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When Leaders Are Not Who They Appear: The Effects Of Leader Disclosure Of A Concealable Stigma On Follower Reactions

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Abstract

Two studies examined follower reactions to disclosure of concealable stigma (i.e., transgender identity) by a leader. Using 109 employed participants, Study 1 showed followers rated leaders disclosing a stigma less likable and effective. This effect was both direct and indirect through relational identification with the leader. Using 206 employed participants, Study 2 found when a leader's stigma was involuntarily found out and disclosed later they received lower ratings of likability and effectiveness compared to leaders who voluntarily came out and disclosed earlier. Method (found out vs. came out) and timing of disclosure (later vs. earlier) had direct

relationships with ratings of likability and effectiveness and method of disclosure had an indirect relationship with the outcomes via relational identification.

1 INTRODUCTION

Over the past 50 years, increased globalization, shifting demographic characteristics, and changing societal attitudes have all served to increase the number and visibility of people with diverse social identities in the workplace. Many workers with diverse social identities have carried with them the burden of social stigma. Stigma is described as a visible mark or badge that symbolizes that one possesses a characteristic that is devalued by society and should be relegated to low status and power (Goffman, [1963](#); Major & O'Brien, [2005](#); Paetzold, Dipboye, & Elsbach, [2008](#)). Examples of visible stigmatizing characteristics include race (Avery, McKay, & Volpone, [2016](#)) and obesity (King, Shapiro, Hebl, Singletary, & Turner, [2006](#)). While stigma has been studied rather extensively (see reviews by Major & O'Brien, [2005](#) and Pescosolido & Martin, [2015](#)), it is only recently that research has begun to examine stigma within the workplace. Stigmata evoke negative reactions (e.g., harassment, discrimination, and even violence) by nonstigma holders and lead to harmful outcomes for stigma holders such as lower health and well-being (Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, & Garcia, [2014](#)). The impact that stigmata can have for both nonstigma and stigma holders can have negative consequences for organizations such as lower cohesion, effectiveness (Kulik, Bainbridge, & Cregan, [2008](#)), and even decreased customer patronage (Avery, McKay, & Volpone, [2016](#)).

Within the literature on stigma in the workplace, a small but growing body of research has begun to recognize and examine stigmata that are concealable¹ (Jones & King, [2014](#)). Concealable stigmata are those that are “invisible” in the sense that they are not always readily apparent (Goffman, [1963](#)). There are a number of concealable stigmata (e.g., hidden disabilities, Santuzzi, Waltz, Finkelstein, & Rupp, [2014](#); multiracial backgrounds, Bell, Marquardt, & Berry, [2014](#)) and one that has garnered recent attention is sexual minority identity (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender [LGBT]). Research in the area of LGBT employees has focused on understanding the process of identity management and disclosure of LGBT identities to others, as well as the antecedents and outcomes of those disclosure decisions. Conceptual and empirical works have shown that the management of concealable stigma can have deleterious effects on the health, well-being, employment, and career progression of the stigma holder (Clair, Beatty, & MacLean, [2005](#); Croteau, Anderson, & VanderWal, [2008](#); Pachankis, [2007](#); Quinn & Chaudoir, [2009](#); Ragins, [2004, 2008](#)).

While this research has advanced our understanding of concealable stigma considerably it has focused on the disclosure process from the perspective of the stigma holder. With few exceptions (cf., King, Reilly, & Hebl, [2008](#); Oswald, [2007](#)), it has yet to examine stigmatized identity disclosure as it is experienced by nonstigma holders. A better understanding of reactions to stigmatized identity disclosure is important for several reasons. First, reactions by nonstigma holders play a key role in both the decision to disclose (Ragins, [2008](#)) and the consequences of that disclosure for the stigma holder (Griffith & Hebl, [2002](#); Quinn & Chaudoir, [2009](#)). The disclosure of one's stigmatized identity has the potential to have favorable effects for the individual (e.g., better well-being; Ragins, [2004](#)) as well as the organization in terms of more favorable work-related attitudes and job performance, and in terms of meeting goals for corporate social responsibility and diversity (King & Cortina, [2010](#)). Understanding how and why nonstigma holders react to stigmatized identity disclosure can help individuals and organizations minimize the negative effects and better achieve the positive effects of stigma disclosure. Second, while there has been research on reactions to stigma disclosure in nonwork settings (e.g., Norton & Herek, [2013](#)) it has rarely been examined in organizational settings. It is likely that reactions differ depending on the specific setting (i.e., work or nonwork) in which the disclosure occurs (Buck & Plant, [2011](#); Ragins, [2008](#)). It is also likely that even within the same setting reactions likely differ across relational situations. For example, the disclosure of one's LGBT identity by one coworker to another coworker is

likely to elicit different reactions than the disclosure of that same identity by a supervisor to a subordinate. One reason for this is that the stigma associated with LGBT identities may be incompatible with the normative expectations of the stigma holder's other roles and identities (Hoyt & Chemers, [2008](#); Liberman & Golom, [2015](#)). Given the importance of understanding this process for stigma holders, nonstigma holders, and organizations there have been calls in the literature for more research in this area (Fassinger, Shullman, & Stevenson, [2010](#); Kulik et al., [2008](#); Sawyer, Thoroughgood, & Webster, [2016](#)).

The purpose of the research presented here is to begin to examine this important but missing element in the literature. Specifically, we present the results of two experimental studies that examine follower reactions to leaders who disclose a concealable stigma. As an exemplar of a concealable stigma, we chose transgender identity. Compared to the stigma associated with other sexual minority identities (gay, lesbian, bisexual), which has lessened somewhat over the past decade (Herek & McLemore, [2013](#)), those with transgender identities still face tremendous stigma (Norton & Herek, [2013](#)). Yet, they have garnered much less research attention (Law, Martinez, Ruggs, Hebl, & Akers, [2011](#)). The choice of transgender identity is also a timely one given the media attention directed at a number of public transgender identity disclosures, for example, the transgender identity disclosure by Caitlyn Jenner (a formerly male Olympic medal winning athlete), and the ongoing social and political debates surrounding the legal rights of those who are transgender. Thus, we contribute to the literature by addressing an increasingly visible and controversial stigmatized minority that is rarely studied. Also, while some research has found those with concealable stigma may face discrimination for entry level jobs (Pichler, Varma, & Bruce, [2010](#)), we are aware of no other empirical study that has examined follower reactions to leader disclosure of a stigma such as transgender identity.

In both studies, we leverage two theoretical frameworks. Based on Leader Categorization Theory (Lord, Foti, & De Vader, [1984](#)), which posits that workers have modal conceptions about the attributes of a “good” leader (i.e., leader prototypes, Junker & van Dick, [2014](#); Schyns & Meindl, [2005](#)), and the notion that stigmatized transgender identities diverge from these prototypes, Study 1 examines the relationship between leader disclosure of a transgender identity and followers' reactions in terms of that leader's likability and effectiveness. Based on Identity Theory (Ashforth & Mael, [1989](#)) applied to leadership (Van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, [2013](#)), which posits that followers' identification with their leader is a key component of the leadership influence process we examine relational identification (Sluss & Ashforth, [2007](#)) with the leader as a potential mediating mechanism linking leader stigma disclosure to subordinate reactions. In Study 2, we move beyond examining disclosure to test whether the manner in which the stigma is disclosed impacts those reactions. That is, we examine the effect of how the disclosure occurs in terms of it being voluntary or involuntary and when the disclosure occurs in terms of it being early in the leader/subordinate relationship or late in the relationship on followers' reactions. We again examine followers' relational identification with the leader as a potential mediating mechanism linking how the disclosure occurred and the timing of disclosure to followers' reactions. In this way, we contribute to Leader Categorization Theory by examining a novel leader characteristic and to Identity Theory by testing relational identification as a mediating mechanism.

2 STUDY 1: BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

A long line of research has examined leadership and although perspectives on it have evolved over the years (see reviews by Barling, [2014](#); Dinh et al., [2014](#); Yukl, [2010](#)) a defining feature of leadership is that it is a social influence process whereby leaders influence followers toward the attainment of a goal. Two current and complementary theoretical perspectives on understanding the leadership process focus on the social cognition and identity-related underpinnings of leader influence (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, [2009](#); Dinh et al., [2014](#)). The social cognition perspective is derived from Leader Categorization Theory (Lord et al., [1984](#)). It suggests that people develop implicit theories of leadership that include prototypes, or cognitive representations, of what

constitutes “good” leadership. People then use these prototypes as a standard by which to judge those in leadership roles (Lord & Maher, [1993](#); Shondrick & Lord, [2010](#)). Research on implicit leadership theory has found that there are a number of attributes people commonly view as prototypical of good leaders and “anti-prototypical” or attributes of bad leaders (Offermann, Kennedy, & Wirtz, [1994](#)). Prototypical attributes of leaders include: sensitive, intelligent, dedicated, trustworthy, charismatic, strong, and attractive. Anti-prototypical attributes include being tyrannical and overly masculine. These attributes have been shown to generalize across organizational settings and to be stable over time (Epitropaki & Martin, [2004](#)). Research relating leader prototypicality to outcomes shows that when employees perceive their actual leader to be a closer match to their prototypical leader, they report more respect for their leader (Van Quaquebeke, Van Knippenberg, & Brodbeck, [2011](#)), better quality relationships with their leader, higher job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and well-being (Epitropaki & Martin, [2005](#)).

Importantly, research has also suggested (Eagly & Chin, [2010](#); Eagly & Karau, [2002](#); Hoyt & Chemers, [2008](#)) and provided empirical evidence (Hoyt & Simon, [2016](#); Johnson, Murphy, Zewdie, & Reichard, [2008](#); Rosette, Leonardelli, & Phillips, [2008](#)) that a mismatch between the prototypical attributes of a leader and the characteristics associated with stigma underlies negative evaluations followers make about the leadership of those with visible stigma (i.e., women and racial minorities). We extend this line of reasoning to the evaluation of leaders who disclose their stigmatized transgender identity to their followers.

As noted earlier, people with transgender identities face considerable stigma. For example, using a national probability sample, Norton and Herek ([2013](#)) found that heterosexuals viewed transgender people negatively and even more negatively than other sexual minorities. Elements of these negative attitudes include Hill and Willoughby's ([2005](#)) assertion that heterosexual individuals respond to transsexual people with feelings of fear and revulsion, which are reflected in their measure of transphobia with items that refer to transgendered individuals as perverted, disgusting, morally wrong, and making others feel uncomfortable. More specifically, Gazzola and Morrison ([2014](#)) found heterosexual stereotypes of transgender people included believing they were abnormal, mentally ill, and outcasts. Moreover, Schilt and Westbrook ([2009](#)) showed that transgender people are viewed as deceitful and deceptive. These negative perceptions of transgender people would seem to be incompatible with the leader prototype held by followers. Some indirect empirical evidence for this assertion comes from Liberman and Golom ([2015](#)) who found that other stigmatized sexual minorities who are thought to have some of these same characteristics (gay men and lesbian women) were considered to be less prototypical of the “successful manager” than heterosexual men and women. As a result, we would expect that leaders disclosing a transgender identity would be evaluated less favorably than leaders who do not disclose a transgender identity. We formally hypothesized:

Hypothesis 1a,b. Leaders disclosing a transgender identity will be rated as (a) less likable and (b) less effective than leaders who do not disclose a transgender identity.

By suggesting that the match between a person's individual characteristics and leader prototypes shape follower perceptions of good (and bad) leadership, the social cognition perspective helps explain why some leaders will be evaluated more (or less) favorably than others. However, it does not explain the process linking leadership prototype match to those evaluations. To help explain this process some researchers (e.g., Van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, [2013](#)) have begun integrating the concept of leader prototype match from Leader Categorization Theory (Lord et al., [1984](#)) with identity-related perspectives on leadership (DeRue & Ashford, [2010](#); Hogg, [2001](#); Sluss & Ashforth, [2007](#)). The identity-related perspective is derived from the theories of social (Tajfel & Turner, [1986](#)) and organizational identification (Ashforth & Mael, [1989](#)). This perspective argues that one's identity, or conception of who one is as a person, is not just based on one's unique characteristics as an individual (the personal self), but by the groups one belongs to (the collective or social identity) and the role-relationships (the relational identity) one has with others (Brewer & Gardner, [1996](#)). From this view leaders influence followers

more effectively when they are able to mobilize followers' social and relational identities toward goal accomplishment (Kark & Shamir, 2002). When social and relational identities are mobilized workers will be intrinsically motivated to act for the mutual benefit of themselves and the group and/or leader (Van Knippenberg, Van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004).

Given our interest in the potential mismatch between transgender identity and leader prototypes, of particular relevance to the present study is the concept of relational identification. Relational identification addresses that part of the self that is defined in terms of interpersonal role-relationships, for example, between a leader and a follower and their individual characteristics, as opposed to identification with a larger impersonal collective and its group characteristics (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Within relational identity, a distinction can be made between positive and negative role- and person-based identities. That is, in a given relationship people may consider the role-based identity (i.e., leader) and person-based identity (e.g., transgender) separately as either positive or negative. Because of our interest in stigma, a characteristic of a personal identity rather than the leader role-based identity, our focus is on the person-based aspect of relational identification. However, we recognize that there may be a condition where role identification is positive or negative, and that this could impact the relationship of negative person-based identification on the evaluations of leaders.

Integrating the relational identity perspective with the social cognitive perspective, Van Quaquebeke and Eckloff (2013) argued that a leader who is perceived to be more prototypical of followers' ideal leader are more attractive "as an object of identification" (p. 72). They suggest that this identification then, in turn, leads to more favorable evaluations of the leader. This is because in establishing person-based relational identification with the leader, followers come to see themselves as having similar values, beliefs, and goals. By extension, positive evaluations of the leader validate these similar values, beliefs, and goals and reflect positively on the follower. In this way, favorable evaluations of the leader are esteem enhancing for the follower (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Van Quaquebeke and Eckloff (2013) provide empirical support showing that relational identification with the leader mediated the relationship between leader prototype match and leader evaluations. A logical corollary of these findings is that any negatively valenced person-based characteristic a leader may have that would detract from followers' perceptions that the leader matches leader prototypes or that would inhibit followers' relational identification with the leader would produce unfavorable evaluations of that leader. In this case, a form of what Sluss and Ashforth (2007) describe as, "relational disidentification" occurs and it can produce negatively biased evaluations of the leader. We contend that the stigma associated with transgender identity reflected in the perception that transgender people are perverted, disgusting, morally wrong (Hill & Willoughby, 2005), and abnormal, mentally ill, and outcasts (Gazzola & Morrison, 2014) are all such negatively valenced characteristic that would lead to relational disidentification. We recognize that relational identification is only one possible mechanism linking leader characteristics to follower ratings and that other mechanisms such as leader-member exchange (LMX) (Epitropaki, Sy, Martin, Tram-Quon, & Topakas, 2013) may operate in a similar fashion. As a result, we state partial mediation for the hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2a,b. The relationship between leader disclosure of a transgender identity and ratings of leader (a) likability and (b) effectiveness will be partially mediated by relational identification with the leader.

2.1 Method

2.1.1 Participants

One hundred nine participants were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk community (MTurk; <http://www.mturk.com>), which is an online marketplace that allows researchers to find participants who will complete tasks for a small fee (see Aguinis & Edwards, 2014; Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011).

Participants were paid \$3.50 to complete the procedure for the present study, which is a relatively generous amount (Buhrmester et al.). Inclusion criteria for participation were participants had to be: (a) 18 years old or older, (b) a citizen of the United States who was living and working in the United States, and (c) working for an employer other than MTurk for at least 20 hr per week. Among the participants, there were 48 women and 61 men, and ages ranged from 19 to 72 ($M = 32.26$, $SD = 9.11$). The majority were White (75%) and reported working an average of 37 hr ($SD = 9.3$) per week. Participants were employed in a variety of industries including healthcare (14%), business and professional services (13%), information services (12%), and financial services (10%). Forty-eight percent reported completion of a Bachelor's degree or higher, 13% completed an Associate's degree, and 26% completed some college.

2.1.2 Procedure

Participants were asked to read a short vignette about a leader and then rate the degree to which they identified with the leader, likeability of the leader, and effectiveness of the leader. The vignette was designed to portray a prototypical leader based on implicit leadership theory (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004). It described a leader who had favorable characteristics including being highly motivated, hard-working, and knowledgeable. Participants were assigned to receive one of two vignettes describing the leader, Pat. In one condition, Pat did not disclose a stigmatized transgender identity ($n = 56$), and in the second condition, Pat disclosed a transgender identity ($n = 53$). The assignment to conditions was based on the time the participants began the study. The first group of participants were assigned the nondisclosure condition and a second group was assigned the disclosure condition. The vignette is included in Appendix A.

2.1.3 Manipulation checks

At the end of the study, participants completed a one-item manipulation check for leader transgender identity disclosure which read, "Which of the following best describes the leader in the scenario you just read?" The response options were as follows "transgender," and "I don't know." Results showed 100% of participants in the stigma disclosure condition accurately reported whether the leader had disclosed a transgender identity.

2.1.4 Measures

Leader relational identification

We adopted Shamir, Zakay, Breinin, and Popper's (1998) seven-item identification with leader measure. Sample items include, "This leader is a model for me to follow," "The leader presents values that are important to me," and "My values are similar to my leader's values." Participants rated the level of agreement for each statement ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale had high internal consistency ($\alpha = .93$).

Leader likeability

Leader likability was measured using Johnson, Murphy, Zewdie, and Reichard's (2008) three-item measure. Participants rated the following items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree): "The leader is liked by his/her employees," "The leader is likeable," and "The leader's employees will like working for him (or her)." Internal consistency for this measure was high ($\alpha = .97$).

Leader effectiveness

To assess leader effectiveness we used five items from Tiedens' (2001) measure as adapted by Madera and Smith (2009). The items include "I would want the supervisor in the story to continue to be the leader," "This supervisor deserves the position of leader," "This supervisor is a competent leader," "This supervisor is a knowledgeable leader," and "This supervisor is a strong leader." Participants rated their level of agreement for each item on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The internal consistency for this measure was acceptable (.95).

Control variables

We controlled for several variables that have been shown to be related to reactions to stigmatized minorities in other studies (Herek & Capitano, 1996; Kite & Whitley, 1996; Norton & Herek, 2013).² For demographic variables, we controlled for age and gender. We also controlled for previous contact with transgender people using three items adapted from Fingerhut (2011) based on past research showing that intergroup contact is related to behaviors toward sexual minorities (e.g., Mereish & Poteat, 2015). Attitudes toward gender identity minorities using nine items from Tebbe, Moradi, and Ege's (2014) transphobia measure and social desirability using Reynolds' (1982) 12-item measure were controlled as both may impact ratings of gender minorities in employment contexts (Pichler et al., 2010).

2.2 Results

Table 1 reports the means, standard deviations, correlations, and internal consistency estimates for all variables. As expected, participants in the leader disclosure condition rated the leader as significantly less likable ($r = -.58, p < .01$) and effective ($r = -.46, p < .01$) than participants in the nondisclosure condition providing initial support for Hypothesis 1. To formally test Hypotheses 1 and 2, we followed the regression-based procedures set forth by Hayes and Colleagues (Hayes & Preacher, 2014; Preacher, 2015; Preacher & Hayes, 2008) using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013). In the first step of the regression, the control variables were entered as a set, and as can be seen in Table 2, they accounted for 9% ($\Delta R^2 = .09, p > .05$) of the variance of leader likability and 15% ($\Delta R^2 = .15, p < .01$) of the variance in leader effectiveness. In the second step, leader disclosure was entered into the regression, and results showed it accounted for an additional 31% of the variance in likeability ($\Delta R^2 = .31, p < .01$) and 29% of the variance in effectiveness ($\Delta R^2 = .29, p < .01$). The effects of disclosure on both leader likability ($B = -1.17, p < .01$) and effectiveness ($B = -0.96, p < .01$) were significant. These findings support Hypothesis 1a,b.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, correlations, and internal consistency estimates for variables in Study 1

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Age	32.26	9.12	–								
2. Gender	0.44	0.50	.07	–							
3. Contact	3.44	0.80	.01	–.04	(.64)						
4. Transphobia	2.08	1.09	–.02	–.12	–.19	(.95)					
5. Social desirability	2.80	0.72	.03	–.07	.07	.08	(.82)				
6. Leader disclosure	0.49	0.50	–.12	–.04	.02	.02	–.03	–			
7. Identification	4.14	0.93	.23*	.14	.13	–.52**	–.11	–.24*	(.93)		
8. Likability	3.95	1.10	.23*	.10	–.03	–.17*	–.07	–.58**	.56**	(.97)	
9. Effectiveness	4.01	1.10	.15	.11	.06	–.35**	–.06	–.46**	.66**	.56**	(.95)

Note. $n = 104$ after listwise deletion of missing data. Leader disclosure coded 1 for “disclosure” and 0 for “no disclosure.” Gender coded 1 for “female” and 0 for “male.” Coefficient alpha reliabilities are reported in the diagonal.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 2. Regression results examining the mediation of leader disclosure on outcomes via identification for Study 1

	<i>B</i>	ΔR^2	R^2		<i>B</i>	ΔR^2	R^2
Model 1							
<i>DV = Likeability</i>				<i>DV = Effectiveness</i>			
<i>Step 1</i>		.09	.09	<i>Step 1</i>		.15**	.15**
Age	0.03 [–]			Age	0.02		
Gender	0.13			Gender	0.12		

Contact	-0.09			Contact	-0.04		
Transphobia	-0.16			Transphobia	-0.35**		
Social desirability	-0.08			Social desirability	-0.06		
Step 2		.31**	.40**	Step 2		.29**	.34**
Age	0.02 ⁺			Age	-0.02		
Gender	0.09			Gender	0.09		
Contact	-0.06			Contact	0.01		
Transphobia	-0.15			Transphobia	-0.34**		
Social desirability	-0.10			Social desirability	-0.08		
Leader disclosure	-1.17**			Leader disclosure	-0.96**		
Step 3		.14**	.54**	Step 3		.20**	.53**
Age	0.01			Age	-0.01		
Gender	0.04			Gender	0.03		
Contact	-0.10			Contact	-0.03		
Transphobia	0.08			Transphobia	-0.05		
Social desirability	-0.05			Social desirability	-0.01		
Leader disclosure	-0.96 ⁺			Leader disclosure	-0.70**		
Identification	0.38**			Identification	0.67**		
Model 2							
<i>DV=Identification</i>							
Step 1		.33**	.33**				
Age	0.03 ⁺						
Gender	0.11						
Contact	0.06						
Transphobia	-0.43**						
Social desirability	-0.07						
Step 2		.04 ⁺	.37**				
Age	0.02 ⁺						
Gender	0.09						
Contact	0.07						
Transphobia	-0.42**						
Social desirability	-0.10						
Leader disclosure	-0.38 ⁺						

Note. $n = 109$. Leader Disclosure coded 1 for “disclosure” and 0 for “no disclosure.” Gender coded 1 for “female” and 0 for “male.”

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

With regard to Hypothesis 2a,b, we argued that relational identification with the leader would partially mediate the relationship between leader disclosure and ratings of leader likability and effectiveness. As shown in Table 2, participants in the leader disclosure condition rated the leader lower on relational identification than participants in the control condition ($B = -.38, p < .05$, see Model 2, Step 2). When leader disclosure and relational identification were both entered into the regression (Model 1, Step 3), the relationship of relational identification to ratings of leader likeability ($B = .38, p < .01$) and effectiveness ($B = .67, p < .01$) were statistically significant. Similarly, the effect of leader disclosure on likability ($B = -.96, p < .01$) and effectiveness ($B = -.70, p < .01$) remained statistically significant. As a formal test of the mediational hypotheses, we used bias-corrected bootstrapping to estimate the indirect effects. To perform this analysis, 1,000 random samples with replacement from the full sample were run (Efron & Tibshirani, 1993). A 95% bias-corrected confidence interval was created around the estimated coefficients. The results showed that the 95% confidence interval around the indirect effects of leader disclosure on likability (indirect effect = $-.21$; CI [$-.41, -.05$]) and effectiveness (indirect

effect = $-.26$; CI [$-.53, -.09$]) via leader relational identification did not include zero. Thus, these results suggest that the relationship between leader disclosure and likeability and effectiveness are partially mediated by leader identification. Thus, Hypothesis 2a,b were supported.

2.3 Discussion

As predicted the results showed that leader disclosure of a transgender identity led to lower ratings of leader liking and effectiveness. This result held even after statistically controlling for age, gender, and individual differences in past contact with and attitudes toward transgender people, as well as the potentially biasing effects of socially desirable responding. This is consistent with the assertion, derived from Leader Categorization Theory (Lord et al., [1984](#)) and models of stigma (Major & O'Brien, [2005](#)), that the stigma associated with having a transgender identity violates the general prototypes people have about someone being a good leader and results in lower evaluations. We also found that relational identification partially mediated the relationship between leader disclosure of transgender identity and reactions to the leader. That is, beyond the direct negative effect of leader disclosure of transgender identity on follower reactions, it also had an indirect negative effect via lowered relational identification with the leader. This supports previous work attempting to integrate identity-related theories of leadership (e.g., Van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, [2013](#)) that suggest relational identification with the leader is one mechanism by which evaluations of a leader may become favorably biased. However, rather than showing how matching leader prototypes may operate through relational identification to favorably bias evaluations of the leader (Van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, [2013](#)), we show that violating leader prototypes by disclosing a stigmatized transgender identity can operate via lower relational identity (i.e., relational disidentification; Sluss & Ashforth, [2007](#)) to unfavorably bias the evaluations of the leader.

3 STUDY 2: BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

Having demonstrated that the disclosure of a stigmatized transgender identity by a leader can negatively bias followers' evaluations of the leader directly and indirectly through lower relational identification, in this second study, we sought to extend those findings to other features of the disclosure process that may also affect followers' reactions. Among the decisions that those with concealable stigmata must make when deciding to disclose an identity (Chrobot-Mason, Button, & DiClementi, [2001](#); Clair et al., [2005](#); Croteau et al., [2008](#)) are decisions about how and when to disclose (King et al., [2008](#)).

With regard to how the disclosure occurs, the nonstigma holder can learn of the stigma holder's identity by the stigma holder voluntarily disclosing it or by finding out through other mechanisms. For example, when deciding how to reveal the stigma people may choose to directly disclose it to others. This direct disclosure method is referred to as coming out. Conversely, it could be the case that the stigma is disclosed involuntarily, for example, when someone learns of the stigma through their own observations or by hearing it from others. We refer to this method of disclosure as being found out. Regarding the timing of the disclosure, those who disclose a concealable stigma may do so in the early stages of their relationship with others, even immediately upon their first meeting them. Or, they may choose to wait a period of time, which could be months or even years. These features of the way in which the disclosure takes place may have important implications for how others react to the disclosure (Herek & Capitanio, [1996](#)). Ragins ([2004](#)) suggested that both being found out and disclosing later can lead nonstigmatized others to feel that they have been deceived and betrayed by the person with the stigma. This idea of feeling deceived and even betrayed is especially important for reactions to leaders with a stigmatized identity because deception and betrayal violate leader prototypes. Further, evidence suggests that in general, people react more negatively when they perceive they have been betrayed by leaders than by nonleaders (Karelai & Keck, [2013](#)).

One important attribute of a prototypical leader is integrity. That is, to be considered a good leader followers must perceive the leader to be honest, sincere, and trustworthy. Studies have shown that integrity is a common

prototypical leader attribute endorsed by followers even across cultures (Brodbeck et al., [2000](#); Den Hartog, House, Hanges, Ruiz-Quintanilla, & Dorfman, [1999](#)). Like violations of other prototypical leader attributes, leader actions that appear to violate the integrity attribute of the leader prototype are likely to result in lower evaluations of that leader (Burke, Sims, Lazzara, & Salas, [2007](#)). Actions by a stigmatized leader such as being deceptive by not disclosing a stigma directly but having been found out, or being thought to have lied about one's stigma by not disclosing it until the later stages of a relationship would violate the integrity attribute, and thus, result in lower evaluations of the leader. This would seem especially true for transgender leaders because of the perception that those who are transgender are deceptive (Schilt & Westbrook, [2009](#)). Some evidence for the importance of how the disclosure was made on the reactions of others can be found in the general literature on stigma disclosure. Research has found that reactions to sexual minority stigma disclosure are less favorable when the disclosure was made indirectly rather than directly communicated by the stigma holder to the nonstigma holder (e.g., Herek & Capitano, [1996](#)). Regarding timing of the disclosure and reactions by nonstigmatized others, the results of the few studies examining this relationship have been somewhat mixed. Some studies have found favorable reactions occur when the disclosure is made earlier (MacInnis & Hodson, [2015](#)), while others have found favorable reactions occur when the disclosure is made later (Buck & Plant, [2011](#); King et al., [2008](#)). None of these studies have examined the effects of the timing of the disclosure in the context of leaders disclosing a stigma to followers. Thus, it is difficult to draw firm inferences. Here we rely on Riggins' ([2004](#)) arguments that feelings of having been deceived by the stigma holder on the part of nonstigmatized others are more likely to occur in relationships that have existed for longer periods of time. This is consistent with conceptual models of the development of trust which suggest that trust develops based on experiences over time (Lewicki, Tomlinson, & Gillespie, [2006](#)). Based on these arguments we hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 1a,b. Leaders disclosing a transgender identity by being found out will be rated as (a) less likable and (b) less effective than leaders who disclose a transgender identity by coming out.

Hypothesis 2a,b. Leaders disclosing a transgender identity later will be rated as (a) less likable and (b) less effective than leaders who disclose a transgender identity sooner.

As shown in Study 1, one mechanism linking leader disclosure of stigma to negative reactions on the part of nonstigmatized followers is lower relational identification with the leader. It has been argued that followers establish relational identification with those leaders whose characteristics are perceived to better match the prototypical leader attributes held by the followers (Van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, [2013](#)). Conversely, followers avoid relational identification with those leaders whose characteristics do not match the prototypical leader attributes, but rather engage in relational disidentification. Relational identification can, in turn lead to biased evaluations of the leader. This is because, owing to an extended sense of self that now includes the relationship with the leader (Sluss & Ashforth, [2007](#)), the evaluations of the leader come to reflect on the follower making such evaluations. When some positive characteristic of the leader matches leader prototype attributes it may lead to increased relational identification and favorably biased evaluations of the leader because such evaluations are esteem enhancing for the follower. When some negative characteristic of the leader violates leader prototype attributes it may lead to low relational identification with the leader to produce unfavorable evaluations of the leader as those evaluations are not connected to the esteem of the follower. This logic was supported in Study 1. Like the content of the stigma itself (i.e., transgender identity in Study 1) characteristics of the disclosure process may also influence relational identification leading to negative evaluations. Leaders whose stigma is disclosed by being found out or whose stigma was disclosed later are likely to be perceived as deceptive and lacking on the integrity attribute of prototypical leaders. Being perceived as lacking in integrity is inconsistent with leader prototype attributes and a negatively valenced characteristic. This mismatch between the leader's personal characteristics and the integrity attribute of prototypical leaders, and the negative valence associated with it, is likely to result in lower relational identification on the part of followers, and ultimately,

unfavorable evaluations. As in Study 1, we recognize that relational identification is only one possible mechanism linking leader characteristics to follower ratings so we state partial mediation for the hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3a,b. The relationship between leader disclosure of a transgender identity by being found out versus coming out and ratings of leader (a) likability and (b) effectiveness will be partially mediated by relational identification with the leader.

Hypothesis 4a,b. The relationship between timing of the disclosure of a transgender identity by a leader and ratings of leader (a) likability and (b) effectiveness will be partially mediated by relational identification with the leader.

3.1 Method

Data for this study came from 206 employed adults. Participants were recruited using the same strategy as was used in Study 1. The sample consisted of slightly more men ($n = 112$) than women ($n = 94$) and they ranged in age from 20 to 63 ($M = 34$, $SD = 9.47$). The majority of participants were White (79%) and worked an average of 39 hr ($SD = 7.9$) a week. Participants worked in various industries such as business and professional services (18%), information services (14%), and education (11%). Regarding participant education, 58% completed a Bachelor's degree or higher, 10% completed an Associate's degree, and 20% completed some college.

3.1.1 Procedure

Similar to the methodology in Study 1, participants were asked to read a short vignette about a leader and then rate the leader on likeability and effectiveness. The vignette described how and when the participant learned about the transgender identity of the leader. Each participant was assigned to read one of four vignettes in a 2 (method: found out [$n = 103$] vs. came out [$n = 101$]) \times 2 (timing: later [$n = 101$] vs. earlier [$n = 103$]) between-subjects experiment. Again, the assignment to conditions was based on the time the participants began the study. The first group of participants were assigned the early/came out condition, then to the late/found out, early/found out, and late/came out conditions. The description of the leader was similar to that of the one described in Study 1 with the addition of information regarding how and when disclosure of the leader's transgender identity occurred. The vignette is included in Appendix B.

3.1.2 Manipulation checks

At the end of the study, a manipulation check was conducted for each condition (method and timing). The method of disclosure manipulation check consisted of a single item "Imagining yourself in the scenario you read, you would have learned about the personal characteristics of the supervisor because..." The response options were "The supervisor wanted you to know and shared the information," and "You found out and asked the supervisor for more information." The timing manipulation check also consisted of two items with a stem that read, "You have worked with the supervisor for" followed by "1 year" and "1 week" with each rated as either "yes" or "no." The method manipulation check showed that 100% of the participants accurately reported whether they learned of the leader's transgender identity by the leader coming out voluntarily or was found out involuntarily. For the timing manipulation check, 99% of the participants accurately reported whether they found out at 1 year (later) or at 1 week (earlier) of being employed.

3.1.3 Measures

Except for the independent variables (method and timing), all of the constructs in Study 2 were assessed using the same measures as reported in Study 1. The variables that were measured included leader relational identification, leader effectiveness and likability. We controlled for age, gender, contact, transphobia, and social desirability as was done in Study 1.[3](#)

3.2 Results

The descriptive statistics, correlations, and internal consistency estimates for the study variables are shown in Table 3. As can be seen there, before controlling for the covariates, method of disclosure was significantly related to likability ($r = -.34, p < .01$) and effectiveness ($r = -.22, p < .01$) as would be predicted. Timing was also related to likability ($r = -.21, p < .01$) and effectiveness ($r = -.22, p < .01$) as would be predicted. These results provide preliminary support for the hypotheses.

Table 3. Means, standard deviations, correlations, and internal consistency estimates for variables in Study 2

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Age	34.06	9.47	–									
2. Gender	0.46	0.50	.18 ²	–								
3. Contact	3.38	0.67	.01	.08	–							
4. Transphobia	2.00	1.05	-.03	-.05	-.25 ^{**}	(.94)						
5. Social desirability	2.78	0.70	.01	-.10	-.01	.10	(.80)					
6. Method	0.50	0.50	.10	-.04	-.05	.21 ^{**}	-.06	–				
7. Timing	0.50	0.50	-.11	-.08	.02	.06	.06	.01	–			
8. Identification	4.28	0.69	.12	.11	.06	-.44 ^{**}	-.15 [*]	-.22 ^{**}	-.08	(.89)		
9. Likability	4.20	0.95	-.02	.02	.01	-.29 ^{**}	.10	-.34 ^{**}	-.21 ^{**}	.54 ^{**}	(.93)	
10. Effectiveness	4.18	1.03	.07	.05	.13	-.60 ^{**}	-.08	-.22 ^{**}	-.22 ^{**}	.59 ^{**}	.50 ^{**}	(.95)

Note. $n = 206$. Timing coded 1 for “1 year” and 0 for “1 week.” Method coded 1 for “found out” and 0 for “came out.” Gender coded 1 for “female” and 0 for “male.” Coefficient alpha reliabilities are reported in the diagonal.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

To formally test Hypotheses 1 through 4, we followed the same procedures as described in Study 1. The results related to these hypotheses are provided in Table 4. As shown, the control variables were entered as a set in Step 1 of the regression. Together they accounted for 11% ($\Delta R^2 = .11, p < .01$) of the variance in leader likability and 36% ($\Delta R^2 = .36, p < .01$) of the variance in leader effectiveness. In Step 2, method and timing of disclosure were entered in the regression. Together they accounted for an additional 11% ($\Delta R^2 = .11, p < .01$) of the variance in likability and 4% ($\Delta R^2 = .04, p < .01$) of the variance in effectiveness. For method, the regression results showed that participants in the “found out” condition rated the leader as less likable ($B = -0.53, p < .01$), but a nonsignificant result was found between method of disclosure and ratings of leader effectiveness ($B = -0.21, ns$). Thus, support was found for Hypothesis 1a, but not 1b. For timing, the results of the regression analysis showed that participants in the later disclosure (1 year) condition rated the leader as less likable than those in the early disclosure (1 week) condition ($B = -0.38, p < .01$). Similarly, participants in the later disclosure condition rated the leader as less effective than those in the early disclosure condition ($B = -0.36, p < .01$). These results support Hypothesis 2a,b.

Table 4. Regression results examining the mediation of method and timing on outcomes via identification for Study 2

	<i>B</i>	ΔR^2	R^2		<i>B</i>	ΔR^2	R^2
Model 1							
<i>DV=Likability</i>				<i>DV=Effectiveness</i>			
<i>Step 1</i>		.11 ^{**}	.11 ^{**}	<i>Step 1</i>		.36 ^{**}	.36 ^{**}
Age	-0.01			Age	0.01		
Gender	0.05			Gender	0.02		
Contact	-0.12			Contact	-0.03		
Transphobia	-0.29 ^{**}			Transphobia	-0.59 ^{**}		

Social desirability	0.19			Social desirability	-0.02		
<i>Step 2</i>		.11**	.22**	<i>Step 2</i>		.04**	.40**
Age	-0.01			Age	0.01		
Gender	-0.01			Gender	-0.02		
Contact	-0.10			Contact	-0.02		
Transphobia	-0.22**			Transphobia	-0.55**		
Social desirability	0.17			Social desirability	-0.02		
Method of disclosure	-0.53**			Method of disclosure	-0.21		
Timing of disclosure	-0.38**			Timing of disclosure	-0.36**		
<i>Step 3</i>		.19**	.38**	<i>Step 3</i>		.12**	.52**
Age	-0.01			Age	0.01		
Gender	-0.06			Gender	-0.07		
Contact	-0.07			Contact	0.01		
Transphobia	-0.04			Transphobia	-0.40**		
Social desirability	0.24**			Social desirability	0.04		
Method of disclosure	-0.39**			Method of disclosure	-0.09		
Timing of disclosure	-0.35**			Timing of disclosure	-0.33**		
Identification	0.68**			Identification	0.58**		
Model 2							
<i>DV=Identification</i>							
<i>Step 1</i>		.22**	.22**				
Age	0.01						
Gender	0.10						
Contact	-0.06						
Transphobia	-0.29**						
Social desirability	-0.10						
<i>Step 2</i>		.24**	.02*				
Age	0.01						
Gender	0.08						
Contact	-0.05						
Transphobia	-0.27**						
Social desirability	-0.11						
Method of disclosure	-0.21*						
Timing of disclosure	-0.05						

Note. $n = 206$. Timing coded 1 for “1 year” and 0 for “1 week.” Method coded 1 for “found out” and 0 for “came out.” Gender coded 1 for “female” and 0 for “male.”

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

With regard to Hypothesis 3a,b, we predicted that relational identification would partially mediate the relationship between method of disclosure and ratings of leader likability and effectiveness. As shown in Table 4 (Model 2, Step 2), a direct effect was found between method of disclosure and relational identification. More specifically, participants in the “found out” condition were more likely to rate the leader lower on relational identification than those who were in the “came out” condition ($B = -.21, p < .01$). When method of disclosure and relational identification were both entered into a regression equation, the effect of relational identification on ratings of leader likability ($B = .68, p < .01$) and effectiveness ($B = .58, p < .01$) were statistically significant. The effect of method of disclosure on ratings of leader likability ($B = -.39, p < .01$) remained statistically significant, whereas, a nonsignificant result was found between method of disclosure and ratings of leader effectiveness ($B = -.09, ns$) To formally test the mediation hypothesis, we used bias-corrected

bootstrapping to estimate the indirect effects. The results showed that the 95% confidence interval around the indirect effects of method of disclosure on likability (indirect effect = $-.14$; CI [$-.27, -.03$]) and effectiveness (indirect effect = $-.12$; CI [$-.25, -.03$]) through relational identification did not include zero. Based on these results, the relationships between method of disclosure and ratings of leader likability and effectiveness are partially mediated by relational identification. More specifically, participants in the “found out” condition were more likely to rate that leader as less likable and effective than those in the “came out” condition due to lower ratings of relational identification. Thus, supporting Hypothesis 3a,b.

Pertaining to Hypothesis 4, and as discussed above, the regression results showed that participants in the later disclosure condition rated the leader as less likable and effective compared to those in the early disclosure condition (see Table 4, Model 1, Step 2). Contrary to our expectation however, a nonsignificant relationship was found between timing of disclosure and relational identification ($B = -.05$, ns). Thus, the indirect effect of timing of disclosure on likability (indirect effect = $-.05$; CI [$-.18, .07$]) and effectiveness (indirect effect = $-.04$; CI [$-.15, .06$]) via relational identification was nonsignificant. Therefore Hypothesis 4a,b were not supported.

3.3 Discussion

The purpose of Study 2 was to examine whether two features related to the way in which the disclosure process takes place (method and the timing of the disclosure) affects followers' reactions to a leader's transgender identity disclosure. In general, the results indicate that leaders who were found out and disclosed in the later stages of the relationship were rated lower on measures of likability and effectiveness compared to leaders who came out voluntarily and disclosed earlier in the relationship. This is consistent with leader prototypes (Brodbeck et al., 2000; Den Hartog et al., 1999); being found out and disclosing later may violate the integrity attribute of a prototypical leader and result in negative reactions to that leader. The specific mechanism linking these features of the disclosure process to followers' reactions differed across conditions and outcomes. For method of disclosure the results showed that being found out had both a direct and indirect effect on likability ratings via relational identification with the leader, but its relationship to effectiveness was entirely indirect. This finding suggests that when considering the method of disclosing of a transgender identity, followers may make a distinction between liking a leader and making judgments about the leader's effectiveness. The finding that method of disclosure indirectly affected both likability and effectiveness supports identity-based theories of leadership (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, 2013) that call attention to the importance of relational identity (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). For the timing of disclosure, the results showed that disclosing later was directly related to lower ratings of both liking and effectiveness but not indirectly via relational identification. Like the findings for method of disclosure, these findings for the direct effect of timing of disclosure on liking and effectiveness are consistent with the logic based on leader prototypes, that disclosing later violates the integrity attribute of a prototypical leader. However, they were not in-line with our predictions derived from identity-related theories of leadership that relational identity serves as a mediating mechanism between timing of disclosure and follower reactions in the form of liking and effectiveness. One reason for the nonsignificant indirect effect between timing of disclosure and reactions was that timing of disclosure was unrelated to relational identification. Thus, the results provide mixed support for relational identification as a mediator between method and timing of disclosure on follower's reactions to leaders who disclose a transgender identity.

4 GENERAL DISCUSSION

The most general purpose of the research reported here was to better understand reactions to stigma, and in particular, the disclosure of concealable stigma in the workplace. In relation to this general purpose, we integrated stigma theory (Goffman, 1963) with Leader Categorization Theory (Lord et al., 1984) and Identity Theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) to derive a set of hypotheses relating stigma disclosure by a leader to reactions

of followers. Based on these theories we expected that a leader's disclosure of a stigmatized gender minority identity itself, as well as specific features of the way in which the disclosure took place (method and timing of disclosure), would lead to lower evaluations of the leader on the part of followers. Moreover, we expected lowered relational identification with the leader to serve as a key mechanism linking leader disclosure to follower reactions. This was based on the logic that both stigma and the way in which it is disclosed can violate general leader prototypes followers hold for leaders. The results of the two studies reported here generally supported these predictions. In Study 1, we focused on the disclosure of the stigma itself and showed that disclosure of a stigmatized gender identity minority on the part of a leader resulted in lower ratings of leader likeability and effectiveness made by followers both directly and indirectly via the mediating effect of relational identification with the leader. In Study 2, we focused on features of the way in which the disclosure occurred. The results of that study showed that both how the disclosure occurred (i.e., being found out) and the timing of the disclosure (i.e., disclosing later) resulted in lower ratings of leader liking and effectiveness made by followers. However, there were some differences across conditions and reaction variables for the mediating effects of relational identification with the leader. That is, while relational identification with the leader partially mediated the relationship between method of disclosure and reactions, it did not have this same effect for the timing of the disclosure. The effect of timing was entirely direct. Taken together, the studies reported here contribute to the literature by providing a better understanding of follower reactions to the “what,” “how,” and “when” of leader stigma disclosure in the workplace. They also provide important insights into relational identification with the leader as one of the underlying processes linking the disclosure process to follower reactions.

4.1 Theoretical implications

The studies reported here make several important contributions to the leadership theories that were employed. The findings of the two studies expand our understanding of Leader Categorization Theory (Lord et al., [1984](#)), by identifying a novel leader characteristic (concealable stigma) that may violate leader prototypes, and then demonstrating its relationship to followers' reactions. Extending the logic of leader prototype violation further, we found that not just the stigma itself but also how and when it is disclosed affected follower's reactions. These suggest core aspects of a leader's identity, and the way in which followers come to know about it, can play a role in the leader-prototype matching process to influence leader evaluations. As the workforce becomes more diverse and the number and visibility of those with concealable stigma increases, theorizing based on leader categorization may need to consider a wider range of leader characteristics that are likely to affect the leader—prototype matching process. The studies reported here also contribute to Identity Theory (Ashforth & Mael, [1989](#)). Although theorized, few studies have empirically linked demographic or deep-level diversity differences to relational disidentification (Sluss, Ployhart, Cobb, & Ashforth, [2012](#)). In the present study, we show that a stigmatized identity, and more specifically a stigmatized identity that is particularly likely to elicit negative reactions, affects person-based relational disidentification. Moreover, we show that person-based relational disidentification, in turn, affects follower reactions of their leader. In this way, we provided an important extension and test of person-based relational disidentification as a mediating process linking stigmatized identity to follower evaluations. Considering the lower evaluations given to a leader disclosing a transgender identity, we would argue they represent an additional dysfunctional outcome of disidentification to those proposed by Sluss and Ashforth ([2007](#)).

The findings reported here also have important implications for theories and models seeking to explain the disclosure of stigmatized identities in the workplace. Reactions on the part of nonstigmatized others play a central role in virtually all of the major models explaining the identity management/disclosure process (Clair et al., [2005](#); Jones & King, [2014](#); Lidderdale, Croteau, Anderson, Tovar-Murray, & Davis, [2007](#); Ragins, [2004, 2008](#)). Those models also suggest that disclosure processes are dynamic, and over time initial reactions by

nonstigmatized others to stigma disclosure influence decisions to disclose to others (King, Mohr, Peddie, Jones, & Kendra, [2017](#)). Unfortunately, reactions on the part of nonstigmatized others to disclosure in a workplace context has rarely been studied and those studies that have examined reactions have only done so with regard to reactions by coworkers and not reactions by subordinates (King et al., [2008](#)). This extension provides insight into the impact that the disclosure process has on the perceptions and reactions of nonstigma holders. Those perceptions and reactions will ultimately shape how the stigma holders manage their identities and make decisions about subsequent disclosures.

The research presented here also contributes to theories of discrimination that explain how stereotypes and bias contribute to the lack of advancement for women and visible minorities in the workplace (Eagly & Chin, [2010](#); Eagly & Karau, [2002](#); Heilman, [2012](#); Lyness & Heilman, [2006](#)). Those theories note that people hold one set of stereotypes regarding the characteristics of women and visible minorities and another set of prototypes regarding the attributes of effective leaders. They assert that negatively biased judgments and discrimination result when there is a mismatch between the stereotypes people hold about a person and the prototypes they hold for a leader (Heilman & Eagly, [2008](#)). In the present research, we extend these theories by suggesting that a similar process produces biased evaluations of a leader who discloses a concealable stigmatized identity. The results of Study 1 supported this logic. Leaders who disclosed a stigmatized identity became subject to the same types of negative evaluations that women and visible minorities have been shown to receive (Eagly, Karau, & Makhijani, [1995](#)). Thus, we show that the idea of a mismatch, or “lack of fit” generalizes to other, concealable stigmatized identities once they are disclosed. The results of Study 1 also suggest that one mechanism by which the mismatch between stereotypes and prototypes may lead to negatively biased evaluations is via lowered relational identification with the leader. For those with a concealable stigma, however, the situation is somewhat more complex than for those with a visible stigma. This is because the process of disclosing a stigma may also influence reactions. The results of Study 2 show that how and when the disclosure of a stigmatized identity is made can bias evaluations of the leader even further. Thus, not only does the stigma itself have the potential to violate attributes of a prototypical leader and in so doing produce negatively biased evaluations of the leader, so too do features of the way in which the stigma is disclosed.

4.2 Practical implications

There are a number of practical implications of this research for both organizations and individuals. For organizations our findings that disclosure of a stigma and the way in which it was disclosed led to biased ratings of leader liking and effectiveness are important for several reasons. First, to the extent that followers' negatively biased evaluations of a leader who disclose a stigmatized identity are reflected in the performance appraisal of that leader, those performance appraisals are likely to be biased and potentially discriminatory. For organizations that include subordinate ratings of their leaders when evaluating leader performance (e.g., via a multisource feedback process) it would be important to provide additional training to help eliminate the types of biases found in the present research. Second, and more broadly, organizations seeking to benefit from the diversity now present in the workforce will need to recognize the potential for negative reactions that can occur as a result of disclosure by those with stigmatized identities and take proactive steps to mitigate them. At an individual level, the findings reported here highlight the very precarious position faced by leaders who have a concealable stigmata. If they do make the “long climb up a slippery ladder” as Hoyt and Chemers ([2008](#), p. 165) put it, to find themselves in leadership positions, the disclosure of their stigma may still undermine their success. Conversely, research suggests that disclosure of a concealable stigma can also lead to a host of positive outcomes such as favorable job attitudes as well as physical and psychological well-being depending on the reactions of others (Jones & King, [2014](#)). Thus reactions of others to the disclosure of a stigma in the workplace are critically important to manage. Leaders who are considering disclosing a stigma or those who advise and

mentor such leaders would do well to consider both the stigma and the way in which it is revealed. Specifically, because one mechanism linking disclosure to reactions was relational identification, it would seem that strategies that enhance relational identification might mitigate the negative effects of disclosure. For example, Clair et al. (2005) describe an approach to identity management referred to as normalizing. Normalizing involves the person who is disclosing a stigma taking steps to minimize the perceived difference between themselves and others and highlighting the similarities.

4.3 Limitations and suggestions for future research

As is the case with any study, the research presented here is not without limitations. Although we note that vignettes like the ones used here have been used extensively in the study of leadership and that we followed best practice recommendations for their construction (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014), concerns about participants responding to a vignette in the same way as they would in an actual work situation remain. One reason for this may be that participants will provide what they believe are socially desirable responses because they know their responses will be evaluated. This response tendency does not appear to have biased the results in the present study. The measure of social desirability was unrelated to most of the other variables and when it was included as a statistical control variable in the main analyses. A second reason participants may not have responded to the vignette as they would in actual work situations is the limited amount of information that can be conveyed within a vignette. For example, we were unable to convey a great deal of information regarding organizational context such as the organization's diversity climate, the presence of inclusive policies and practices, and supportive others in the work environment, which have all been linked to the decision to disclose a concealable stigma (Clair et al., 2005; Lidderdale et al., 2007; Ragins, 2008). This type of nuanced contextual information and its effects on participants is better examined in field studies conducted in actual organizations. We might expect that followers working in organizations that are more welcoming and inclusive may react less negatively to the disclosure of concealable stigmata than workers in organizations that are less welcoming and inclusive. This is because climate can shape expectations for the types of reactions that would be acceptable within the organization. Examining these types of workplace contextual variables as potential moderators of the relationship between disclosure and reactions would seem a fruitful area for future research.

A second limitation of our study was the lack of random assignment of participants to conditions. As a result there is no guarantee that the participants in the various conditions did not differ from each other in some systematic way. To help address this issue we did use a number of variables as statistical controls that, based on past research (e.g., Norton & Herek, 2013), could have influenced the results. It is interesting to note that while there was good rationale for including them, most of the control variables were only weakly related to likability and effectiveness and, in an exploratory analysis, none moderated the relationship between disclosure, method or timing, and the outcomes. As one example, men have been found to react more negatively toward transgender individuals (Norton & Herek, 2013) and based on this we might expect them to perceive transgender leaders less likeable than women would perceive transgender leaders. However, this was not the case. Men and women reacted similarly negatively to the transgender leader. One reason for the difference between these findings and those in past research may be the difference in the nature of the "target" that was studied. In Norton and Herek's (2013) study participants were asked about their feelings toward various groups of people, one of which was transgender people. This is a general measure that refers to transgender people as a group and without regard to setting (work vs. nonwork) or role relationship (friend, coworker, leader, etc.). It could be the case that the specific setting (workplace) and role relationship (leader) account for the differences between the present studies and the Norton and Herek's study. Additional empirical research is needed to determine if reactions toward transgender people (and those with other concealable stigmata) who disclose their stigma differ across settings and relationships.

Two other suggestions for future research are examining reactions to a broader range of disclosure strategies and even more specific content of the disclosure. In the present study, we focused on disclosure in terms of what are sometimes referred to as revealing and concealing strategies (Clair et al., [2005](#)). That is, the stigma is either disclosed to others (revealing) or it is not (concealing). A “middle ground” strategy is referred to as signaling and it involves hinting or “testing the waters” (Jones & King, [2014](#), p. 1471). This strategy is an indirect approach wherein the concealable stigma holder strategically shares information and then judges the reactions of others before deciding to continue to conceal or further reveal. Nonstigmatized others may react to this type of strategy differently from either concealing or revealing owing to the ambiguity involved but it has not yet been studied. We also focused only on the content of the disclosure in terms of whether the leader was transgender or not (i.e., we used a gender neutral transgender person in the vignettes). This was consistent with our theorizing about stigma in general, but there may be different reactions to those whose transition status is from male to female (transwomen) and those whose transition status is from female to male (transmen). Research distinguishing between these two groups is sparse and somewhat mixed. On the one hand, Gazzola and Morrison ([2014](#)) found that cultural stereotypes of transmen were more negative than cultural stereotypes of transwomen, and Rothblum, Balsam, Solomon, and Factor ([2007](#)) found that transmen reported higher levels of harassment. These would suggest that leaders who disclose that they are transmen would elicit more negative reactions than leaders who disclose as transwomen. On the other hand, Winter, Webster, and Chueng ([2008](#)) found attitudes toward transwomen were more negative than attitudes toward transmen. Clearly, this is an area that can benefit from better and clearer theorizing and additional empirical research. One approach to this might be to consider Implicit Inversion Theory (Kite & Deaux, [1987](#)), which suggests those who disclose that they are gay men are perceived to take on feminine characteristics and those who disclose that they are lesbian women are seen to take on masculine characteristics, as it might be applied to disclosure by transmen and transwomen.

Another area for future research is to examine other mediating mechanisms that link leader disclosure of a stigmatized identity to follower reactions. In the two studies reported here, we hypothesized that relational identification would partially mediate the relationship between disclosure and reactions. The hypotheses recognized that other variables may also play a role in determining reactions to leaders who disclose their transgender identities. One example of another mediating mechanism is LMX (Graen & Uhl-Bien, [1995](#)), which suggests that leader influence is based on the quality of the relationship between leader and follower. Several studies have demonstrated that LMX mediates the relationship between leader prototype match and outcomes (Epitropaki et al., [2013](#)). Finally, an extension of the research reported here would be to examine group-level leader prototypes and group-level identity. In the present study we focused on general leader prototypes that have been shown to be common across groups and we focused on an individual-level relational identification with the leader. There are, however, group-level analogs to these constructs that have been studied rather extensively (van Kippenberg, van Kippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, [2004](#)). Social identity theories of leadership (Haslam, [2001](#); Hogg, [2001](#)) argue that leaders are most effective at influencing others when they are prototypical of the group they are leading and when followers identify with the values, beliefs, and goals of the group (i.e., social identity). At this level of analysis research might examine how a mismatch between stereotypes associated with a particular stigmatized group to which the leader belongs and workgroup-level prototypes influence reactions to stigma disclosure via the mediating effect of social (collective) identity.

5 CONCLUSION

As workforce diversity has increased so too has the range of potentially stigmatizing conditions to be found in the workplace, including those whose stigmatized identities are concealable. Understanding the identity management process, its antecedents and consequences from the perspective of the stigma holder is important. However, understanding that process, its antecedents and consequences from the perspective of

nonstigmatized others is equally important if individuals and organizations are to reap the potential benefits of a diverse workforce. We contribute to this understanding by theorizing and then showing that the disclosure of a leader's stigmatized identity, as well as the method and timing of that disclosure impacts follower perceptions of leadership qualities.

APPENDIX A: INSTRUCTIONS AND VIGNETTES USED IN STUDY 1

Instructions

The paragraph below presents a description of a fictional leader in an organization. Please read it carefully and try to imagine yourself in the situation described. Please remember that the description is meant to be a depiction of a person who is YOUR supervisor. It would be good if you tried as much as possible to put yourself in this situation and to imagine this in real life. Several questions will be posed after the text and should be answered in the context of the work situation described.

Please imagine the following...

The nondisclosure condition read

"Your supervisor is Pat Miller. Miller is a good leader and you consider yourself pretty lucky to work for him/her. The two of you get along and seem to have similar work styles. You work well together. Miller is clearly very smart and has had good training. S/he is experienced. S/he knows the business and how to get things done. Miller also shows a lot dedication and puts in a lot of hard work. S/he will stay late and come in early to help with projects if that's what's needed. Everyone at work thinks Pat is a great leader. They describe him/her as one of those types of leaders who 'says what they mean and mean what they say' and 'talks the talk and walks the walk'. You agree. Miller is a strong and sincere leader but not pushy, loud, or overbearing. When it comes to making decisions s/he is open-minded and objective. In meetings s/he asks for input and feedback from you and your peers. S/he listens carefully and considers the different perspectives before reaching a conclusion. When Miller makes an important decision at work s/he is good at communicating it. S/he clearly explains the reasons for the decision and offers objective reasons why it seemed the best option. S/he is understanding when it comes to work issues among the people who at work and understands people have personal lives too. Although you wouldn't say you are close friends outside of work, you are about the same age and have a number of similar interests. When you run into each other at the same restaurant, sporting event, etc, the two of you will spend a few minutes in friendly conversation.

In the following section, you will be asked about the details presented in this scenario. Be sure to read the scenario carefully and when you are ready to proceed, click below."

For the disclosure condition the following sentences were added to the vignette

"Today you learned that Pat is a transgender person. That is, someone who experiences a mismatch between the gender they identify with or express and their assigned biological sex. Pat will be undergoing a process to align the gender s/he identifies with his/her biological sex."

APPENDIX B: INSTRUCTIONS AND VIGNETTES USED IN STUDY 2

Instructions to participant

The paragraph below presents a description of a fictional leader in an organization. Please read it carefully and try to imagine yourself in the situation described. Please remember that the description is meant to be a depiction of a person who is YOUR supervisor. It would be good if you tried as much as possible to put yourself

in this situation and to imagine this in real life. Several questions will be posed after the text and should be answered in the context of the work situation described.

Please imagine the following...

The vignette then read

“You have been working in your current position for about _____ now. (Early condition read, “1 week”), Late condition read, “1 year”). During that time your supervisor has been Pat Miller. Pat is a good leader and you consider yourself pretty lucky to work for him/her. The two of you get along and seem to have similar work styles. You work well together. Pat is clearly very smart and has had good training. S/he is experienced. S/he knows the business and how to get things done. S/he also shows a lot dedication and puts in a lot of hard work. S/he will stay late and come in early to help with projects if that's what's needed. Everyone at work thinks Pat is a great leader. They describe him/her as one of those types of leaders who ‘says what s/he means and means what s/he says’ and that s/he ‘talks the talk and walks the walk’. You agree. Pat is a strong and sincere leader but s/he's not pushy, loud, or overbearing. When it comes to making decisions s/he is open-minded and objective. In meetings s/he asks for input and feedback from you and your peers. S/he listens carefully and considers the different perspectives before reaching a conclusion. When Pat makes an important decision at work s/he is good at communicating it. S/he clearly explains the reasons for the decision and offers objective reasons why it seemed the best option. S/he is understanding when it comes to work issues among the people who work for him/her and understands people have personal lives too. Although you wouldn't say you are close friends outside of work, you are about the same age and have a number of similar interests. When you run into each other at the same restaurant, sporting event, etc, the two of you will spend a few minutes in friendly conversation.”

The Came out condition then read

“In a meeting Pat scheduled with you today, s/he wanted to let you know that s/he was a transgender person. That is, someone who experiences a mismatch between the gender they identify with or express and their assigned biological sex.”

The Found out condition then read

“Yesterday, while you were outside of work, you saw Pat dressed differently. Today you decided to stop by his/her office to ask about it. During that meeting s/he explained that s/he was a transgender person. That is, someone who experiences a mismatch between the gender they identify with or express and their assigned biological sex.”

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