. Those who differentiate seek to present an identity as equally valid (rather than stigmatized) and may engage in an effort to change the perceptions and behavior of the groups, organizations, and institutions that might stigmatize them. For people with stigmatizing illnesses, this strategy involves speaking up when others are dismissing them or treating them poorly, voicing their rights to fair employment, and threatening legal options based on employment laws like the Americans with Disabilities Act. For multiracial individuals, this may mean publicly claiming their multiracial background, rather than allowing others to categorize them into one racial group or another. The stigmatized person reclaims and redefines the way in which his or her invisible social identity is understood at work, preserving

its marginality and transforming traditionally stigmatized differences into assets.

Differentiators' very act of revealing and claiming their social identity may drive change at both the individual and organizational level. Researchers describe a strategy of "identity deployment," where people reveal differences in ways that challenge perceptions, values, practices, and perspectives of the dominant group or organizational culture vis-à-vis stigmatized others (Bernstein, 1997; Creed & Scully, 2000; Taylor & Raeburn, 1995). These encounters can be as simple as individuals sharing personal stories and allowing others to ask questions.

### ANTECEDENTS TO PASSING AND REVEALING

Stigma and social identity theories lead us to expect that individuals with stigmatizing invisible social identities will pass in the workplace to avoid negative consequences and to maintain positive social images. However, research indicates that people do reveal their stigmatizing social identities to those with whom they interact at work. In the following sections we elaborate on our proposed model (see Figure 1), which outlines antecedents to the decision to pass or reveal, the outcomes of that choice, and the proposed iterative relationship between these elements.

Disclosure research illustrates that environmental and individual factors influence the choice to reveal or pass. Thus, we divide antecedents into two categories: (1) contextual conditions, which include organizational, professional, industry, and legal environments, as well as interpersonal relationships, and (2) individual factors, which include individual differences (i.e., personality characteristics and/or social identity group memberships) and personal motives. These factors are unlikely to operate independently. Consequently, a person is likely to experience conflicting pressures to reveal and to conceal stigmatizing information. We discuss each of the antecedents separately, however, to identify their unique contributions to a person's propensity to pass or to reveal.

#### Contextual Conditions

In this section we consider how three contextual conditions influence a person's propensity to reveal or to pass in social interactions at

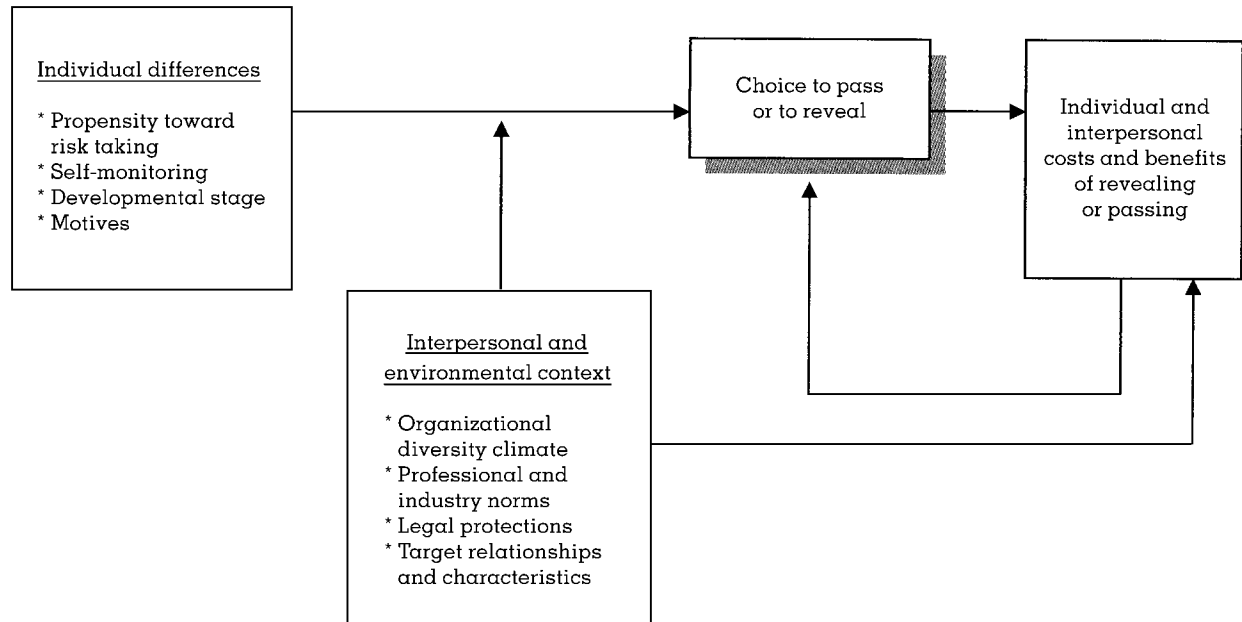
work: (1) organizational diversity climate, (2) industry and professional context, and (3) legal protections. Additionally, we explore features of interpersonal relationships that influence a person's decision concerning whether or not to reveal. We suggest that people interpret these contextual conditions as "signals" or symbolic indicators of whether support for or stigmatization of their invisible difference will occur from disclosure.

**Organizational context.** First, organizational context influences the decision to reveal as individuals assess the social norms of their workplace. Tsui and Gutek (1999) term this the *diversity climate*, and scholars such as Cox (1993) and Ely and Thomas (2001) discuss how diversity climate influences a person's experience of being different within that social context. Supportive and affirming work climates are associated with more openness (Chrobot-Mason et al., 2001; Driscoll, Kelley, & Fassinger, 1996). For example, individuals are more likely to reveal their sexual orientation if they perceive they have supportive coworkers (Cain, 1991; Ragins & Cornwall, 2001b) and managers (Day & Schoenrade, 1997). We suggest that organizational policy and procedures, transparency of decision making, and the presence of other "out" individuals influence an organizational diversity climate.

Organizational policies are likely to influence whether a person passes or reveals. Nondiscrimination policies, either legally mandated or voluntarily adopted by an organization, establish organizational accountability so that a person has some measure of protection against discrimination and feels safer revealing a difference. In addition, policies that are voluntarily adopted by an organization, such as domestic partner benefits, signal that an organization seeks to support employees with particular invisible social identities. Employees are more likely to reveal in organizations that exceed minimal compliance standards, because these efforts signal that the organization values these employees and seeks to create a welcoming environment.

However, policies and procedures designed to ensure a discrimination-free environment will be interpreted as empty promises if they are not enforced. Research on organizational compliance with securities regulations suggests that when training related to compliance is infrequent, punishment for compliance rule violators

**FIGURE 1**  
**A Conceptual Model of the Decision to Pass or Reveal**



is weak or nonexistent, and monitoring for rule breaking is ineffective, the compliance function itself is marginalized and undermined in the eyes of organization members. Consequently, policies are perceived as symbolic in nature—not to be taken seriously (MacLean, 2003). This suggests that the original intent of the policy will be undermined, and those with invisible differences will be discouraged from revealing themselves if policies designed to protect stigmatized groups are not enforced.

The degree to which organizational decisions regarding hiring and promotion are transparent and appear to be based on merit is also likely to influence whether a person feels safe revealing. Transparency will be increased when individuals have access to information about the bases for hiring and promotion decisions. For example, tenure and promotion decisions for professors are more transparent when specific criteria for promotion are available to everyone, those under consideration for promotion have access to materials collected for making promotion decisions (i.e., recommendation letters), and people receive specific feedback about why they were (or were not) granted a promotion. Transparency and the appearance of meritocracy in these decisions should make an individual feel safer revealing rather than passing at work.

Finally, the presence of other individuals who have publicly revealed an invisible difference is likely to facilitate the decision to reveal, especially if the "out" others do not seem to have suffered any negative consequences as a result of their revelation (Ragins & Cornwall, 2001b). The existence of recognized groups of revealed others, such as a Gay-Straight Alliance, similarly will act as a facilitating factor for revealing. Conversely, individuals are more likely to pass at work if it appears that others with invisible identities are also hiding their differences.

**Industry and professional norms.** Industry and professional norms for passing or revealing set the context within which employees may feel pressure to tailor their behaviors to "fit in." For example, referring to gay employees, Friskopp and Silverstein note that people who "work for companies associated with the defense industry, that serve children, or that are connected with conservative or fundamentalist religious groups face special challenges in the workplace . . . [and] almost all are completely closeted" (1995: 158). The military also encourages passing, as publicized in the "Don't ask, don't tell" policy of the 1990s (cf. Herek, Jobe, & Carney, 1996). People are more likely to be stigmatized if they reveal their differences to others in organizations situated in industries or containing jobs

where passing for "normal" is implicitly or explicitly encouraged. In these situations, passing is seen as the most viable strategy to avoid discrimination and to secure equal cultural, social, economic, and recreational advantages (Conyers & Kennedy, 1963).

Conversely, revealing may be encouraged in other industries or occupations, if doing so is consistent with shared values and meaning systems. For example, human services work relies on delivering help to clients through a medium of honest personal relationships, which requires an attitude of social tolerance (Halmos, 1970), so professional norms in that occupation will promote disclosure to "practice what they preach."

**Legal protections.** Individuals who enjoy legal protection from discrimination against an invisible social identity at the local, state, or federal level may be more likely to reveal than those who are not afforded such protection (Ragins & Cornwall, 2001b). The existence of this protection will vary by the nature of the invisible difference and by location. For instance, federal law protects individuals from employment discrimination on the basis of differences such as race and disability status, but it does not protect people on the basis of their sexual orientation.

**Interpersonal context.** The target (i.e., the person with whom the holder of the invisible identity is interacting) influences passing or revealing behaviors. We highlight two features of the target: (1) the relationship an individual believes he or she has with the target and (2) the dispositional and demographic characteristics of the target.

The specific nature of the relationship between parties shapes the decision to reveal. Research suggests that people share more personal information about themselves with those others whom they feel close to and trust. Revealing is related to trust, and more trust leads to more personal intimate disclosure (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993; Jourard, 1971). For example, close, trusting relationships have been shown to positively influence the choice to reveal AIDS (Derlega, Lovejoy, & Winstead, 1998), sexual orientation (Cain, 1991; Herek, 1996; Ragins & Cornwall, 2001a), and illness (Greene, 2000).

In addition, dispositional and demographic characteristics of a target can shape an individual's willingness to reveal. Some people are better at placing others at ease and at eliciting

intimate information (Miller, Berg, & Archer, 1983). People may also share personal information with "wise others" (Goffman, 1963), who seem knowledgeable about and sympathetic toward the particular difference. People seek out and prefer to interact with such individuals, whom they believe support and validate their identity (Schlenker, 1984). In particular, the salience of the stigma in social interaction is reduced when a person interacts with someone who shares the stigma (Gibbons, 1986). For example, in their study of gays and lesbians, Cornwall and Ragins (2001b) found that having gay supervisors or coworkers diminishes individuals' fear of discrimination, thereby making disclosure easier. In sum, we expect a person to reveal more readily to a target who seems knowledgeable about, sympathetic toward, or similar to oneself because he or she also shares the invisible difference.

Research also suggests that gender-based beliefs can affect disclosure (Derlega et al., 1993). Some people may be less likely to reveal to males, believing that men are more embarrassed or upset talking about intimate topics. Conversely, an individual may be more inclined to reveal to women, because, as suggested by gender research, women's communication styles engender revealing personal information (Tannen, 1990).

### Individual Differences

Early disclosure researchers found that individuals vary in their propensity to reveal personal information (Jourard, 1971), suggesting that disclosure behavior is at least partially determined by such individual differences as personality characteristics and social identity group memberships. In this section we consider some of these differences.

First, research suggests that individuals differ in the extent to which they are willing to take risks in decision making (Bromiley & Curley, 1992). Someone who has a higher propensity toward risk taking is more likely to make riskier decisions than someone with a lower propensity (Sitkin & Weingart, 1995). As we mentioned earlier, someone who reveals information about a potentially stigmatizing social identity faces stigma risk, or the possibility that he or she may be stigmatized as a result of his or her revelations and suffer real, negative work-related con-

sequences. We expect that individuals who are dispositionally less risk averse will be more likely to reveal a stigmatizing invisible social identity. Conversely, an individual who has a lower risk-taking propensity will be more likely to choose to pass at work.

Second, an individual's self-monitoring tendencies may also influence disclosure. Self-monitoring refers to the degree to which an individual observes, regulates, and controls how well he or she is fulfilling the social expectations of his or her role within a particular context (Snyder, 1987). Those individuals who are high self-monitors closely monitor how they are perceived in their interactions with others and are more likely to behave in socially acceptable ways. In contrast, low self-monitors are not as concerned with the social appropriateness of their behavior and will act in a manner more "true to themselves" (Kilduff & Day, 1994), with expressive behaviors reflecting their inner attitudes and emotions (Gangestad & Snyder, 2000).

We expect high self-monitors to have the largest repertoire of passing and revealing behaviors, because they are likely to be sensitive to situational demands; whether and how a person passes or reveals may depend on perceptions of the social environment. Further, the high self-monitor should be more effective at judging whether he or she will suffer negative consequences from revealing an invisible difference at work. For example, Anderson and Randlet (1993) assert that high self-monitors are more skilled at assessing whether revealing that they are gay or lesbian will lead to negative consequences.

Self-monitoring theory also predicts that low self-monitors are more likely to reveal, because doing so expresses "who they really are." Yet the additional consideration of stigma theory may mute this revealing effect. Stigma theory suggests that people within a culture commonly agree on which characteristics are considered stigmatizing, implying that low self-monitors are likely to perceive the risks of stigmatization and other possible negative outcomes (i.e., workplace discrimination) associated with revealing their invisible difference. For example, we expect low self-monitors to know that society stigmatizes individuals in an interracial relationship. For this reason, we expect low self-monitors with such a potentially stigmatizing invisible difference to attempt to pass as much

as high self-monitors, but they may not be as good at managing impressions because they are likely to be less effective at tailoring their image in ways that benefit their self-interest (Gangestad & Snyder, 2000; Snyder & Copeland, 1989). Thus, a low self-monitor in an interracial relationship may be unskilled at effectively making his or her relationship appear "normal" to others.

Third, models of adult development also suggest that one's developmental stage may influence one's propensity to reveal or pass. For example, models of racial identity development (i.e., Tatum, 1997) suggest that racial minorities at the highest stage of development fully embrace their racial heritage as an equally valid identity, even though society denigrates their racial background. Highly developed individuals will tend to freely express their racial heritage, although it may not be visible to others.

Scholarly research on gays and lesbians (Cass, 1984; Moorhead, 1999; Warren, 1974), as well as illness (Adams, Pill, & Jones, 1997), also implicitly and explicitly suggests that those individuals who are "out" rather than closeted are more sophisticated and self-assured than those who choose to pass. However, new models of biracial identity (self-views about "who I am" of those from biracial heritage) suggest that this idea may be too simplistic. For example, one study reveals that individuals with biracial backgrounds express their identities in a variety of ways, including altering their behaviors or mannerisms to suit the situation (i.e., a person changes vernacular and body language to fit the situation when with black versus white colleagues; Rockquemore & Brunσμα, 2001). Research on biracial identity suggests that this behavior is a true expression of a person's multiple identities, rather than an attempt to pass for black or white (Rockquemore & Brunσμα, 2001). This suggests that predictions of passing versus revealing behavior may be more complex than suggested by traditional models of adult development.

Finally, those individuals with additional visible stigmatizing social identities may be less likely to reveal an invisible difference because they already face possible bias in the workplace from a visible stigma. Friskopp and Silverstein (1995) illustrate how lesbians in top management were aware that they already faced possible gender bias and consequently were less

willing to reveal their sexual orientation. Similar examples can be found addressing age, race, and ethnicity, in which multiple potentially stigmatized identities interact with each other (e.g., Creed & Scully, 2000; Reimann, 2001).

### Personal Motives

Personal motives are also likely to influence disclosure decisions. We address four motives: (1) maintaining self-esteem and coping, (2) building or preserving relationships, (3) arranging accommodation, and (4) creating social change. While these motives drive disclosure decisions, they do not guarantee actual outcomes obtained. For example, an individual may reveal that he has early Alzheimer's disease to a colleague as a form of coping; however, the colleague may respond with shock and disgust. As we discuss later, a person is likely to avoid future revelations if previous disclosure has led to these negative outcomes.

People reveal an invisible difference to maintain a coherent sense of self (Harry, 1993; Moorhead, 1999). Declaring one's difference allows one to be a complete and integrated person (Friskopp & Silverstein, 1995) and obviates the difficult task of constantly being engaged in information management to conceal aspects of oneself (Charmaz, 1991). A person reveals stigmatizing information to maintain control over the way in which others learn about the stigmatizing difference and to positively frame the information (Herek, 1996). Similarly, passing can be an attempt to create one's own life narrative and to control the process of signification itself (Schlossberg, 2001). Individuals may seek to avoid acknowledging perceived flaws and weaknesses because it lowers their self-esteem (Rosenfeld, 1979). In either case, the choice to pass or reveal is linked to individuals' identity and their goals for self-presentation.

Revealing is also a coping strategy for dealing with stressful situations. People are motivated to share personal information to release pent-up concerns and feelings to one another (Derlega et al., 1998). Therapeutic disclosure reduces negative feelings that accompany secrecy (Herek, 1996) and has both emotional and physical benefits (Jourard, 1971; Pennebaker, 1997).

A person may also reveal to gain social closeness. Revealing personal information is a normal and integral part of developing relation-

ships, and individuals are likely to reveal personal information as their relationships mature (Derlega, 1984). Individuals may choose to reveal an invisible social identity to a target in the normal process of relationship building to gain general social support (Derlega et al., 1993; Rubin & Shenker, 1978). Additionally, information is typically revealed in a reciprocal way (Derlega, Harris, & Chaikin, 1973; Taylor, 1968). Thus, people may feel compelled to disclose to minimize social awkwardness (Herek, 1996).

As we mentioned earlier, a person's decision to reveal or pass can also be motivated by an interest in preserving or enhancing existing social relationships. For example, a person may choose to pass for straight at work to protect his or her closeted partner or other family members who work at the same organization from stigmatization. Conversely, a person is more likely to reveal if passing compromises a significant relationship. For example, a person is more likely to reveal that he is gay if his partner is offended by being excluded from company functions.

Another motive to reveal is so that one's difference can be accommodated or so that one can receive a benefit within the workplace. Creed and Scully (2000) discuss how gay employees may reveal their sexual orientation in order to request domestic partner benefits. Similarly, a person must disclose a disability in order to receive workplace accommodation legislated under the Americans with Disabilities Act. This presents a dilemma for people whose difference would otherwise be unknown to others (Matthews & Harrington, 2000). People also mention their difference to explain or justify unusual or unexpected behaviors. Sometimes a difference can be a bargaining tool to achieve preferential treatment—a phenomenon Strauss (1975) calls "secondary gain." In secondary gain, a person uses his or her difference to claim a benefit—for example, being relieved of an unpleasant work task.

Finally, revealing can be motivated by a desire to educate others and to change social conditions at work. Some people feel a responsibility to reveal or to educate others about the special nature of their difference. Bernstein (1997) has illustrated that gays and lesbians reveal to explain gay identity and to change heterosexual people's perspectives. This motive allows individuals to assert their identity and to challenge social norms that lead to discrimina-

tion. The civil rights and disability rights movements grew out of this approach to revealing and claiming stigmatized identities (Anspach, 1979; Fine & Asch, 1988; Scotch, 1988), and it has been a powerful force for social change.

### OUTCOMES FROM PASSING AND REVEALING

We contend here that people with invisible social identities are aware of the risks, costs, and benefits associated with revealing their stigmatizing difference. As we depict in Figure 1, we predict that individuals engage in a type of cost-benefit analysis in deciding whether to pass or reveal. In this section we discuss some of the outcomes of passing and revealing.

The risks of passing occur at individual and interpersonal levels. For the individual, passing is a "sequestering of the self," which raises issues of authenticity (Leary, 1999: 86). Consequently, passers may experience psychological strain from feeling like a fraud (Goffman, 1963) because of a need to construct credible and consistent fabrications about their lives and to ensure that colleagues and clients remain unaware of their invisible difference. As Smart and Wegner note, "Concealing a stigma leads to an inner turmoil that is remarkable for its intensity and its capacity for absorbing an individual's mental life" (2000: 221). Ragins and Cornwall (2001b) found that fears associated with the decision to reveal sexual orientation were more deleterious than disclosure itself, with respect to job attitudes and psychological strain.

In interpersonal relationships, the passer may find that he or she is more isolated from colleagues and less effective at working with clients because of the need to keep others at a personal distance in order to hide a difference. Work colleagues expect to have some degree of knowledge about each other's personal life. This knowledge helps establish effective work relationships (Kronenberger, 1991; Schneider, 1987). Relationships can become strained in the workplace when interaction partners become suspicious because of the lack of personal disclosure (Herek, 1996). Associations with others thus become an ordeal for the passer and something to be avoided (Jones et al., 1984). Also, passers may have more limited networks and mentoring relationships (Day & Schoenrade, 1997), resulting in long-term deleterious effects on career advancement. Further, as already noted, a person's

decision to pass may compromise personal relationships outside of work, if a significant other's existence is denied or his or her importance minimized.

Revealing presents different types of risk. The person who chooses to reveal his or her invisible social identity opens himself or herself to possible stigmatization, prejudice, and discrimination at work. Upon revealing, this person may worry about how others will react to his or her revelations and whether these revelations will lead to negative personal consequences. However, the benefit of minimizing dissonance between who one "really is" and the image that one projects to others may be worth the risk of stigmatization (Shallenberger, 1994). This individual may also benefit from building closer social relationships, as we discussed above, by revealing personal information about the self. Revealing may allow an individual to acknowledge significant others and family members, rather than deny their existence or minimize their importance. Finally, an individual can affect social changes within the organization by strategically deploying his or her invisible difference (Creed & Scully, 2000).

People with an invisible social identity will inevitably need to decide whether, when, and how to reveal their invisible, potentially stigmatized social identity in social interactions at work. They are likely to expend energy and to experience increased stress in every new social relationship at work that requires a decision to pass or reveal.

### INFLUENCE OF OUTCOMES ON FUTURE BEHAVIORS

Figure 1 includes a feedback loop, which suggests that a person's outcomes from revealing will influence his or her future choices to pass or reveal. Not surprisingly, we expect that a person is more likely to reveal in the future if he or she believes that prior revealing led to positive outcomes. For example, a person will be more likely to reveal that he or she has asthma to additional colleagues at work if prior revealing led to workplace accommodations. Conversely, we expect this person may pass in the future if he or she encountered a negative outcome, such as being denied promotion.

These predictions arise from theories of social cognition, which suggest that past social en-

counters frame in one's mind what such encounters "should" entail, thereby shaping future expectations and perceptions (Fiske & Taylor, 1984). Thus, positive coming out experiences beget more revealing behaviors, whereas negative experiences are likely to generate future passing. This is likely to be true even though prior experiences may not accurately predict outcomes of future social interactions.

## DISCUSSION

This article illuminates the role of invisibility in organizational diversity dynamics. Although organizational scholars acknowledge that demographic differences can be visible as well as invisible, in most diversity research scholars focus on observable differences. The literature on race, on sexual orientation, and on chronic illness suggests that those with invisible social identities face a choice that visibly different others do not face: whether or not to reveal their invisible social identity or to pass as a member of the (nonstigmatized) majority. By synthesizing these bodies of literature and explicitly acknowledging the unique dynamics associated with invisible social identities in the workplace, we accomplish several things: (1) we describe how individuals manage invisible social identities by passing and revealing in organizations, as well as discuss the complexities inherent in those strategies; (2) we explore individual and contextual factors that affect an individual's choice to pass or to reveal; (3) we suggest consequences associated with both revealing and passing; and (4) we open up new avenues of inquiry for organization studies researchers. We address some of the potential areas for further research below.

### Group Performance

Given a tradition of diversity research at the group level of analysis (Williams & O'Reilly, 1998), one significant area of research is to investigate the impact of the visibility of social identities on group performance. Williams and O'Reilly (1998) categorize this group-level diversity research into two competing and conflicting perspectives. The first perspective suggests that increased diversity improves group performance through enhanced information networks and more and varied perspectives on the world

that allow for increased creativity and innovation. The second perspective hypothesizes that increased diversity hinders group performance, because social categorization processes and concomitant skewed attributions and stereotyping undermine communication and cooperation.

Both of these perspectives rely on individuals in workgroups being able to identify differences in each other. What happens when differences aren't visible? If individuals reveal their invisible social identities to group members only after establishing positive relationships and trust, do these groups experience higher levels of group cohesion and performance than groups with visible diversity, whose observable composition may have precluded the formation of close bonds?

### Group Dynamics

In the same vein, there is a need to develop an understanding of the process by which invisible social identities affect group dynamics. The way a group deals with revelations of those with invisible social identities is likely to influence the group's future interactions. Groups that fail to respond sensitively to a person's revelations about a stigmatizing invisible social identity may suffer from decreased cohesion among their members. Research about this will not only enrich diversity literature but also will benefit practicing managers, who may be aware of invisible differences within groups they manage but uncertain about managing group responses to them.

### Trust

In addition to considering what will be disclosed to whom, individuals with invisible identities must consider *when* to disclose. Our model suggests that trust and intimacy in coworker relationships are precursors to revealing. Trust develops over time, in response to earlier interactions, increasing or decreasing based on past interactions, as indicated in the feedback loop of our disclosure model. In the future, other scholars may explore the decision-making process through which individuals assess whether the threshold of intimacy and trust necessary for disclosure has been reached.

## Social Identity

There are likely to be specific factors unique to particular social identities that influence how people manage these identities in social interactions at work. As an example, invisible chronic illnesses are different from other social identities because of the potential intrusiveness of periodic symptoms. Those with an invisible chronic illness must find ways to explain or hide symptoms from others. As another example, a pregnancy slowly moves from invisible to visible. How do women manage social reactions to the changes in their bodies during pregnancy at work? How does the movement from invisible to visible during pregnancy affect passing and revealing behaviors? How do women make decisions about when and how to reveal, knowing that their pregnancy implies they will be absent from work or that their performance may suffer in the future if their child care responsibilities conflict with work demands?

As these examples illustrate, from a practice perspective, managers may need to be aware of the range of different issues important for distinct invisible identities as well as the commonalities among them. Grounded qualitative research is one method to build rich insights on particular types of invisible social identities and to create advice useful to managers for specific types of invisible social identities.

## Social Networks

The importance of a target relationship in the decision concerning whether to reveal suggests that social network theory may offer clues regarding how individuals manage their invisible social identity. In social network theory it is assumed that people are embedded within a network of relationships that create opportunities for and constraints on individual action (Granovetter, 1985). Our model raises questions for social network researchers, including whether the strength of a tie with a target influences an individual's passing or revealing behaviors. Given the potential stigma associated with revealing, another research question concerns whether or not individuals consider the network relationships of others when deciding whether to pass or reveal their difference. A person with many social ties and high centrality has the ability to "spread the word" to others,

which may dissuade an individual from disclosing unless trust in that person is extremely high.

## Organizational Change

Finally, this work opens the door for research on how the decision to pass or reveal may affect the organization. Individuals with invisible social identities often conceal their differences until they have built a network of mentors, friends, colleagues, and supporters within their organization. Revealing invisible social identities to an established, strong, and supportive network may influence the way the revealed difference is viewed by members of the organization and may have far-reaching effects on the overall climate of the organization. Similarly, passing may simply further institutionalize stigmatization of particular social identities in given organizational contexts.

The possible destigmatizing effects of revealing strategies present a new area for organizational change researchers to explore (cf. Creed & Scully, 2000). This particular area provides fertile ground for exploring the macro-micro link in organization studies. Case study researchers should attempt to trace the evolution of the microsocial actions of one or more individuals who reveal an invisible difference in an organization that translates into macrosocial changes in the climate of that organization.

## Measurement Issues

We close by briefly considering measurement issues. One of the particular challenges for scholars is that this social identity is invisible. In other words, scholars who conduct field research on invisible social identities rely on those with such invisible differences to reveal their social identity. Samples may be systematically biased, because those who agree to participate in such research (i.e., who reveal a difference to the researcher) may also be higher in risk-taking propensity or willingness to trust others. However, scholars may mitigate bias by ensuring confidentiality, thus attracting subjects who are less likely to reveal an invisible social identity to strangers. Scholars may also benefit by drawing subjects from interest groups rather than from one particular organization. For example, Beatty (2003) drew participants with invisible chronic illnesses from support groups

for these illnesses. This approach is likely to make a closeted participant feel safer, because he or she can avoid being revealed at work.

Another research challenge rests with operationalizing revealing and passing behaviors. For example, scholars need to consider what it means to "signal" one's invisible difference to a target person. The signaler may believe that he or she has signaled an invisible difference to another in a social interaction, even though the target fails to perceive this signal. Is it sufficient to say that behaviors constitute signals even if the target fails to recognize them as such? Additionally, differences among the passing behaviors of fabrication, concealment, and discretion (Herek, 1996) are subtle. Scholars will need to demonstrate that these differences hold up to standards of empirical measurement. These are just some of the measurement issues that scholars are likely to face when studying invisible social identities at work.

While theoretical and empirical research on invisible social identities to some extent constitutes uncharted territory, we believe that those who undertake the challenge will be richly rewarded by new insights regarding invisible as well as visible social identities within the workplace.

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