



## The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 26  
Issue 4 *December*

Article 3

December 1999

# The Social Process of "Passing" to Manage Stigma: Acts of Internalized Oppression or Acts of Resistance?

Valli Kalei Kanuha  
*University of Hawaii*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the [Social Work Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Kanuha, Valli Kalei (1999) "The Social Process of "Passing" to Manage Stigma: Acts of Internalized Oppression or Acts of Resistance?," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 4 , Article 3.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol26/iss4/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [maira.bundza@wmich.edu](mailto:maira.bundza@wmich.edu).



# The Social Process of “Passing” to Manage Stigma: Acts of Internalized Oppression or Acts of Resistance?

VALLI KALEI KANUHA

University of Hawaii  
School of Social Work

*In order to manage social stigma, some individuals construct and enact a social interaction strategy known as passing, which is “a performance in which one presents himself as what one is not” (Rohy, 1996). Based on interviews with lesbians and gay men of color, this article suggests that the process of passing is not based upon a rejection of stigmatized identity, but situationally employed to resist social oppression.*

Am I to be cursed forever with becoming someone else on my way to myself?

Audre Lorde, “Change of Season” (1992)

In everyday social encounters, people manage their personal and social identities in a variety of ways. In particular, among those social groups and populations that have some kind of social stigma that is negatively valued in society, there is a social management strategy known as *passing* through which people organize and “perform” their identities with others. The Oxford English Dictionary (Simpson & Webster, 1989) defines passing as: “to be accepted as equivalent to; to be taken for; to be accepted, received, or held in repute as.” Brown (1991) states that passing is “an adaptation to circumstances of oppression” (p. 36) “wherein individual members of various minority/subordinate groups will achieve an identity as a member of the dominant/superordinate group” (p. 33). He continues that “any person with a stigmatizing attribute which is not apparent and who interacts with others

without it being known is, to some extent, engaged in passing" (p. 37).

Whether among those who conceal the aging process by claiming to be younger than they are, or people who cannot read ordering food from pictures on restaurant menus, or battered women saying they bumped into doors to explain bruises, all of these people engage in hiding certain aspects of themselves—older people passing as younger, non-literate persons passing as readers, and battered women passing as clumsy due to the social stigma associated respectively with aging, illiteracy, and intimate violence.

This article will describe how some lesbians and gay men manage the stigma associated with homosexuality by passing as heterosexual in social interactions. Based on a study of stigma and identity among lesbians and gay men of color, it is posited that passing may not necessarily represent a form of "internalized homophobia" as commonly suggested but perhaps a conscious strategy of resistance to societal oppression. Building on this analysis, implications for social work intervention are also offered.

#### DEFINITIONS OF PASSING AND STIGMA

Hitch (1983) states that *passing* is "a process whereby the individual attempts to conceal her origins or else play them down" (p. 124). Rohy (1996) says "passing designates a performance in which one presents oneself as what one is not, a performance commonly imagined along the axis of race, class, gender or sexuality" (p. 219). Garfinkel (1967) suggests that for transsexuals in particular, passing is "the work of achieving and making secure their rights to live the elected sex status while providing for the possibility of detection and ruin carried out within the social structured conditions in which this work occurred" (p. 118). Finally, it is sociologist Erving Goffman's seminal work on stigma from which one of the most succinct descriptions of passing is derived: "the management of undisclosed discrediting information about self" (1963b, p. 42). All of these conceptualizations of passing focus on the fact that not only is an individual endowed or prescribed with some kind of personally *discrediting information about self*, but that this information is *undisclosed to others* who observe and/or interact with that person.

There have been many and diverse literary accounts of passing, most prominent with regard to race. Beginning in the Harlem renaissance to the present, there is a genre of African American literature known as the passing narrative from which many reports of Black Americans passing as White have been described (Baldwin, 1956; Craft, 1861; Fauset, 1995; Ginsberg, 1996; Jacobs, 1861; Johnson, 1927; Larson, 1992; Mullen, 1995; Stowe, 1852). In addition, African Americans have analyzed the diverse personal experiences that many have had passing as White in historical and contemporary American life (Gates, 1996; Parker, 1997; Piper, 1996; Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992; Williams, 1996). Passing has also been discussed with many other populations including: lesbians and gay men passing as heterosexual (Berger, 1990; Brown, 1991; Brownsworth, 1996; Spradlin, 1995; Woods & Harbeck, 1992), transgendered persons passing as their non-biological sex (Devor, 1989; Ferris, 1993; Garfinkel, 1967; Kando, 1972; Money, 1988), those of lower socio-economic classes passing as middle or upper class (Granfield, 1991), and passing among persons with various physical or mental disabilities, e.g., visually-impaired persons passing as fully sighted (Blum, 1991; Goffman, 1961; see also Goffman, 1963b for many examples throughout).

### *Passing and stigma*

The social process of passing can only be understood in the context of *stigma*, a term which has its origins in the Greek tradition to designate "tattoo marks" or other physical blemishes upon the body. Contemporary analogies include the expressions "branded," "spoiled" or "marked" to elaborate various factors that characterize stigma as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting" (Goffman, 1963b, p. 3).

Goffman suggested that society uses collective characteristics about social groups to define how we will relate to individuals who are thought to be members of those groups. This *social identity* as he called it, is comprised of personal as well as structural attributes which are derived in the context of social settings. When an individual is endowed with a failing or shortcoming which has "more or less abiding characteristics, as opposed to moods, feelings or intents" (p. 43), Goffman refers to that attribute as a *stigma*.

Goffman began his initial theorizing about stigma by creating a typology that included *abominations of the body* or physical deformities such as sight and hearing impairments, *blemishes of individual character* that are "domineering or unnatural passions" (homosexuality or criminality) (Goffman, 1963b, p. 4); and *tribal stigma*, affiliations of race, nationality, or religion. Building on Goffman's work, there has been an abundance of empirical and theoretical studies on various aspects of stigma produced primarily by social psychologists over the last 30 years (Ainlay, Becker, & Coleman, 1986; Alonzo & Reynolds, 1995; Crocker & Major, 1989; Crocker, Major, & Steele, in press; Gardner, 1991; Jones et al., 1984; Katz, 1981; Neuberg, Smith, Hoffman, & Russell, 1994; Schur, 1971).

### METHOD

A qualitative study of stigma, identity and passing was conducted with 29 self-identified lesbians and gay men of color in the United States (Kanuha, 1997). Study participants were purposively recruited by snowball sampling methods, and face-to-face, in-depth interviews were conducted in three locales: New York City, Seattle, and Hilo, Hawaii.<sup>1</sup> The majority of the informants were female (n=21), and the age range of the sample was 23–50 years old. While most of the participants were well-educated (some college through doctoral education), the majority of the sample reported growing up in working class or poor families with only four of 29 respondents reporting their families of origin as middle class. The racial/ethnic composition of the study group was almost equally divided among the major non-White racial/ethnic categories of the United States: Asian and Pacific Islander (n=9), Latino/Hispanic (n=9), and African American (n=8).<sup>2</sup>

### CONTINGENCIES FOR PASSING

In this study cohort, it is significant that *none* were either totally "out" as lesbian or gay in all domains of their lives nor were any of them engaged in what Goffman (1963b) called "passing fully" or conducting their lives exclusively as heterosexual. Therefore for the purposes of this analysis, these gay men and lesbians all reported situations in which they intentionally chose to pass as heterosexual.

Every study participant described a decision-making process similar to a cost-benefit analysis in which they conducted an internal and oftentimes split-second, assessment of both the situation *and* those interacting in that situation (including oneself), to determine how to enact their lesbian or gay identities in particular contexts. Informants reported four primary conditions that were relevant in their deliberations about whether or not to pass: 1) fit; 2) risk and safety; 3) relationship with the audience; and 4) motivation and energy.

### *Fit*

In the process of passing, the concept of *fit* is probably the most complex and significant prerequisite to be considered. Fit refers to the degree of conformity to a social stereotype used to characterize ethnic, sexual, class, gender or other social classifications. In this study, fit referred to the degree to which respondents perceived that they conformed to some established social role expectation of heterosexual, gay, or lesbian identity.

However, a significant conceptualization with regard to the concept of fit for lesbians and gay men is that its operationalization in the passing process is not related to social typing of sexuality or homosexuality, but to gender. What is characterized more accurately as *gender fit* is the degree to which respondents fit the social stereotype of what typified "maleness" or masculinity and "femaleness" or femininity," i.e., how men and women walked, talked, dressed, gesticulated, expressed emotions, and generally interacted in the world according to gendered, sex role expectations. This finding was consistent with the view that the stigma associated with homosexuality is more linked to gender roles than to sex or sexual identity, as long theorized by lesbian, feminist, and gay male scholars (Brown, 1995; Coleman, 1987; Greene, 1997; Kanuha, 1990; Pharr, 1988).

All of the gay men recounted attempts at a very young age to appear more masculine and hence more heterosexually male (and less gay). As one Latino man reported:

I tried to pass for so many years . . . I tried to hide it. I remember when I was 13 or 14, I studied the ways I walked or laughed or sat . . . everything, just to see if someone could tell that I was gay.

For all of the male study participants, their early and ongoing attempts to mediate *gender mis-fit* constituted part of the criteria for considering passing as a viable option. Those men who were able to “correct” or modify their gender mis-fit such that they could somehow carry off a heterosexual male gender role performance could therefore consider and employ passing as a stigma management option. In this particular study sample, most of the men thought they *could* pass as heterosexual in certain social encounters and contexts because they were not “limp wristed” or effeminate in appearance or behavior.

However, none of the lesbians recalled the kinds or extent of childhood attempts to mediate their gender mis-fit as reported by gay men, despite the fact that some engaged in what one respondent called “boy things,” along with embodying physical attributes associated with maleness such as having more facial hair or walking in a masculine manner (“swaggering”). This finding emphasizes the disproportionate social stigma associated with men who are more feminine, again related to the implicit gender bias against anything female (Pharr, 1988).

#### *Risk and safety*

Respondents who reported passing as heterosexual in certain social encounters indicated that they were often motivated by issues of *risk and safety*. In these situations, risk might refer to actual physical risk, i.e., they might be beaten up if discovered to be gay. More often, passing was employed in those situations in which there was a perception of material or emotional risk wherein they might be fired from or not get a job, they might lose professional or personal credibility, or they might lose a relationship with someone important to them. Respondents who were high school counselors, teachers or child welfare workers—all working with children—were concerned that they would lose their jobs if they could not or did not choose to pass as heterosexual in the workplace.

With this particular sample of lesbians and gay men of color, most perceived that there were greater risks associated with being gay or lesbian than being non-White. While most respondents did *not* choose to pass as White even if they could have (due to their *race mis-fit* or looking more White than the phenotypes associated

with their particular racial/ethnic group), they perceived the political-social climate of the U.S. as hazardous enough for all 29 of them to pass as heterosexual in certain situations.

#### *Relationship and intimacy issues*

The third contingency for passing was *the degree and kind of intimacy* that existed between respondents and their audiences. This was mentioned by the majority of study participants for whom passing was a viable strategy, e.g., those with a high degree of gender fit. Generally, passing was considered and employed in two kinds of situations—in very high and very low intimacy relationships. In high intimacy relationships, respondents feared losing close relationships with family members, friends or colleagues if it was discovered that they were lesbian or gay. However, in some high intimacy situations where respondents and their interactants were expected to sustain and perhaps further build upon their relationships, eventually the pressure and anxiety of withholding the fact of their gay or lesbian identity became too difficult, and passing ceased to be a satisfactory tactic. As one respondent stated, "I felt like I couldn't be real or that I always had to live wondering, are they going to totally dump me when they find out? And I wasn't willing to do that."

In addition, the decision to come out and therefore to *not* pass was related to the social context in which those intimate relationships were developed and sustained. A number of study participants admitted that they chose to pass with certain people in certain situations out of respect for the values or beliefs of their interactants or not wanting to disrupt the lives of those close to them. As one lesbian stated, "I'd feel bad if I made my parents miserable."

#### *Motivation and energy*

Many study respondents reported that an important condition in deciding to pass as heterosexual or the converse, to disclose being gay was a simple one: having the energy to do so. Similar to the previously mentioned contingencies for passing, *motivation and energy* are factors that influence both the minutiae and more substantive aspects of daily life. For lesbians and gay men of color who must expend an undue amount of energy thinking about and



reacting to racial, class, gender and sexual discrimination, it is an endlessly tiring existence in which they make intentional as well as spontaneous decisions about with whom, how, when and why to disclose or conceal being lesbian or gay. A lot of times it simply depended on what other challenges they had already confronted that day, as noted by one participant, "You might be having a rough day in your personal life, and you don't want to have to deal with some ignorant bigot. So you just let it slide and act as if you're straight."

### TYPES OF PASSING

According to Goffman (1959; 1963a; 1963b) and others (Ginsberg, 1996; Granfield, 1991; Kando, 1972; Piper, 1996; Ponse, 1976; Spradlin, 1995), the decision to employ passing is not only determined by a cost-benefit analysis discussed earlier but a number of other factors including: skill to carry off "the act," whether or not there are accomplices to support or sabotage the performance, and of course the commitment, necessity or even desire to use passing versus other stigma management strategies. Four main types of passing were reported in this study. They were: dissociation; omission; mutual pretense; and, playing with the audience.

#### *Dissociation*

The concept of *dissociation* or camouflaging (Ponse, 1976; Spradlin, 1995) is probably the most common and easiest to employ of the passing strategies. Dissociation occurs when one behaves as if she is not part of the stigmatized group to which she actually belongs, by engaging in performances such as modifying one's manner of dress or physical appearance, avoiding contact with others like yourself, or remaining silent when one's group is being publicly disparaged.

For many respondents, deciding to use a dissociative type of passing was significantly influenced by the nature of their association with their audiences. As in the case of an African gay man who recounted an episode in which he did not confront sexist and homophobic statements made in his presence. He stated, "It was for all kinds of reasons, fear . . . panic, that I just didn't say anything. If this had been an outside party (of non-Africans) it would have been no question, I would have challenged them!"

Obviously the other party goes thought they were with "one of their own," and therefore this respondent's high gender fit coupled with the high intimacy and high emotional risk associated with his relationship to his African peers were salient conditions that influenced his decision to pass.

### *Omission*

*Omission* was the second most common passing strategy reported by study informants. This strategy is wholly dependent upon an interactant initiating an inquiry about the status of the discreditable person. While other passing theorists have described a variant called "dodging" (Spradlin, 1995) whereby the passer changes the subject or averts a social interaction away from her stigmatizing condition, omission is distinguished as an interaction wherein the stigmatized person actually responds directly to an inquiry, but omits some key detail or clarification that would result in disclosure of the stigma. For example, one lesbian reported:

I wear a ring so they assume I'm married. So they'll ask, "What does your husband do?" and usually my pat answer is "I'm not married." Or "Do you have kids? You seem like you would be really good with kids." And I say, "No, I don't have any children, but I hope to someday."

A relatively low level of intimacy with the respondent coupled with minimal awareness of gay life are necessary contingencies with this type of passing because it was those interactants who have little information about either the respondent's personal life or gay/lesbian culture in general who were likely to make inquiries.

### *Mutual pretense*

The dual workings of *accomplices* and *mutual pretense* are integral to this particular passing strategy (Goffman, 1963b; Ponse, 1976; Spradlin, 1995). Accomplices who are aware of a stigmatized person's discreditable attributes are oftentimes integral to maintaining the passer's façade; however, they also constitute the passer's biggest liability. Mutual pretense is referred to by Ponse as "counterfeit secrecy . . . whereby both parties to an interaction

know a secret but maintain the fiction that they do not know it" (1976, p. 323). This particular reference implies that both passers and their interactants behave as if there is nothing discrediting in the stigmatized person nor in their discreditable actions. As an African American participant reported:

When you work with people professionally, at some point you start to talk about what you did over the weekend and those sorts of things. When people at work *don't* ask, when they have the opportunity to, I start assuming that *they're* assuming I'm a lesbian but that they're scared to ask.

A prominent public policy example of this passing strategy is the "Don't ask, don't tell" policy currently employed by the United States government vis a vis gay men and lesbians in the armed services. As long as stigmatized persons do not publicly acknowledge their true "marked" status, they are able to maintain a degree of discretionary control in their social lives.

#### *Playing with the audience*

In Goffman's analysis of stigma, he referred to a particular social interaction strategy called "minstrelization," a term he credited to Anatole Broyard, African American literary critic who himself passed as White (Gates, 1996). Minstrelization referred to situations "whereby the stigmatized person ingratiatingly acts out before normals the full dance of bad qualities imputed to his kind, thereby consolidating a life situation into a clownish role" (Goffman, 1963b, p. 110). It seems from both Goffman's and Broyard's accounts that minstrelization implies that the stigmatized individual has to some extent inculcated the negative qualities attributed to him or his social reference group.

In this study, respondents also reported acting out negative characteristics attributed to their sexual and/or racial identities. However, in this variant of passing I call *playing with the audience*, gay men and lesbians did not actually internalize those contrary social characteristics, but instead feigned those false and stereotypical images as a turn on the audience. One gay man reported that he is able to pass as heterosexual primarily due to his high gender fit and occasionally engages in mutually agreed-upon public performances with his female "accomplices" (who are

"knowing" friends) to appear as if they are a heterosexual couple. He states, "We love having a ball with their (the audience's) ignorance. If they think we're straight, let them! It's like using their stereotypes on them!" Instead of passing as heterosexual to protect oneself from the negative social consequences of being gay, participants use an exaggerated heterosexual role performance to ridicule those very expectations in society-at-large.

### CONSEQUENCES AND EFFECTS OF PASSING

Probably more than any of the other elements in the passing process, the consequences of managing stigma are of most interest to social workers. Anecdotal literature and other sources suggest that passing is implicitly a necessary but deleterious adaptation to social stigmatization (Brown, 1991; Daniel, 1992; Ginsberg, 1996; Ponce, 1976; Spradlin, 1995). However, since the personal consequences particularly upon the passer have not been empirically examined in the social science literature, we have heretofore only speculated about what Goffman (1963b) calls "folk conceptions" that presume adverse effects of passing.

Most respondents in this study reported some kind of *affective reaction* when withholding information from others, including "a pressure inside" or "a sense of pain." Many reported feelings of *guilt and shame* "that I couldn't be honest." A related and oft stated reaction to passing was *anger*. Most respondents reported feeling both *guilt and anger* at the social construction of stigma, and the ways their lives as lesbians and gay men of color were subsequently structured to accommodate societal homophobia, heterosexism, racism, and other forms of oppression. Another frequently reported outcome of passing was *distancing* from and within intimate relationships, i.e., by passing and therefore withholding an important aspect of oneself in social and intimate relationships, participants felt detached from other people. Many gay men and lesbians described passing as *lying* and subsequently feeling bad about being deceitful.

The most significant finding, however, was that most of the lesbians and gay men in this particular study did not report any notable negative outcomes as a result of choosing to pass in specific social contexts and situations. In fact, most described the

concealment-disclosure tension and their subsequent decision to pass in quite pragmatic terms. One Chicana lesbian reported, "I feel bad sometimes about passing, but I think it's always a coming out process for me. It's just the way things are." Or as stated by an African American man, "If I have to pass in a professional setting, I think to myself this is just what I have to do right now."

In reflecting upon how he felt about passing as heterosexual in certain social contexts, one gay man summarized it best that passing "is just a burden I have to bear" in order to mediate the stigma of homophobia and heterosexism in many aspects of American social life.

### PASSING AS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE

Webster (1992; 1996) defines *assimilate* as "to take in or incorporate as one's own; absorb" or "to bring into conformity with the customs, attitudes, etc. of a dominant cultural group or national culture." Many consider passing to be a form of assimilation; that is, it is a specific strategy of blending into or absorbing dominant and normative racial, sexual, gender and other social roles, such that the passer not only benefits from but begins to accept their socially integrated lifestyle. Brownsworth (1996, p. 103) suggests about passing that "society may reward the lie, may even demand it, but the passing person is punished for passing—either by being caught in the lie or by believing it." By such conceptions, passing is not understood as an emancipatory strategy but a form of "internalized oppression" or self-hatred (Beard & Glickhauf, 1994; Harbeck, 1992; Piper, 1996; Troiden, 1988). Only those who disdain themselves and others of their own kind would deliberately choose a social performance or for some, a fully-integrated lifestyle in which one would pass as something they were not. "Coming out" is the antithesis of passing because it represents a liberatory strategy of claiming versus hiding one's stigmatized identity. Coming out is therefore considered an important device for social change because when it becomes common knowledge that "we are everywhere," by sheer numbers we cannot be oppressed as lesbians and gay men. Similarly, identifying with one's desig-

nated and ascribed racial category is an emancipatory act, passing as White is not.

*Resistance*, on the other hand, is defined as "the opposition offered by one thing, force, etc. to another" or "the act or power of opposing or withstanding" (Webster, 1992; 1996). I suggest that if passing is constructed and subsequently employed to mitigate the effects of social discrimination due primarily if not solely to stigma, we instead consider that *passing is not an act of assimilation, but an act of resistance to social oppression*. Every respondent in this study reported that they purposefully decided to pass in particular social situations because of their perception that negative consequences would result if it was discovered that they were lesbian or gay. That is, the maintenance of a false performance was for the purpose of "opposing" those forces that would threaten or harm them in specific social encounters, and not for the purpose of "taking in or absorbing" a false personae. In each of the following accounts, three different interviewees describe the decision to pass as primarily concerned about the loss of safety or comfort due not to internal factors, but to a consciousness of two external influences: predominant social norms that mandate heterosexuality, and subsequent negative social consequences of being gay:

I have to weigh the situation (to pass or not) completely. About my sexuality, it always comes down to the fact that I'm going to get a reaction. It will form a division or something between us . . . it will be a negative thing.

I would never choose to tell the men that I work with. I think that they'll hold it over my head or use it against me somehow or somehow put me down.

I can be having a conversation with heterosexuals and all of a sudden it dawns on me how privileged they are. I think that recognition of their privilege has been a big piece of my life, and knowing that it's not going to be safe to come out because of homophobia.

For one Latino gay man who is also an immigrant, his analysis of what *not* passing might mean for him is conspicuously linked to his homosexuality vis a vis the socio-political world:

I try to hide it from people in political power. Especially at airports whenever I come into this country . . . with immigration officials, I try to be really careful.

And yet this same respondent was also one of the most vehement about the importance of being out as both gay and being a person of color:

People [who are gay or lesbian] should have the responsibility to break the stigma of gay and lesbian people, and to correct it. I want to say don't pass, and teach people when you're not passing that you're proud of your culture.

As a Japanese-American lesbian reported about being in the U.S. Air Force:

When you're in the military you gotta kinda . . . act straight. And the only people that know are close friends or, of course, the one you're with.

And as an African American man recounted about passing in his childhood on three dimensions—as heterosexual, White, and middle class:

I look back on this one example in elementary school and I was always placed in the lower courses with other African Americans. But the minute I started putting on these masks, I was even with them [White students] academically. And that's tough for me to sit here and say that, but I had to be someone else in order to prove that I had the skills to compete academically.

These respondents echo the majority of study participants who indicate an emphasis upon and awareness of passing not as an act of assimilation to dominant norms and identities, but of performance, i.e., to “put on masks” and “act.” In fact, the main findings of this study are the routinely situational nature of passing, and the employment of passing as performance primarily for self-protection from societal prejudice.

In essence, passing is an act of resistance because a passer never really assimilates. As one respondent stated, “I can be proud of being gay and still not be ‘out’ all the time.” Assimilation assumes a rejection of one's Self to take on the values, traditions, privileges, and lifestyle of the normative or dominant

culture. I suggest that passing always constitutes an intentional performance, and that passers know that their "passing" as performance is temporary and illusory: all passers live with the fear that someone will discover who they really are. Assimilationists fear no such thing because they have *embodied* the norm, they are not *performing* as the norm. Assimilationists valorize the norm, passers fear the consequences of not valorizing the norm. Therefore, passing must constitute an act of resistance because passers are always in a conscious and intentional state of transgression against the norm, but primarily and secretively to survive the implicit and overt social transgressions against them if they were to be discovered to be whom they really are.

I believe that the consideration of passing as an act of resistance is a radical—politically and theoretically—departure from contemporary considerations of these enactments of marginalized identity. It situates the act of passing in the context of other well-understood acts of resistance: when battered women conceal the true source of their injuries (Baker, 1996); when African Americans traversed out of slavery by passing as White (Craft, 1861; Johnson, 1927; Stowe, 1852); or when Jews survived the Holocaust (Venaki, Nadler, & Gershoni, 1985). For all of these peoples and others, their survival in part required the use of passing as a mediator of social repression. When some battered women report that all is well while living in a household of violence, and some children were sent to live underground by hiding their Jewish identities during Nazi-occupied Germany, and gay men pass as heterosexual to keep jobs as elementary school teachers or to prevent being beaten by young boys who call them faggots, these can only be acts of resistance against historically ingrained, institutionalized systems of oppression and hatred.

Most importantly, when we label passing and similar acts of survival as resistance, we are putting the responsibility for social stigmatization squarely where it belongs: in the hearts and minds of those who perpetuate stereotypes, discrimination, and malice. Passing is only required to mitigate the effects of stigmatization by others; that is, it is rarely based in any innately devalued characteristic, trait or affiliation in the stigmatized individual. It requires the power of some to "name" others as "Other." These contingencies can only require the stigmatized to live with caution



and vigilance, and therefore to live by dissociating, omitting, and employing any number of strategies to protect deeply personal aspects of themselves. These strategies exist as situationally imposed acts of resistance to institutional oppression, and not necessarily as some acquired form of self-hatred or rejection of personal and cultural identity.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

By considering passing as an act of resistance to social oppression, social workers can employ two of their most important theories and skills in their interventions with people of color, lesbians, people with HIV, and other marginalized populations: empowerment and strengths perspectives (Cox & Parsons, 1994; Gutierrez, DeLois, & GlenMaye, 1995; Lee, 1994; Saleeby, 1992). With this analysis, we can better understand why people choose to pass in certain situations and analyze the ways social discrimination establishes and reinforces the need for passing to be enacted. We can thereby assist our clients in appraising how and when passing might be necessary, and how to minimize the costs and maximize the benefits of claiming our authentic selves whenever possible in social life.

If social workers accept the reality that throughout their lifetimes most lesbians, gay men, and perhaps others who are socially stigmatized will conceal aspects of their most significant identities in particular situations, we might work with clients to understand and perhaps reduce some of the shame, guilt, and anger that accompanies the oftentimes necessary choice to pass in certain social encounters. Focusing on those social conditions that require us to compromise our identities and selves rather than situating blame primarily in oneself is consistent with social work's emphasis on the person-in-environment. In addition, as clients and client groups are better able to understand the social structures that impose the necessity for passing upon certain populations we can begin mobilizing them to work at meso and macro levels to focus our change efforts on those social institutions in which stigma truly resides.

Finally, if passing is part of the life course for gay men, lesbians, and other stigmatized populations, social work educators

might consider including such analyses and frameworks about the relationship between identity and stigma, the management of stigmatized identity, and interventions with stigmatized groups in foundation and practice courses such as human behavior in the social environment. While the HBSE literature includes frameworks of human development over the life span, our specific focus on "minority" groups might incorporate an understanding of passing and other stigma management strategies to complement current social work theories and practice.

## CONCLUSION

There are always situations in which human beings will perceive themselves or be perceived as embodying certain traits, characteristics, or physical features that are socially endowed as peculiar, inferior, or tainted. The foregoing framework and analysis of passing as a specific strategy to manage the social stigma associated with gay and lesbian life demonstrates that people are inherently resourceful, creative, and resilient in the face of adversity that is cross-cultural and centuries old. An understanding of the contingencies and specific ways passing is structured and functions is an important foundation for social work practice with marginalized peoples who will probably employ passing in some if not many occasions over the life course.

## NOTES

1. Interviews were also conducted with one respondent who was attending a conference in Chicago (who grew up in Texas and currently resided in Hawaii), and one respondent who resided in Minneapolis.
2. One respondent identified herself as Iranian, which in the context of U.S. and West Asian relations is a socially stigmatized ethnic group in American life (Suleiman, 1988), and one gay man from Hawaii referred to himself as Portuguese, which is considered a minority ethnic group in the specific context and history of Hawaii (Carvalho, 1980). Finally, one respondent is of African descent but has lived in the United States for over 15 years.

## REFERENCES

- Ainlay, S. C., Becker, G., & Coleman, L. M. (Eds.). (1986). *The dilemma of difference: A multidisciplinary view of stigma*. New York: Plenum Press.

- Alonzo, A. A., & Reynolds, N. R. (1995). Stigma, HIV and AIDS: An exploration and elaboration of a stigma trajectory. *Social Science and Medicine*, 41(3), 303–315.
- Baker, P. L. (1996). Doin' what it takes to survive: Battered women and the consequences of compliance to a cultural script. *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, 20, 73–90.
- Baldwin, J. (1956). *Giovanni's room*. New York: Dell.
- Beard, J., & Glickhauf, H. C. (1994). Gay identity and sense of self: Rethinking male homosexuality. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Psychotherapy*, 2(2), 21–37.
- Berger, R. M. (1990). Passing: The impact on the quality of same-sex couple relationships. *Social Work*, 35(4), 328–332.
- Blum, N. S. (1991). The management of stigma by Alzheimer family caregivers. Special issue: Stigma and social interactions. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 20(3), 263–284.
- Brown, L. S. (1995). Lesbian identities: Concepts and issues. In A. R. D'Augelli & C. J. Patterson (Eds.), *Lesbian, gay and bisexual identities over the lifespan* (pp. 3–23). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, P. (1991). Passing: Differences in our public and private self. *Journal of Multicultural Social Work*, 1, 33–50.
- Brownsworth, V. A. (1996). *Too queer: Essays from a radical life*. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books.
- Carvalho, E. W. (1980). The Portuguese. In J. F. McDermott, W. S. Tseng, & T. Matetzki (Eds.), *People and cultures of Hawaii* (pp. 100–110). Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Coleman, E. (Ed.). (1987). *Integrated identity for gay men and lesbians*. New York: Harrington Park.
- Cox, E. O., & Parsons, R. J. (1994). *Empowerment-oriented social work practice with the elderly*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Craft, W. (1861). *Running a thousand miles for freedom; or, The escape of William and Ellen Craft from slavery*. (1969 ed.). Miami: Mnemosyne.
- Crocker, J., & Major, B. (1989). Social stigma and self-esteem: The self-protective properties of stigma. *Psychological Review*, 96(4), 608–630.
- Crocker, J., Major, B., & Steele, C. (in press). Social stigma. In D. Gilbert, S. T. Fiske, & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *Handbook of social psychology* (4th ed.). Boston: McGraw Hill.
- Daniel, G. R. (1992). Passers and pluralists: Subverting the racial divide. In M. P. P. Root (Ed.), *Racially mixed people in America* (pp. 91–107). Newbury Park: Sage Publications.
- Devor, H. (1989). *Gender blending*. Bloomington, ID: University of Indiana Press.
- Fauset, J. (1995). Emmy. In B. Mullens (Ed.), *Revolutionary tales: African American women's short stories from the first story to the present* (pp. 73–111). New York: Laurel Books.
- Ferris, L. (Ed.). (1993). *Crossing the stage: Controversies on cross dressing*. London: Routledge.
- Gardner, C. B. (1991). Stigma and the public self: Notes on communication, self and others. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 20(3), 251–262.

- Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- Gates, H. L. (1996, June 17, 1996). White like me. *The New Yorker*, 66–81.
- Ginsberg, E. K. (Ed.). (1996). *Passing and the fictions of identity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Anchor-Doubleday.
- Goffman, E. (1961). *Asylums*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Goffman, E. (1963a). *Behavior in public places: Notes on the social organization of gatherings*. New York: The Free Press.
- Goffman, E. (1963b). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Granfield, R. (1991). Making it by faking it: Working class students in an elite academic environment. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 20(3), 251–262.
- Greene, B. (1997). *Ethnic and cultural diversity among lesbians and gay men*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Gutierrez, L. M., DeLois, K. A., & GlenMaye, L. (1995). Understanding empowerment practice: Building on practitioner-based knowledge. *Families in Society*, 76(9), 534–42.
- Harbeck, K. M. (Ed.). (1992). *Coming out of the classroom closet: Gay and lesbian students, teachers and curricula*. Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press.
- Hitch, P. (1983). Social identity and the half-Asian child. In G. M. Breakwell (Ed.), *Threatened identities* (pp. 107–127). New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Jacobs, H. (1861). *Incidents in the life of a slave girl*. (1987 ed.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Johnson, J. W. (1927). *The autobiography of an ex-coloured man*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Jones, E. A., Farina, A., Hastorf, A. H., Markus, H., Miller, D. T., & Scott, R. A. (1984). *Social stigma: The psychology of marked relationships*. New York: W. H. Freeman and Co.
- Kando, T. (1972). Passing and stigma management: The case of the transsexual. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 13(Fall 1972), 475–483.
- Kanuha, V. (1990). Compounding the triple jeopardy: Battering in lesbian of color relationships. *Women and Therapy*, 9(1–2), 169–183.
- Kanuha, V. (1997). *Stigma, identity and passing: How lesbians and gay men of color construct and manage stigmatized identity in social interaction*. Unpublished Dissertation, University of Washington, Seattle.
- Katz, I. (1981). *Stigma: A social psychological analysis*. Hillsdale, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates.
- Larson, C. R. (Ed.). (1992). *An intimation of things distant: The collected fiction of Nella Larsen*. New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday.
- Lee, J. A. B. (1994). *The empowerment approach to social work practice*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lorde, A. (1992). *Undersong: Chosen poems, old and new*. (Rev. ed.). New York: W. W. Norton & Co.

- Money, J. (1988). *Gay, straight and in-between: The sexology of erotic orientation*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mullen, B. (Ed.). (1995). *Revolutionary tales: African American women's short stories from the first story to the present*. New York: Laurel Books.
- Neuberg, S. L., Smith, D. L., Hoffman, J. C., & Russell, F. J. (1994). When we observe stigmatized and "normal" individuals interacting: Stigma by association. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 20(2), 196–209.
- Parker, L. (1997, April). Reflections of an invisible sister. *Essence*, 62.
- Pharr, S. (1988). *Homophobia: A weapon of sexism*. Inverness, CA: Chardon Press.
- Piper, A. (1996). Passing for White, passing for Black. In E. K. Ginsberg (Ed.), *Passing and the fictions of identity* (pp. 234–269). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ponse, B. (1976). Secrecy in the lesbian world. *Urban Life*, 5(3), 313–338.
- Rohy, V. (1996). Displacing desire: Passing, nostalgia and Giovanni's Room. In E. K. Ginsberg (Ed.), *Passing and the fictions of identity* (pp. 218–233). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Russell, K., Wilson, M., & Hall, R. (1992). *The color complex: The politics of skin color among African Americans*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Saleeby, D. (Ed.). (1992). *The strengths perspective in social work practice: Power to the people*. White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Schur, E. M. (1971). *Labeling deviant behavior: Its sociological implications*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Simpson, J. A., & Webster, E. S. C. (1989). *Oxford English Dictionary*. (2nd ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Spradlin, A. L. (1995). *The price of "passing": A lesbian perspective on authenticity in organizations*. Paper presented at the The Speech Communication Association, 1995 Annual Convention, San Antonio, TX.
- Stowe, H. B. (1852). *Uncle Tom's cabin; or, Life among the lowly*. In A. Douglas (Ed.) (1968 ed., ). Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Suleiman, M. (1988). *The Arabs in the mind of America*. New York: Amana Books.
- Troiden, R. (1988). *Gay and lesbian identity: A sociological analysis*. New York: General Hall.
- Venaki, S. K., Nadler, A., & Gershoni, H. (1985). Sharing the Holocaust experience: Communication behaviors and their consequences in families of ex-partisans and ex-prisoners of concentration camps. *Family Process*, 24(2), 273–80.
- Webster's college dictionary*. (1992). New York: Random House.
- Webster's encyclopedic unabridged dictionary of the English language*. (1996) (New rev. ed.). New York: Random House Value Publishing.
- Williams, G. H. (1996). *Life on the color line*. New York: Plume Books.
- Woods, S. E., & Harbeck, K. M. (1992). Living in two worlds: The identity management strategies used by lesbian physical educators. In K. M. Harbeck (Ed.), *Coming out of the classroom closet: Gay and lesbian students, teachers and curricula* (pp. 141–166). Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press.