

# Truth or consequences? The negative results of concealing who you really are on the job

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Most know that hiding something from others can cause internal angst. New research suggests the consequences can go far beyond emotional strife and that being forced to keep information concealed, such as one's sexual orientation, disrupts the concealer's basic skills and abilities, including intellectual acuity, physical strength, and interpersonal grace—skills critical to workplace success.

"With no federal protection for gays and lesbians in the work place, our work suggests that the wisdom of non-discrimination laws should be debated not merely through a moral lens, but with an appreciation for the loss of economic productivity that such vulnerabilities produce," says Clayton R. Critcher, assistant professor at UC Berkeley's Haas School of Business. Critcher, a member of the Haas Marketing Group, conducts research on consumer behavior and social psychology, including questions of self and identity.

Critcher's paper, "The Cost of Keeping it Hidden: Decomposing Concealment Reveals What Makes it Depleting," forthcoming in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* and co-authored with Melissa J. Ferguson of Cornell University, details multiple negative consequences of concealment. The findings, says Critcher, stem from the difficulty of having to constantly monitor one's speech for secret-revealing content that needs to be edited out.

The researchers conducted four studies, each of which was a variation on a single paradigm. When participants arrived at the study, they learned

they would be taking part in an interview. Following a rigged drawing, all participants learned they were assigned to be an interviewee. Another supposed participant—who, in reality, was an actor hired by the experimenter—was the interviewer.

Some participants were given special instructions about what they could reveal in the interview. In three of the four studies, some participants were told they should make sure not to reveal their sexual orientation while answering the questions. For example, participants were told that in answering questions, instead of saying "I tend to date men who ...," the participants could say, "I tend to date people who ...."

After the interview, participants thought they were moving on to an unrelated study. In actuality, this second part of the experiment was related, offering researchers the opportunity to measure whether participants' intellectual, physical, or interpersonal skills were degraded by concealment. The studies revealed the variety of negative effects of concealment.

In one study, participants completed a measure of spatial intelligence that was modeled after items on military aptitude tests. Participants randomly assigned to conceal their sexual orientation performed 17% worse than those who went through the interview without instructions to conceal. In another experiment, participants tasked with hiding their sexual orientation exhibited reduced physical stamina, only able to squeeze an exercise handgrip for 20% less time than those in a control condition. Additional studies revealed that concealment led people to show less interpersonal restraint. For example, the participants responded to a "snarky" email from a superior with more anger than politeness.

During another test, participants demonstrated poorer performance on a "Stroop task," a commonly-used measure of executive cognitive

function.

In consequent experiments, participants' abilities were assessed both before and after the interview. This permitted the experimenters to more directly observe that merely going through an interview does not affect one's strength of cognitive control, but going through an interview while having to conceal one's sexual orientation led to significant declines.

In addition, the researchers varied whether questions focused on participants' personal or dating life, or on topics for which one's sexual orientation would never be revealed. Concealment caused similarly sharp declines in both cases.

"Environments that explicitly or implicitly encourage people to conceal their [sexual orientation](#)—even when employers adopt a 'Don't Ask' policy—may significantly harm workers," says Critcher, "Establishing a workplace climate that supports diversity may be one of the easiest ways to enhance workplace productivity."

**More information:** [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23796042](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23796042)

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