

Social background concealment among first-generation students: The role of social belonging and academic achievement concerns

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Abstract

Although higher education has become more accessible to people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, the transition to university is more difficult for first- compared to continuing-generation students. Previous research showed that social identity processes are key to understand differences between first- and continuing-generation students' experiences at university. In the present paper, we argue that social background identity concealment may occur as a coping process among first-generation students. A longitudinal study among 829 first-year university students showed that first-generation students indeed concealed their social background at university more than continuing-generation students. This was especially the case when they had experienced concerns about their social belonging at university, indicating that identity concealment resulted from concerns to fit in at university. Finally, social background concealment was related to a decrease in well-being, suggesting that concealment is a costly social identity management strategy. Instead, universities should put in efforts to increase first-generation students' sense of belonging.

Keywords

academic engagement, belonging, first-generation students, higher education, identity concealment, social background concealment, social class, social identity management, well-being

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Higher education has become more accessible to people from a wider range of socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, for example, for students whose parents do not have a higher education degree (i.e., first-generation students; Saenz et al., 2007).¹ Despite this increased accessibility, adjustment to university can be more difficult for first-generation compared to continuing-generation students (i.e., students who have at least one parent with a higher education degree), as evidenced

by higher drop-out rates and lower academic achievement (Stephens et al., 2015). Practical

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factors such as differences in financial resources or academic preparation cannot fully explain these group differences (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011). A pivotal factor in these group differences is that first-generation students struggle more with the identity transition to university (Iyer et al., 2009; Veldman et al., 2019). The present study extends this social identity perspective (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987) by bringing forward concealment of one's social background as a prevalent but potentially costly identity management strategy for first-generation students. Specifically, our aims are threefold: (a) studying the prevalence of social background identity concealment among first- versus continuing-generation students; (b) looking into the role of social belonging and academic achievement concerns therein; and (c) examining the relation between social background identity concealment and student well-being and academic engagement.

Social Background Concealment as Identity Management at University

The transition to university is one of the most important life transitions for young people (Holmbeck & Wandrei, 1993; Jetten et al., 2017). This transition is not just a practical one, but also a transition in identity: the new identity as a university student has to be incorporated into one's self-concept (C. Haslam et al., 2021; Jetten et al., 2008; Oyserman, 2019). According to the social identity model of identity change (SIMIC; Jetten et al., 2017), such identity transitions are more challenging when the new identity is experienced as less consistent with one's current identities (Ethier & Deaux, 1994; Jetten et al., 2002). Because of middle-class norms at university mismatching with first-generation students' mostly working-class backgrounds (Bourdieu, 1985; de Vreeze et al., 2018; Fiske & Markus, 2012; Stephens et al., 2011), persistent stereotypes that those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have lower competence (Durante & Fiske, 2017), and lower expectations in their social environment to go to university (Iyer et al., 2009), first-generation students transitioning

to university tend to experience less identity compatibility or fit of the new university student identity with their social background identity than continuing-generation students do (Easterbrook et al., 2019; Iyer et al., 2009; Veldman et al., 2019; see also Thiem & Dasgupta, 2022). This more difficult identity transition to university for first-generation students partly explains why first-generation students tend to self-select into less prestigious universities (Nieuwenhuis et al., 2019) and why there is an academic achievement gap between first- and continuing-generation students (Phillips et al., 2020; Stephens et al., 2012; Veldman et al., 2019). Thus, social identity processes are key to understand differences between first- and continuing-generation students' experiences at university.

The present study examines the social identity management strategy of concealment of one's social background as a coping process among first-generation students. Concealing an identity is an identity management response that individuals can show to avoid the negative experience of being stigmatized or to better fit in with a high-status outgroup (van Veelen et al., 2020). We argue that concealing their socioeconomic status (SES) background is a particularly relevant and viable identity management strategy for first-generation students.

First, people who possess an identity that is devalued and invisible unless revealed (i.e., concealable) often keep their identity hidden to avoid bias (e.g., stigmatized identities based on sexual orientation and mental health issues; Goh et al., 2019; Newheiser & Barreto, 2014). SES is an identity that is—at least to some extent—concealable, making it easier for first-generation students to conceal their social background identity compared to more visible identities. Qualitative interviews with first-generation students at elite universities in the US indeed indicated that they tried to make it by “faking it” (Granfield, 1991)—in other words, to conceal their social background in order to succeed in the university environment. The present study is, to the best of our knowledge, the first quantitative examination of social background identity concealment among first-generation students.

Secondly, identity concealment is more likely to occur when group boundaries are perceived to be permeable (Wright et al., 1990). Perceived permeability is particularly high for first-generation students because of strong meritocracy beliefs at university that create the idea that anyone can succeed at university independent of their background, and that this is one's individual responsibility and choice (Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Kuppens et al., 2018). Permeability makes access to a high-status group seem more realistic for stigmatized individuals (Ellemers, 1993; Ellemers & van Laar, 2010). Consequently, it is more likely that first-generation students conceal to adjust to the university environment and improve their personal situation instead of using more collective responses questioning the status quo to improve the position of the entire group (Bourguignon et al., 2020; van Veelen et al., 2020).

Thus, we argue that social background concealment is a particularly likely identity management strategy for first-generation students. Therefore, we expect that first-generation students will show this more than continuing-generation students.

Concealment to Cope With Social Belonging and Academic Achievement Concerns

Furthermore, we expect that first-generation students will especially conceal when they experience concerns or difficulties in adjusting to university. We focus on university adjustment in two key domains: the social belonging domain and the academic achievement domain (see also Veldman et al., 2019).

When students experience concerns in the social belonging domain at university, this means that they are struggling to socially connect with others, they are experiencing a low sense of belonging, and are feeling lonely and excluded (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Concealing their SES background could be a way for first-generation students to cope with experienced belonging concerns. By concealing their social background identity, which makes them feel like (or would

make others signal to them that) they do not belong and fit in socially, first-generation students aim to increase their sense of social fit in this middle-class university environment.

When students experience concerns in the academic achievement domain at university, this means that they are struggling with uncertainties about their performance or their academic competence more generally. Concealing their SES background could be a way for first-generation students to cope with experienced concerns regarding academic achievement. They conceal their SES background identity, which is often seen as being at odds with academic achievement (Easterbrook et al., 2019), as a way of moving away from the stereotype or the lower status of their group.

The role of social belonging and academic achievement concerns in first-generation students' higher identity concealment could work in two ways. First, it could be that first-generation students experience higher social belonging and/or academic achievement concerns and, as a consequence, conceal their background identity more than continuing-generation students (i.e., mediation). In line with this, previous research has shown that first-generation students often experience more difficulties with adjustment in the social belonging domain (e.g., lower integration into social university life, more loneliness, lower sense of university belonging; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Rubin, 2012; Stephens et al., 2015; Trawalter et al., 2020) and the academic achievement domain (e.g., feeling less well prepared, having weaker academic self-beliefs, and more performance concerns; Harackiewicz et al., 2014; Jetten et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 2011) than continuing-generation students (for a recent overview, see Thiem & Dasgupta, 2022).

Second, it could be that first-generation students do not all experience these concerns more than continuing-generation students, but that they conceal their social identity more especially when they experience high social belonging and/or academic achievement concerns (i.e., moderation). In the current research, we will test both these potential mechanisms.

Consequences of Social Background Concealment

A final research question is what the consequences of social background concealment may be. On the one hand, from a social identity perspective, concealment is an identity management response whereby people try to improve their personal situation (van Veelen et al., 2020). However, there are strong reasons to suspect that concealment incurs costs. Although people believe that others view them more favorably when they conceal, it is a coping strategy that can backfire (Dyar & London, 2018; Newheiser & Barreto, 2014). The act of managing the visibility of an identity and trying to conceal aspects of one's identity is stressful. In line with this reasoning, concealment has been related to lower authenticity feelings (Crabtree & Pillow, 2020; Newheiser & Barreto, 2014), performance-related self-confidence (Barreto et al., 2006), health (Pachankis, 2008), and work engagement (Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Newheiser et al., 2017). Moreover, the ingroup is an important source of support (Correll & Park, 2005; S. A. Haslam et al., 2005). Concealing the group identity could be perceived as a lack of loyalty by fellow ingroup members (Bourguignon et al., 2020; Gaines, 2001), and they may be more likely to retract their support for the concealing ingroup member (van Laar et al., 2014). Consequently, the supportive psychological effects of the ingroup (e.g., a buffer against stress) are lost (Branscombe et al., 1999; S. A. Haslam et al., 2005). Therefore, we expect that social background concealment will be related to a decrease in well-being and academic engagement.

The Current Research

These research questions were examined in a sample of university students in their first semester at university. Specifically, a longitudinal study examined the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: First-generation students conceal their social background identity more than continuing-generation students.

Hypothesis 2a: First-generation students experience higher social belonging and/or academic achievement concerns and, as a consequence, conceal their social background identity more than continuing-generation students (i.e., mediation).

Hypothesis 2b: First-generation students conceal their social background identity more especially when they experience high social belonging and/or academic achievement concerns (i.e., moderation).

Hypothesis 3: Social background concealment is related to a decrease in well-being and academic engagement.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

These hypotheses were tested with a two-wave longitudinal study focusing on first-year students' adjustment to university. Online surveys were distributed among 829 first-year psychology students (88% female²; $M_{\text{age}} = 18.6$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.12$; 90.3% Belgian, 13.1% [also] selected other national groups, such as Dutch, French, Italian, Turkish, Moroccan, or Polish). Data collection was conducted across 4 consecutive academic years between 2016 and 2020 to ensure sufficient first-generation students in the sample. A post hoc sensitivity analysis (one-tailed) conducted in G*Power 3.1.9.2 with .80 power, $\alpha = .05$, and the following sample sizes: first-generation: $n = 148$; continuing-generation: $n = 649$; 3.9% unknown generation status, indicated ability to detect already small group differences at an effect size of $d = 0.23$ (Faul et al., 2009). Data and code are available at the Open Science Framework website (https://osf.io/dgmny/?view_only=0b36a8e2bffa4dc7b17d2c100b0229d2).

Wave 1 was assessed during students' first month at university (October); Wave 2 was assessed during the first month of the second semester (February). In both waves, all first-year psychology students were invited to participate in a study on their experiences at university in exchange for credit. Students' data were then

linked if they took part in both surveys. Data were linked anonymously, using a numerical code that participants used in the experimenter management system to obtain their participation credit. Only individuals who participated in both waves were included in the final sample. The final sample excludes 426 participants who did not participate in Wave 2 (see Results section for attrition analyses) and 27 participants who indicated that they did not participate seriously (below the midpoint of a scale: 1 = *completed the survey not at all seriously*, 7 = *completed the survey very seriously*). The study was approved by the University of Leuven's ethnics committee.

Measures

Unless otherwise indicated, items were answered on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

Generation status. Generation status was based on participants' self-indicated education level of both parents (assessed in Wave 1). For each parent, participants chose one of the following options (based on the Belgian education system) that best described their education level: "*unknown*," "*learning contract*" (type of vocational training), "*incomplete secondary education*," "*secondary education diploma*," "*higher vocational education degree*" (equivalent to a bachelor's degree), "*university degree*" (equivalent to a bachelor's or master's degree), or "*other*" with space provided for participants to describe this. Open-ended answers were checked manually and categorized accordingly (e.g., participants sometimes described the specific degree, which was then recoded to the appropriate category). Participants were considered first generation when neither parent had a higher education degree (i.e., did not have at least a bachelor's degree), and continuing generation when at least one parent had at least a bachelor's degree (Wohn et al., 2013). The present sample consisted of 17.9% first-generation students, which is equivalent to the population level for the psychology department of this university. The present sample consisted of 78.3% continuing-generation students, and the generation status of

3.1% of the sample could not be determined (because of unknown education levels of both parents, or one unknown and one with no higher education degree).

Social background concealment. In Wave 2, participants were asked to reflect on the past semester, and asked to indicate the extent to which they sometimes felt hesitant to talk with fellow students about or show them each of the following things: "Which education your parents followed," "The way you grew up," "Your social background," and "Which high school you attended" ($\alpha = .86$, $M = 1.87$, $SD = 1.23$).³

Social belonging concerns. In Wave 2, participants were asked to indicate, when thinking about the past semester, how often (1 = *never*, 7 = *often*) they experienced each of the following: "Felt that you do not belong at university," "Felt excluded at university," "Felt that you have few social contacts at university," "Felt lonely at university" ($\alpha = .88$, $M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.48$; based on the Need to Belong Scale; Leary et al., 2013).

Academic achievement concerns. On the same scale as the belonging concerns measure, participants indicated how often they experienced each of the following during the past semester: "Feared bad grades," "Not feeling competent at university," "Feared that you will not successfully complete university," "Feared performing poorly academically" ($\alpha = .89$, $M = 5.16$, $SD = 1.28$; based on the Confidence in Learning Subscale of the Science Motivation Questionnaire; Glynn & Koballa, 2006). The order of the two concerns scales was counterbalanced. A principal factor analysis with oblimin rotation extracted the two expected factors with 69.5% explained variance (factors correlated $r = .35$).

Outcome measures. The outcome variables were measured in both waves to allow examination of changes in outcomes.

Well-being. Well-being was measured with 12 items from the General Health Question-

Table 1. Correlations between all variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Social belonging concerns (W2)		.33***	.10**	-.30***	-.51***	-.26***	-.47***
2. Academic achievement concerns (W2)	.48***		.06	-.10*	-.44***	-.05	-.30***
3. Social background concealment (W2)	.25**	.22**		-.11**	-.17***	-.04	-.11*
4. Academic engagement (W2)	-.32***	-.24**	-.10		.41***	.61***	.32***
5. Well-being (W2)	-.39***	-.61***	-.22*	.14		.21***	.61***
6. Academic engagement (W1)	-.25**	-.12	-.21**	.50***	.09		.37***
7. Well-being (W1)	-.39***	-.41***	-.24*	.09	.49***	.32***	

Note. Bivariate correlations for first-generation students are to the left of the diagonal; correlations for continuing-generation students are to the right of the diagonal.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 2. Descriptives of survey measures separately for first- and continuing-generation students and results of Analyses of Variance testing the effect of generation-status.

	First generation		Continuing generation		Analysis of variance			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η_p^2
Social background concealment (W2)	2.34	1.47	1.73	1.13	791	30.72	< .001	.04
Social belonging concerns (W2)	3.10	1.44	3.05	1.47	793	0.14	.707	.00
Academic achievement concerns (W2)	5.36	1.28	5.11	1.27	793	4.58	.033	.01
Academic engagement (W2)	5.36	0.95	5.41	0.87	792	0.37	.543	.00
Well-being (W2)	4.42	1.01	4.60	1.06	625	2.90	.089	.01
Academic engagement (W1)	5.52	0.78	5.43	0.86	795	1.47	.225	.002
Well-being (W1)	4.31	0.94	4.47	0.80	627	3.45	.064	.01

Note. Degrees of freedom vary due to drop-out of some participants during the surveys and are lower for well-being (W1 and W2) because this measure was not assessed in the first year of data collection (see Endnote 4).

naire (GHQ-12; Goldberg & Williams, 1988). Participants rated the extent to which they experienced several feelings lately, such as feeling constantly under pressure (reverse-coded [R]), feeling that they could not control their difficulties (R), feeling down (R), feeling able to make decisions, and feeling able to concentrate (Wave 1: $\alpha = .79$, $M = 4.44$, $SD = 0.84$; Wave 2: $\alpha = .90$, $M = 4.56$, $SD = 1.06$). This measure was not added in the first year of data collection. Pairwise deletion was used in the analyses; hence, the relations reported in what follows including this measure use a smaller sample.⁴

Academic engagement. Six items measured participants' academic engagement (based on the motiva-

tion items of the Academic Adjustment Subscale of the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire; Beyers & Goossens, 2002). On a scale ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*), participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with items such as, "I know why I am at university and what I want to get out of it," "Lately, I have doubts about the value of a university degree" (R), and "Obtaining a university degree is very important to me" (Wave 1: $\alpha = .73$, $M = 5.45$, $SD = 0.84$; Wave 2: $\alpha = .77$, $M = 5.38$, $SD = 0.90$).

Table 1 shows the correlations between measures. Table 2 reports the descriptives of each measure for first- and continuing-generation students separately, and the results of ANOVAs testing whether first- and continuing-generation

students differed on all the survey measures. This study was part of a larger project on first-year university students' experiences. The supplemental material provides an overview of additional measures not included in this manuscript.

Results

Attrition Analyses

All first-year students were offered the possibility to take part in Wave 1 and Wave 2. Students' data were linked if they took part in both surveys. We conducted attrition analyses to see if there were any differences between students who took part in both waves and those who did not. In terms of demographic measures, participants who only completed the Wave 1 survey ($M = 18.56$, $SD = 1.42$) were slightly older than participants who completed both surveys ($M = 18.26$, $SD = 1.12$), $F(1, 1228) = 16.20$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. Also, participants who only completed the Wave 1 survey (20.4%) more likely to be male than participants who completed both surveys (12.4%), $\chi^2(1, N = 858) = 9.61$, $p = .002$. Attrition did not differ based on ethnicity, $\chi^2(1, N = 1,230) = 0.24$, $p = .628$, or generation status, $\chi^2(1, N = 1,184) = 2.00$, $p = .158$. Thus, first-generation students were not less or more likely to also participate in the Wave 2 survey. In terms of Wave 1 measures, participants who only completed the Wave 1 survey reported significantly lower academic engagement ($M = 5.30$, $SD = 0.91$), $F(1, 1235) = 8.39$, $p = .004$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, and lower well-being ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.86$), $F(1, 951) = 24.19$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, than participants who completed both surveys ($M = 5.45$, $SD = 0.84$ and $M = 4.44$, $SD = 0.84$, respectively). These results could indicate that a portion of the more vulnerable group did not complete Wave 2. We discuss this issue in the Discussion section.

Social Background Concealment Among First- Versus Continuing-Generation Students

As expected, the ANOVA reported in Table 2 shows that first-generation students concealed

their social background more often during the semester than continuing-generation students. This finding confirms Hypothesis 1.

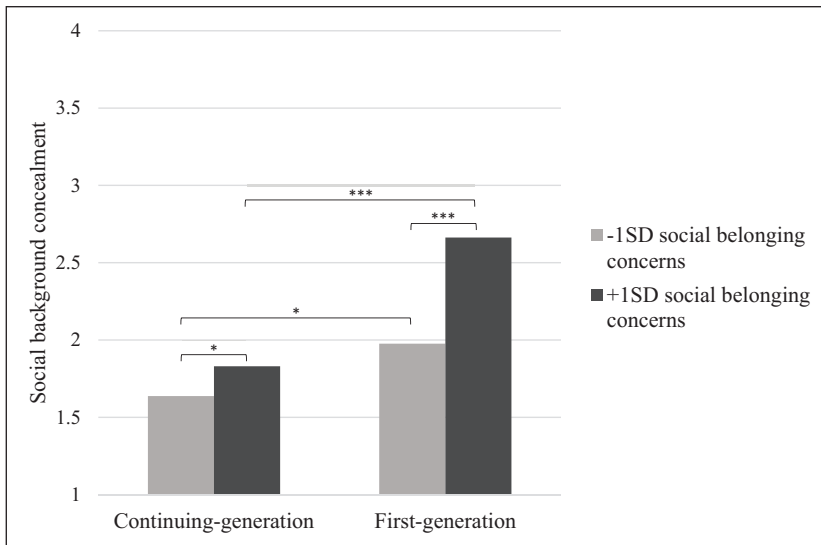
The Role of Social Belonging and Academic Achievement Concerns

First, we examined Hypothesis 2a that first-generation students conceal their SES background at university more than continuing-generation students do, because of higher social belonging and/or achievement concerns. We conducted a mediation analysis in SPSS using Model 4 in PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2017), with generation status as the categorical independent variable (continuing generation = 0, first generation = 1), achievement concerns and belonging concerns as the mediating variables, and concealment as the dependent variable.

Results showed that generation status was significantly related to achievement concerns ($b = 0.25$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.48], $SE = 0.12$, $p = .032$) and concealment (total effect: $b = 0.61$, 95% CI [0.39, 0.82], $SE = 0.11$, $p < .001$), but not to belonging concerns ($b = 0.05$, 95% CI [-0.21, 0.31], $SE = 0.13$, $p = .710$). Belonging concerns ($b = 0.09$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.16], $SE = 0.03$, $p = .002$), but not achievement concerns ($b = 0.05$, 95% CI [-0.02, 0.12], $SE = 0.04$, $p = .139$), were related to more concealment. There were no indirect effects of generation status on concealment via achievement ($b = 0.01$, 95% CI [-0.004, 0.04], $SE = 0.01$) or belonging concerns ($b = 0.01$, 95% CI [-0.02, 0.03], $SE = 0.01$). Including the concern measures, generation status was still related to concealment ($b = 0.59$, 95% CI [0.38, 0.80], $SE = 0.11$, $p < .001$). Thus, Hypothesis 2a was not supported.

Next, we examined Hypothesis 2b that first-generation students conceal their SES background at university more than continuing-generation students do, especially when they report high belonging and/or achievement concerns. We conducted moderation analyses in SPSS using Model 1 in PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2017), with generation status as the categorical independent variable (continuing generation = 0, first generation = 1)

Figure 1. Social background identity concealment as a function of generation status and social belonging concerns (-1 and $+1$ SD around the mean).



† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

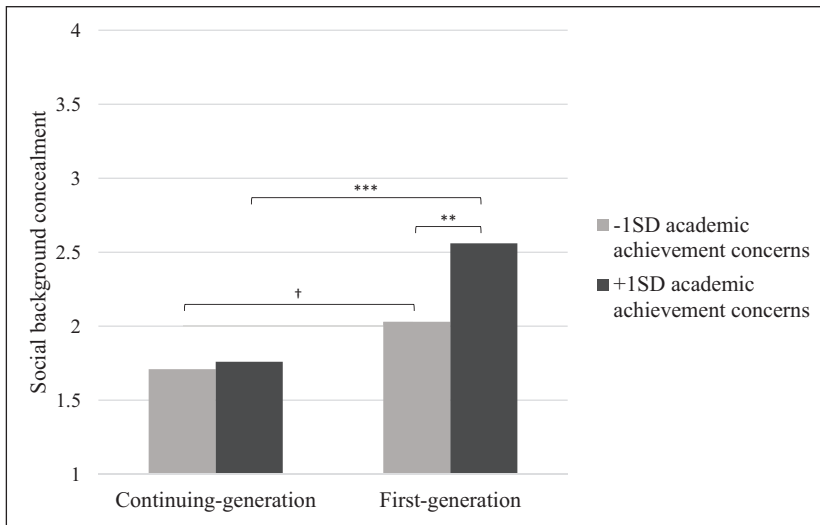
and concealment as the dependent variable. We conducted this model with belonging concerns or achievement concerns as the moderating variable, each time controlling for the other concern type as a covariate.

The model with belonging concerns as a moderator showed that concealment was predicted by generation status ($b = 0.59$, 95% CI [0.37, 0.80], $SE = 0.11$, $p < .001$) and by belonging concerns ($b = 0.07$, 95% CI [0.001, 0.13], $SE = 0.03$, $p = .048$), but not by the covariate achievement concerns ($b = 0.05$, 95% CI [-0.02, 0.12], $SE = 0.04$, $p = .185$). There was also an interaction between generation status and belonging concerns ($b = 0.17$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.32], $SE = 0.08$, $p = .026$). In line with expectations, first-generation students report more concealment than continuing-generation students under high levels of belonging concerns ($b = 0.83$, 95% CI [0.53, 1.13], $SE = 0.15$, $p < .001$; see Figure 1). Under low levels of belonging concerns, the effect of generation status on concealment became smaller but was still significant ($b = 0.34$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.65], $SE = 0.16$, $p = .030$). These findings are in line with Hypothesis 2b. Looking at the

interaction the other way, there was a significant relation between belonging concerns and concealment for first-generation students ($b = 0.24$, 95% CI [0.10, 0.37], $SE = 0.07$, $p = .001$). For continuing-generation students, this relationship was also significant but smaller ($b = 0.07$, 95% CI [0.001, 0.13], $SE = 0.03$, $p = .048$).

The model with achievement concerns as a moderator showed that concealment was predicted by generation status ($b = 0.59$, 95% CI [0.37, 0.80], $SE = 0.11$, $p < .001$) and by the covariate belonging concerns ($b = 0.09$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.15], $SE = 0.03$, $p = .004$), but not by achievement concerns ($b = 0.02$, 95% CI [-0.06, 0.10], $SE = 0.04$, $p = .618$). Furthermore, there was an interaction between generation status and achievement concerns ($b = 0.19$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.36], $SE = 0.09$, $p = .027$). First-generation students concealed more than continuing-generation students under high levels of achievement concerns ($b = 0.80$, 95% CI [0.52, 1.08], $SE = 0.15$, $p < .001$; see Figure 2). Under low levels of achievement concerns, the effect of generation status became marginally significant ($b = 0.32$, 95% CI [-0.001, 0.64], $SE = 0.16$, $p = .051$).

Figure 2. Social background identity concealment as a function of generation status and academic achievement concerns (-1 and $+1$ SD around the mean).



† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

These findings are in line with Hypothesis 2b. Looking at the interaction the other way, achievement concerns were related to concealment for first-generation ($b = 0.21$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.36], $SE = 0.08$, $p = .008$) but not for continuing-generation students ($b = 0.02$, 95% CI [-0.06, 0.10], $SE = 0.04$, $p = .618$).

As a final test, we conducted a moderation analysis using PROCESS macro, Model 3 (Hayes, 2017) to examine whether belonging or achievement concerns played a stronger role in concealment. This model includes all possible interactions between the independent variables (generation status, belonging concerns, achievement concerns). The interaction between generation status and belonging concerns remained ($b = 0.20$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.39], $SE = 0.10$, $p = .034$), but the interaction between generation status and achievement concerns was no longer significant ($b = 0.08$, 95% CI [-0.11, 0.28], $SE = 0.10$, $p = .402$). Concealment was also still predicted by generation status ($b = 0.66$, 95% CI [0.42, 0.90], $SE = 0.12$, $p < .001$) and belonging concerns ($b = 0.08$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.15], $SE = 0.03$, $p = .016$). All other effects were nonsignificant (all $ps > .076$).

Together, these findings provide the strongest support for the social belonging part of Hypothesis 2b: first-generation students conceal their SES background at university more than continuing-generation students especially when they report high belonging concerns.

Relation Between Identity Concealment and Student Outcomes

To examine Hypothesis 3 that concealment is related to a decrease in well-being and academic engagement, we tested two regression models for each outcome. Model 1 included the outcome measure at Wave 2 as dependent variable, and concealment and the outcome measure at Wave 1 as independent variables. Model 2 added the concerns as predictors to test whether concealment uniquely predicted the outcomes above and beyond experienced concerns that might also be costly for outcomes. Continuous predictors were centered around the mean.

Well-being. Model 1 showed that concealment was related to lower well-being in Wave 2 ($b = -0.09$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .001$). This relation was

controlled for Wave 1 well-being ($b = 0.73, SE = 0.04, p < .001$). Model 2 showed that Wave 2 well-being was still predicted by concealment ($b = -0.06, SE = 0.02, p = .017$) and Wave 1 well-being ($b = 0.51, SE = 0.04, p < .001$). Belonging ($b = -0.14, SE = 0.02, p < .001$) and achievement ($b = -0.21, SE = 0.03, p < .001$) concerns were also related to lower well-being.

Academic engagement. Model 1 showed that concealment was related to lower engagement in Wave 2 ($b = -0.06, SE = 0.02, p = .006$). This relation was controlled for Wave 1 engagement ($b = 0.62, SE = 0.03, p < .001$). Model 2 showed that engagement was only marginally significantly predicted by concealment ($b = -0.04, SE = 0.02, p = .058$). Wave 1 academic engagement was still a significant predictor of Wave 2 academic engagement ($b = 0.58, SE = 0.03, p < .001$). Social belonging concerns ($b = -0.09, SE = 0.02, p < .001$) were a predictor of academic engagement, but achievement concerns were not ($b = -0.03, SE = 0.02, p = .125$).

Thus, social background concealment was related to a decrease in well-being. The relation with engagement did not hold significantly when controlling for concerns, indicating that concealment less reliably predicts engagement above and beyond (belonging) concerns that are also costly for engagement.

Discussion

This study examined identity concealment as a social identity management strategy for first-generation students. Results showed that first-generation students indeed concealed their social background more than continuing-generation students. Furthermore, although both belonging and achievement concerns strengthened identity concealment among first-generation students, social belonging concerns seemed to play a stronger role. Finally, social background concealment seemed to be costly, as it related to a decrease in well-being.

Contributions

Previous work on identity concealment has evidenced how people who possess a devalued or

stigmatized identity that is invisible unless revealed often keep their identity hidden to avoid possible bias (Goh et al., 2019; Newheiser & Barreto, 2014). Identity concealment has been reported for concealable stigmatized identities such as those related to sexual orientation, mental health (e.g., schizophrenia, depression), and having a history of poverty or physical illness not directly visible to others (Newheiser et al., 2017; Quinn et al., 2017). The present paper extends this literature by evidencing concealment of social background among first-generation students. Universities are environments that are tailored to middle-class culture, norms, and values (Bourdieu, 1985; Stephens et al., 2019). As a consequence, students from working-class backgrounds often feel less comfortable in this environment and can even feel stigmatized due to negative stereotypes surrounding lower social classes and education (Easterbrook et al., 2019). As such, being a first-generation student is an identity that is devalued in the university context, and concealing their social background at university can be a viable identity management strategy for them. This viability is further increased by the high meritocracy belief present at universities (Kluegel & Smith, 1986), creating the idea that anyone can succeed at university education independent of their social background, and that it is one's own individual responsibility and choice to make it to a higher status position, such as succeeding at university (Kuppens et al., 2018). Identity concealment as a viable identity management strategy for first-generation students was supported by the present findings.

Furthermore, the finding that social belonging concerns played a role in concealment suggests that by concealing their social background identity, first-generation students aim to increase their sense of social fit in this middle-class university environment. That we found social belonging to play a stronger role than academic achievement concerns in identity concealment might be because belonging is a fundamental human motive. People have a vital need to fit in socially and to feel included, accepted, and at home (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Kyprianides et al., 2019; Major & Schmader, 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vignoles,

2011). In fact, belonging has been proposed to be the most fundamental human motive there is (Fiske, 2018; Leary & Cox, 2008). Because belonging is such a key goal, especially when adjusting to a new organizational environment (Walton & Cohen, 2011), experiencing uncertainties about belonging in their first year at university may be particularly influential in first-generation students' identity management (see also Veldman et al., 2021). Concerns about achievement might start playing a stronger role in identity concealment among first-generation students once they have been at university longer—to convince themselves that low-SES stereotypes of poorer performance are not applicable to them or to make sure that others in the university environment do not see them through the lens of these stereotypes. Future research could examine the role of belonging and achievement concerns in identity concealment responses among students who are further along in their university trajectory.

The present paper also contributes to the literature taking a social identity perspective on the transition to university for first- and continuing-generation students (Nieuwenhuis et al., 2019; Phillips et al., 2020; Stephens et al., 2012). That is, the findings show yet another social identity process through which group inequalities may be perpetuated at university. Our findings suggest that first-generation students feel a need to assimilate into the university environment, to conceal their SES background to try and fit in at university. As such, they are faced with the difficulty of having to negotiate their belonging to the middle-class university identity and to their social background identity (Jetten et al., 2008). Previous work indicated that upward social mobility for stigmatized individuals oftentimes goes together with severing connections with their ingroup, who perceive a lack of loyalty from them (Gaines, 2001; van Laar et al., 2014). The finding that concealment was related to decreased well-being is consistent with the idea that they may indeed lose some of the (psychological and other) benefits that a group provides.

Future research could gain more direct insight into how this concealment process at university

relates to connections with one's social background. The consequences of social background concealment for ingroup relations might differ depending on how strong social background identification is to begin with. For first-generation students who identify strongly with their social background, concealing it to try and fit in at university might not go together with severing connections with their social background. As a consequence, they might still have the advantages of belonging to the group but might feel inauthentic at university, as they are concealing an important part of themselves. On the other hand, for people who do not identify strongly with their social background to begin with, concealing it might go together with severing connections with their social background. As a result, they lose potential benefits of belonging to that group (such as support), but the cost of concealing in terms of authenticity might not be as high given that the group is not an important part of their identity.

Over time, the well-being cost of identity concealment that was found in the present study may result in withdrawal from university (Jetten et al., 2008). People might detach their self-worth from academic achievement and success entirely, hence further strengthening educational inequalities (Osborne, 1995; Steele, 1997). There were already some hints about this in the present study, with identity concealment being related to a decrease in academic engagement. However, this link did not hold when controlling for belonging concerns, indicating that concealment was less reliably related to academic engagement. In line with previous work (Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Newheiser et al., 2017), we expected that concealment would be related to lower engagement because the act of trying to conceal aspects of one's identity is stressful and because concealment could go together with losing a source of support. The reason that we did not see a reliable relation there could be because a different process might actually lead to more engagement (see e.g., Matschke & Sassenberg, 2010). That is, if people indeed conceal as a way of trying to improve their position in a university context where academic

engagement is valued, then one could expect concealment to actually go together with increased engagement. It would be interesting for future work to try and disentangle these two processes to increase our understanding of how and when concealment is related to academic engagement.

Societal Implications

Identity concealment likely has other consequences on a broader, societal level. First, an ironic consequence of identity concealment is that it further perpetuates the idea of meritocracy. Identity concealment is an identity management response whereby people manage the visibility of their identity to avoid the negative experience of being stigmatized or to better fit in with a high-status outgroup—and, as such, to aim to improve one's personal situation (van Veelen et al., 2020). This individual concealment response stands in contrast to more collective responses that try to improve the position of the entire group. As such, identity concealment implies that people try to assimilate to the context and avoid challenging the current status quo (e.g., through protesting the disadvantaged position of one's group; van Veelen et al., 2020). This way, identity concealment further strengthens the meritocratic belief that anyone can succeed at university education independent of their social background, and that it is one's own individual responsibility and choice to make it to a higher status position, such as succeeding at university (Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Kuppens et al., 2018).

Secondly, first-generation students concealing their social background identity to try to fit in and assimilate to the university context results in the perpetuation of a nondiverse concept of who a university student is and can be (e.g., middle class; Stephens et al., 2019), reducing being a university student as a possible self for potential incoming students (Oyserman, 2019). Seeing people "like them" at university is important for low-SES students to believe that they themselves could follow the same path (Easterbrook et al., 2019). This possibility to see ingroup members with whom low-SES students can identify at university is thwarted

when these ingroup members conceal their group membership (Dasgupta, 2011).

Finally, universities also miss out on an opportunity to benefit from diversity when their first-generation students feel the need to dissociate from their social background and assimilate to the university context in order to fit in (Ellemers & Rink, 2016). Universities can protect the outcomes of first-generation students by reducing their need to conceal their social background. Creating identity-safe environments that provide a sense of belonging would be likely successful to this end. For example, previous work among first-year university students has shown that a brief intervention framing social adversity as common and transient was successful for negatively stereotyped groups in academics (African American students in this case; Walton & Cohen, 2011). This intervention prevented students from seeing social adversity on campus as an indictment of their belonging. Similarly, such an intervention could be helpful in the present context where we found that social background concealment occurred especially when first-generation students experienced social belonging concerns during their first semester at university. We interpret this finding as indicating that first-generation students aim to increase their sense of social fit in the middle-class university environment by concealing their social background identity. An intervention that frames the experience of social belonging concerns as common and transient might prevent first-generation students from interpreting their feeling of low belonging as originating from their social background identity, and hence reduce their social background concealment. Other interventions that could be helpful to increase first-generation students' sense of belonging (and hence reduce their felt need to conceal) are role model interventions that affirm their first-generation identity at university (Stephens et al., 2014) or interventions that boost close and supportive cross-class relationships at university (Carey et al., 2022).

Limitations and Future Directions

We interpret the present findings as indicating that first-generation students conceal their social

background identity to cope with concerns they experience regarding their social belonging at university. An open question is whether concealing the identity that makes them feel that they do not belong or fit in socially (or that would make others signal to them that this is the case) helps increase their sense of social fit in the middle-class university environment. Although it could help a small group of individuals in the longer run, it seems more likely that concealment will further strengthen social belonging concerns. Previous work indeed indicated that although people expect to benefit interpersonally, hiding a stigma actually leads to feeling less socially accepted (Newheiser & Barreto, 2014). An interesting avenue for future research would be to examine how belonging concerns and identity concealment relate to each other over time. Ideally, a future study would consist of three waves and measure social belonging and academic achievement concerns, concealment, and outcomes (well-being and academic engagement) in all waves. This would enable examining the relation between concerns and concealment over time, and how this relates to changes in outcomes over time. Future research would also need to confirm the importance of social belonging over academic achievement concerns in identity concealment. Finally, attrition analyses indicated that a part of the more vulnerable students (i.e., those with lower well-being and engagement in Wave 1) did not participate in Wave 2. Although we have no reasons to expect that the processes would be different including this more vulnerable group, this would need to be confirmed by future research.

Conclusion

The present study is the first of its kind to document social background concealment as a coping strategy among first-generation students to fit in socially at university. Even if in the longer run it might help some first-generation students to increase their social fit in the middle-class university environment, identity concealment seems primarily costly on both the individual and the broader, societal level. As such, paying extra

attention to the sense of social belonging of first-generation students seems the most fruitful way to allow for more successful university transition and to maintain a diverse student body.

Authors' note

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Socioeconomic status can be determined by level of education, wealth, or social class (DiMaggio, 2012). The present research focuses on level of education, but given that SES consists of other aspects too, we also consider the literature focusing on these other aspects of socioeconomic status background (wealth or social class) as relevant for the present research (status determined by parental education level).
2. Due to a programming error in the second year of data collection, gender was not recorded in that year. Consequently, this percentage is based on 68% of the sample. There is no reason to

believe that participant gender distribution would have been different in the second year of data collection compared to the 3 other years. Additionally, the indicated percentage of female participants is similar to the overall percentage of female students at the psychology department of this university.

3. Results fully replicate regardless of whether we use the full social background concealment scale or only focus on the two items directly referring to social background (“Which education your parents followed” and “Your social background”).
4. A similar post hoc sensitivity analysis as reported in the “Participants and procedure” section with the smallest sample sizes available (first-generation students: $n = 118$; continuing-generation students: $n = 509$) showed that we were still able to detect small differences between groups with an effect size of $d = 0.25$ for these sample sizes.

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