



Managing threatened identities across everyday situations[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Identity threats occur across diverse identities and situations, yet little is known about how responses to these threats relate to subsequent psychological costs across diverse identities, people, and situations. Across six studies capturing 22,000+ instances of identity threat experienced by 1648 participants, we identify two prevalent identity distancing strategies: downplaying a threatened identity and emphasizing similarity to others. Correlational evidence (Studies 1–3) illustrates that greater downplaying of identities most strongly predicted feeling inauthentic, whereas greater downplaying and emphasizing similarly predicted disidentifying from the threatened identity. Identity distancing predicted felt inauthenticity regardless of social climate or concealability, whereas disidentification depended on these contextual factors, underscoring when identity distancing may be adaptive. Finally, both strategies indirectly predicted greater psychological stress and worse self-reported physical health through inauthenticity and disidentification. Extending beyond correlational findings, a longitudinal experiment (Study 4) demonstrated that randomly assigning participants to enact identity distancing strategies over a week increased inauthenticity and disidentification compared to an identity affirming strategy. Together, these studies provide a multiple-identity examination of distancing strategies across diverse threatened identities, people, and situations, revealing psychological consequences of managing identities in the face of myriad everyday situations.

1. Introduction

The universe of ways in which a marginalized identity can feel threatened is vast and varied (Murphy & Taylor, 2012; Steele et al., 2002). A casual conversation about summer travel or hobbies, for example, could make someone from a low socioeconomic background feel like they do not belong. For someone else, it could be hearing a question like “Where are you from?” or being the only person in the room that looks the way you do, or witnessing surprise from others when you defy a stereotype associated with someone in your group.

Experiences of identity threat range from those classically studied in the stigma literature (e.g., race, gender, and sexual orientation, disability status, health status; e.g., Badgett et al., 2007; Spencer et al., 1999; Steele et al., 2002) to those less often examined (e.g., culture, region, language, religion, SES, age, political orientation). These threats can be shaped by individual characteristics, such as stigma consciousness or rejection sensitivity (e.g., Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002; Pinel, 1999), as well as features of the situation, ranging from subtle threat

cues (e.g., not feeling like minded with others) to overt bias (e.g., being labeled an affirmative action hire; Slepian & Jacoby-Senghor, 2021). Identities also vary in concealability, prevailing supportiveness or hostility of the situation, and level of salience across contexts. Though such experiences substantively differ based on a complex set of factors, what is shared across them is that individuals often engage in some form of identity management to navigate the threats they encounter.

This complexity rightfully leads each factor to have their own traditions within scholarship on stigma, prejudice, and discrimination, with nuanced distinctions necessary to understanding their full impact. The current work complements these research traditions by examining the prevalence and impact of behavioral identity distancing strategies that diminish the salience or relevance of the threatened identity (Van Veelen et al., 2020), across diverse identities, individuals, and in response to myriad kinds of threat. As we argue below, these strategies may have unintended costs. Adopting a novel multiple-identity approach, we examine how identity, individual, and situational factors explain the psychological and wellbeing corollaries of identity

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distancing, casting a wide net across a broad universe of identities and threatening situations.

1.1. Identity distancing strategies

Building from extant work (e.g., Roberts et al., 2008; Van Veelen et al., 2020), we examine two meaningful identity distancing strategies: *downplaying* a threatened identity (i.e., minimizing, concealing, or suppressing aspects of a threatened identity to diminish its salience within a context), and *emphasizing similarity* to others along other identities (i.e., highlighting or playing up similarity with others along a non-threatened identity to diminish the salience of the threatened identity). Existing literatures on stigma, identity, belongingness, and intergroup relations are decidedly mixed as to whether these strategies predict positive or negative outcomes. Much of this scholarship has understandably examined one identity at a time.

Here, we acknowledge the possibility that different situations can evoke different levels of threat, that some identities are more often or more intensely threatened than others, and certain people (compared to others with the same identity or in the same situation) can experience any given threat more acutely. In the present investigation, accordingly, we do not assume that threats across identities are equivalent in form, severity, or consequence, nor do we intend to minimize disproportionate burdens faced by marginalized communities. That is, rather than assuming a certain magnitude of threat, we examine how people respond to threats across diverse circumstances. This thereby allows us to evaluate whether the enactment of identity distancing behaviors is associated with particular psychological consequences across a diverse set of identities, people, and situations.

As elaborated below, we predict that the extent to which people employ identity distancing behaviors will be associated with greater feelings of inauthenticity and disidentification from the threatened identity. To the extent that identity distancing is related to disidentification and feeling inauthentic, we posit that people will have poorer psychological and physical health. Such a finding would help explain why experiences of identity threat relate to worse mental health and wellbeing (Major et al., 2018).

1.2. Downplaying threatened identities

First, research on behavioral *downplaying* of threatened identities has often focused on concealable stigmas. People with a minority sexual orientation, a criminal history, or a mental illness, for example, can withhold revealing their stigmatized identity in new situations (e.g., Croteau et al., 2008; Pachankis, 2007; Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009). Similarly, “passing” can represent a form of downplaying employed by individuals with stigmatized identities who can appear to be a member of the dominant group (e.g., Albuja et al., 2018; Khanna & Johnson, 2010).

Crucially, however, the capacity to downplay one's identity is not solely determined by whether an identity is “visible” or “invisible.” Classic forms of concealment and passing represent *only a subset* of the downplaying strategies used in everyday life. For example, even when a threatened identity is visible to others, an individual can choose to downplay the importance of that identity to one's self concept or to alter how stereotypically they behave in a given context (e.g., code-switching; e.g., Clair et al., 2005; McCluney et al., 2021; Pronin et al., 2004; Roberts et al., 2008). Downplaying a threatened identity is therefore likely to be employed by both those with concealable identities and those whose identities are readily apparent. Moreover, downplaying may show reliable effects on important markers of personal well-being across diverse identities and situations. However, extant evidence on the consequences of concealing or downplaying one's identity is decidedly mixed, with effects ranging from adaptive and protective (Goffman, 1963; Quinn et al., 2004) to harmful and maladaptive (Newheiser & Barreto, 2014; Pachankis, 2007; Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009; also see

Camacho et al., 2020). It remains unclear whether these effects are always specific to particular identities and contexts (see Pachankis et al., 2008 for a taxonomy of stigma experiences) or whether downplaying additionally produces general effects across different contexts and identities (Quinn, 2017).

One complicating factor in drawing conclusions across this body of evidence is that often the comparison is between disclosure versus concealment. Yet the true breadth of behavioral downplaying is more expansive (Van Veelen et al., 2020). By capturing the natural diversity of situations that prompt downplaying an identity and a broader set of downplaying strategies, the present work can provide a clearer and more comprehensive view of this phenomenon.

1.3. Emphasizing similarity

An alternative to holding the threatened identity at arm's length in response threat is to more closely associate with non-threatened identities that one shares with others. Social identity theory theorizes that people are motivated to enhance differences from devalued others and similarities to valued others and that these processes are fundamental in self-concept management (Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel & Wilkes, 1963). We therefore expect that emphasizing shared identity is a prevalent response to identity threat. Despite the prominence of social identity theory, it remains unclear whether emphasizing similarity is an effective shield against these threats (e.g., Dovidio et al., 2016; Ufkes et al., 2016).

What is certainly clear is that researchers and practitioners have viewed emphasizing similarity as a desirable goal. Uncovering similarities can strengthen interpersonal bonds (Byrne, 1961), allow people to feel belonging (Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2013), and help verify one's perception of reality (Hardin & Higgins, 1996). In intergroup contexts, researchers have touted increasing self-other overlap with the outgroup (Dovidio et al., 2004, 2007; Fritzlen et al., 2020; Sasaki & Vorauer, 2013) or making superordinate identities more salient (e.g., we are all members of this academy or this country; Lemay Jr. et al., 2020; Scroggins et al., 2016) as methods for reducing intergroup bias and discrimination (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000; Kunst et al., 2015; Vezzali et al., 2015) or to facilitate upward mobility within the status hierarchy (Derks et al., 2015; Van Veelen & Derks, 2022). Likewise, many institutions implement diversity policies that emphasize overarching identities or underlying similarities between employees (Apfelbaum et al., 2012).

However, there is evidence that emphasizing similarity might have drawbacks. For example, interacting with people who hold colorblind ideologies, which emphasize shared values and identities to the exclusion of group differences, psychologically depletes racial minorities (Holoien & Shelton, 2012). Additionally, superordinate identity strategies have limited effectiveness precisely because they depend on actively diminishing the importance of subordinate identities that may be valued by individuals (Dovidio et al., 2009; Roberts et al., 2008; Saguy et al., 2008).

Another limitation of existing scholarship on downplaying and emphasizing similarity is that these strategies are rarely examined simultaneously. When studies only assess the extent individuals, emphasizing similarity, for example, other forms of identity distancing may account for some of the observed association with measured outcomes. In the present work, we test each strategy as competing predictors to better clarify their unique associations with responses to identity threats.

1.4. Disidentification and inauthenticity

In our framework, identity distancing strategies are immediate behavioral responses to situational experiences of identity threat that may come with a shift in one's psychological connection to that identity. Whereas downplaying directly diminishes a threatened identity, we

predict that emphasizing similarity reduces its distinctiveness, both to others and oneself. We propose that, as a result, the degree to which people employ these two strategies will predict the extent to which they feel disidentification and inauthenticity in that moment, which will subsequently predict lower wellbeing.

We define disidentification as the reconceptualization of the self, such that a particular identity ceases to be a foundation for self-evaluation (Spencer et al., 2016). While some work operationalizes disidentification itself as a form of identity distancing (e.g., “that’s not me”; see Van Veelen et al., 2020), the distinction we draw in this work is between *behavioral* distancing strategies and *psychological* evaluations of the self with respect to one’s identity.

Prior work demonstrates that subjective identification can erode as a response to sustained threats to one’s identity (e.g., Crocker & Major, 1989; Derks et al., 2015; Major & O’Brien, 2005; O’Brien & Major, 2005; Steele, 1997; Steele et al., 2002) or when situational changes render an existing identity incompatible with their environment (Wittman, 2019). Women, for example, respond to threats regarding their math ability by identifying less with feminine characteristics (Pronin et al., 2004), and social identity threat can lead racial minorities to disidentify from both their racial identity (Yip, 2016) and the threatening domain itself (Steele, 1997; von Hippel et al., 2011). We suggest that behavioral identity distancing behaviors play a role in how threat affects the self-concept, ultimately weakening psychological identification with the threatened aspect of self.

We define feelings of inauthenticity as the subjective experience of incongruence between one’s inner self and outward behavior identity (Bailey & Levy, 2022; Horton Jr et al., 2025; Slepian et al., 2017). Given that the hallmarks of feeling authentic are “being oneself” and acting in accordance with one’s own values and self-identity rather than external influence (Wood et al., 2008), distancing from a threatened identity is likely to relate to feeling more inauthentic (Crabtree & Pillow, 2020). However, while we expect both identity distancing strategies to relate to greater inauthenticity, the effect of downplaying may be significantly stronger than that of emphasizing similarity. Perceiving one’s identity as a poor fit increases self-consciousness and self-monitoring, which reduce authenticity (Schmader & Sedikides, 2018; also see Newheiser & Barreto, 2014; Slepian et al., 2017; Sun & Slepian, 2020), suggesting that downplaying should strongly predict feeling inauthentic. In contrast, playing-up shared identities may highlight one’s fit within a given context. As a result, emphasizing similarity may predict inauthenticity to a lesser degree, or even predict greater feelings of authenticity.

The reduced connection to one’s own identity—in either the form of disidentification or inauthenticity—may carry unintended costs. For instance, disidentifying from one’s identity has been linked to strategic shifts in individuals’ narratives of the self (Valentine & Sporton, 2009), decreased workplace well-being (Von Hippel et al., 2015), and abandonment of one’s personal goals (Woodcock et al., 2012). In turn, feeling inauthentic subsequently predicts worse health and psychological wellbeing (Slepian & Jacoby-Senghor, 2021). Building from these findings, we predict that downplaying a threatened identity and emphasizing similarity with others are two pathways by which disidentification and felt inauthenticity occur, which, in turn exacerbates psychological stress and undermines health.

1.5. Current studies

We utilize the Identity Threats Questionnaire (ITQ), which samples 30 commonly experienced threat situations in order to speak to a broader universe of identity threats (see Slepian & Jacoby-Senghor, 2021). Based on the Multiple Exemplar Method (Slepian & Kalokerinos, 2024), this approach allows us to measure multiple responses from each participant, leading to 22,000+ instances of identity threat experienced by 1648 participants across a diverse set of situations and threatened identities encountered in participants’ everyday life.

In a pilot study ($N = 200$; see SOM for method, sample details, and

results), we first confirmed that downplaying and emphasizing similarity are common and distinguishable responses to everyday identity threats. On average, participants reported encountering 8 identity threat situations ($M = 8.46$, $SD = 6.23$) in the past week across 1701 total situations. Importantly, participants reported downplaying their identity in 52% of time (885 total events), emphasizing similarity 43.8% of the time (745 total events), and enacting both strategies 6.4% of the time (109 total events; see Fig. 1).

Building from this initial evidence, Studies 1a–3 examine whether downplaying one’s identity and emphasizing similarity are significantly associated with greater *disidentification* and feeling more *inauthentic*, and whether the strength of these associations differ across identity distancing strategy. In Study 2, we test whether these relationships hold across a sample of non-US participants. In Study 3, we test whether these identity distancing strategies are more or less adaptive in certain situations. Specifically, we test how support for or hostility toward one’s identity in one’s social context moderates the effects of identity distancing.

We then pool data from Studies 1a–3, as pre-registered, to examine whether the effects of identity distancing depend on the concealability of participants’ threatened identity, and whether identity distancing predicts physical and psychological wellbeing through inauthenticity and disidentification. Finally, in Study 4, we conducted a longitudinal experiment randomly assigning participants to enact one of three strategies over the course of a week: downplaying, emphasizing similarity, or affirming their identity (a comparison condition used in past work; e.g., Mussweiler et al., 2000; Sherman et al., 2013) to examine their causal effects on disidentification and inauthenticity.

All studies, measures, and participant exclusions are reported in this manuscript or the Supplementary Online Materials (SOM); all data and analysis scripts are available on OSF: <https://osf.io/qrtfp4>.

1.5.1. Study 1a

We tested whether, in response to everyday identity threats, downplaying one’s identity and emphasizing similarity are associated with *disidentification* and feeling more *inauthentic*, and explored whether these associations differed in magnitude across strategies.

2. Method

We preregistered our data collection, exclusions, and analysis plan on OSF: <https://osf.io/5q6eg>.

2.1. Participants

We aimed to recruit 200 participants for the study, and recruited 201 participants from Mechanical Turk (MTurk) with the same advertisement used in the pilot study. Four respondents did not consent to participate and did not complete the survey. One additional participant indicated providing fabricated responses and their data were excluded, as preregistered, yielding a final sample of 196 participants (110 women, 86 men; $M_{age} = 40.66$, $SD_{age} = 12.85$, 95% CI [38.85, 42.47], range = 18–74).

We recruited a diverse set of self-reported threatened identities. Roughly 94% of participants reported having a clearly stigmatized identity, such as being a woman (in a male dominant context), a racial minority, diverse sexual orientations, religions, countries of birth, education, disability. Among the roughly 6% of our remaining sample who were straight White men, participants reported an array of threatened identities, including immigration status, socioeconomic status, and mental illness. We used similar sampling methods across Studies 1–3. Fig. 2 illustrates the diversity of participants and Fig. 3 presents social identities across identity threat situations participants experienced across Studies 1–3.

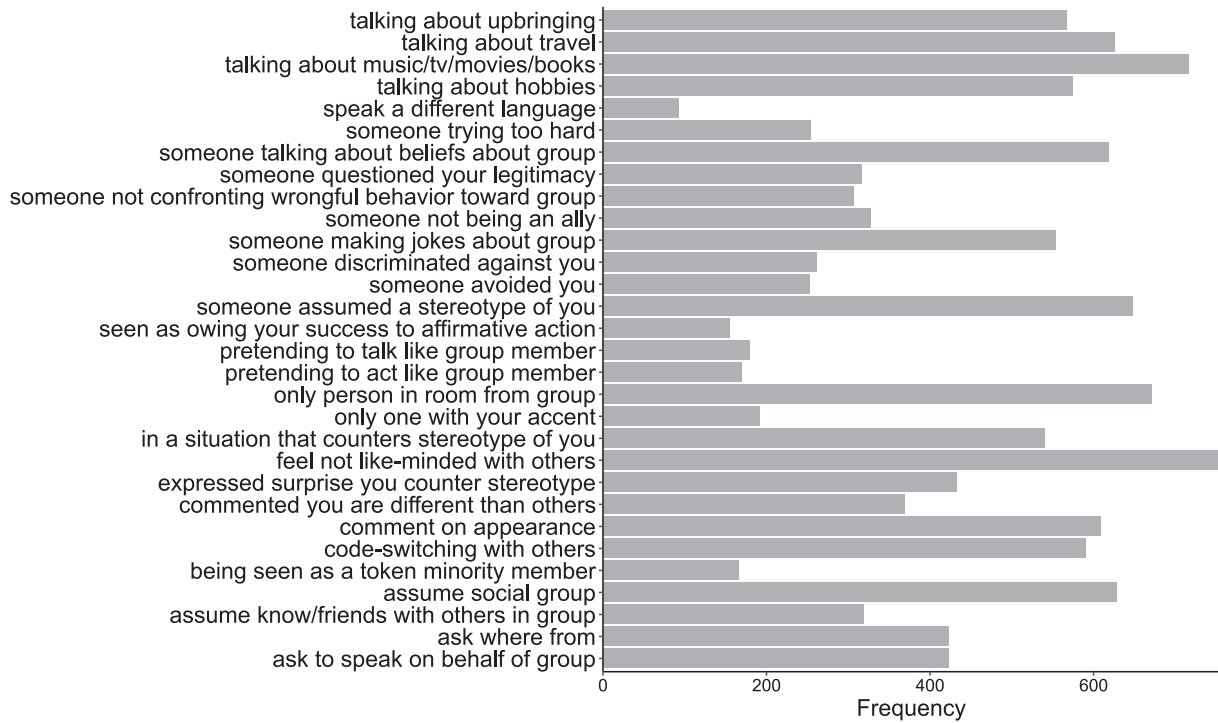


Fig. 1. Everyday identity threat situations by pilot study participants in the past week.

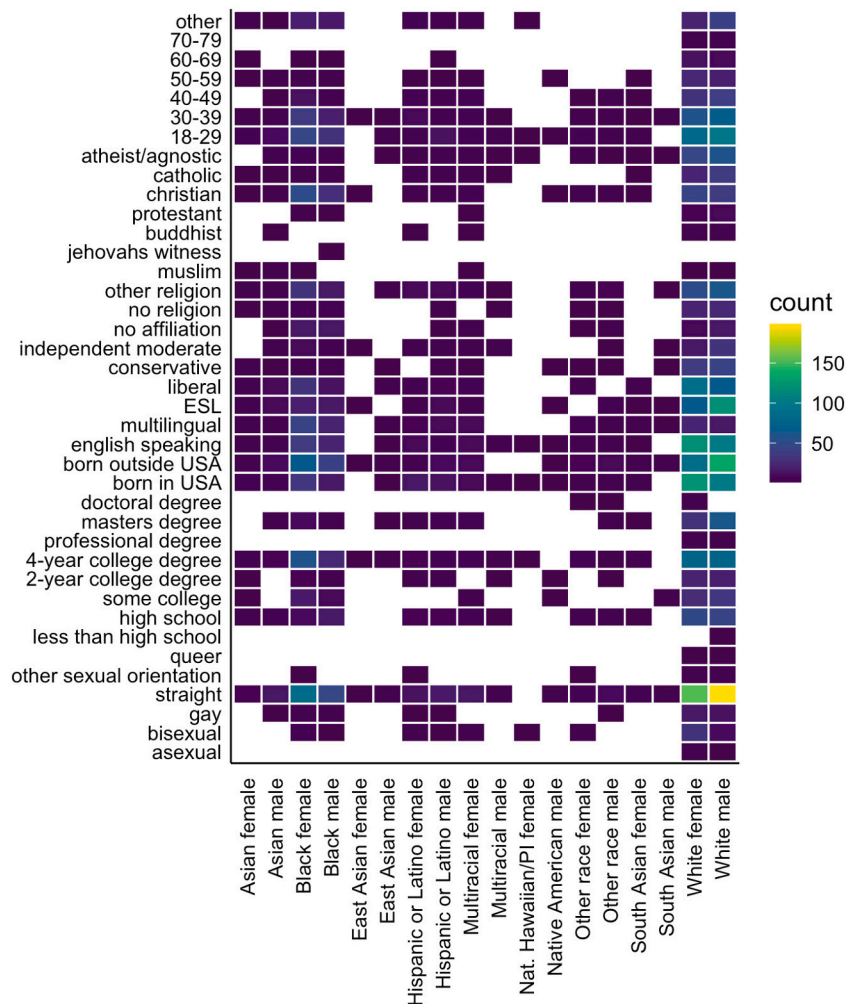


Fig. 2. Visualization of diversity of participant sample for Studies 1–3 (N = 1140).

2.2. Sample size determination

To determine whether our sample size was sufficient, we conducted simulation-based power analyses using the *simr()* R package (using 1000 simulations). We set a small-to-medium effect size as the threshold ($\beta = 0.10$) for both downplaying and emphasizing similarity as predictors. Results from this power analysis indicated our estimated power was between 97.2% (95% CI [95.98, 98.13]) and 99.3% (95% CI [98.56, 99.72]) for our predictors given our recruited sample of 1649 observations from 196 participants.

2.3. Procedure

As in the Pilot Study, participants completed the ITQ wherein they reported identities threatened over the past week across nine categories and across 30 situations. Per each identity threat situation participants experienced, we measured the degree to which they *downplayed* their threatened identity or *emphasized similarity* with others and the degree to which they felt *inauthenticity* and *disidentification* from their identity. Participants then indicated which of their identities had been threatened. Afterward, participants reported additional demographic information and whether or not their responses had been honest.

3. Measures

Per each identity threat situation, participants completed the following items using 7-point Likert-type scales (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).¹

3.1. Downplaying and emphasizing similarity

We measured downplaying one's identity with the following three items: "I downplayed an aspect of my identity," "I tried not to behave in a way that is typical of people with my identity," and "I hid part of my identity" ($\alpha=0.92$; $M = 3.22$, $SD = 2.03$). We measured emphasizing similarity with the following two items: "I emphasized how I am similar to those around me," and "I played up a different identity that I share with other people around me" ($\alpha=0.83$; $M = 3.31$, $SD = 1.95$). Consistent with prior work conceptualizing identity distancing as a family of functionally similar but behaviorally distinct strategies (Van Veelen et al., 2020), we operationalize downplaying and emphasizing similarity as distinct constructs that share a common psychological function (i.e., managing an identity threat) albeit via different psychological responses. Specifically, downplaying involves reducing the salience of the threatened identity while emphasizing similarity involves increasing the salience of a different, shared identity.²

3.2. Inauthenticity

"I felt like I could NOT be the 'real me'," "I felt like I was NOT being authentic," and "I felt like I was NOT able to be completely myself" (Slepian & Jacoby-Senghor, 2021; $\alpha=0.97$; $M = 3.56$, $SD = 2.18$).

3.3. Disidentification

"I thought of myself as not a member of my identity," "I disengaged

¹ We report model-estimated means (M), standard errors (SE), and multilevel model-based associations (standardized β s) for all variables and studies in the SOM (see Table S1 for Study 1a, Table S5 for Study 1b, Table S8 for Study 1c, Table S12 for Study 2, and Table S14 for Study 3). We also report the results from exploratory factor analyses to confirm that the 3-item measure of downplaying loads onto a single factor across studies in the SOM.

² Exploratory factor analyses confirmed items loaded as expected on two separate dimensions (see Table S18).

from other people who shared my identity," and "I felt that my identity did not relate to me personally" ($\alpha=0.94$; $M = 2.62$, $SD = 1.82$).

4. Results

4.1. Analysis plan

We entered inauthenticity and disidentification as dependent variables in separate models, with the three remaining variables as simultaneous predictors. This approach isolates the unique variance explained by each predictor beyond overlap between measured constructs (particularly given that participants are rating the same experience; see Multiple Exemplar Measurement; Slepian & Kalokerinos, 2024). Our goal with this analytical approach was to ensure that the effects of identity distancing strategies on each outcome held beyond a general negative reaction to identity distancing, thus providing more accurate estimates.

Given multiple observations per participant, we analyzed the data via cross-classified multilevel models using the *lmerTest* R-package, which calculates p -values using a Satterthwaite approximation test to approximate the F -distribution to calculate degrees of freedom (Kuznetsova et al., 2013). We included identity, threat situation, and participant as random factors in each model (Judd et al., 2012).³ In cases where identity distancing strategies emerged as significant predictors and their associated 95% CIs overlapped, we performed follow-up general linear hypothesis tests (using the *multcomp* R-package; Hotorn et al., 2008). These tests directly evaluated whether the estimated difference between coefficients was statistically different. In cases where 95% CIs are non-overlapping, we deduce that these differences are statistically significant (e.g., Slepian & Jacoby-Senghor, 2021).

4.2. Identity threats

Participants reported experiencing 1649 identity threats in total, across the 30 situations included in the ITQ. Participants experienced an average of 8–9 identity threats in the last week ($M = 8.41$, $SD = 6.00$, 95% CI [7.57, 9.26]).

4.3. Predicting feelings of inauthenticity

Downplaying one's identity more strongly predicted felt inauthenticity than did emphasizing similarity (as indicated by non-overlapping 95% confidence intervals; Table 1). Emphasizing similarity nonetheless still significantly predicted greater feelings of inauthenticity, indicating a negative psychological consequence of superordinate identity strategies on threatened individuals.

³ All models included random effects for person, identity, and situation. The situation random effect captures situation-level variance in which identity threats are experienced (e.g., hobbies, someone assuming stereotypes about you, someone making jokes about your identity group, being discrimination against, etc). The *person* random effect captures individual-level variance reflecting each participants' disposition and their unique histories of lived experience, which are inherently intertwined with the specific constellation of identities each person uniquely holds. The *identity* random effect represents a categorical grouping variable indicating broad identity domains (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation), rather than specific identity subgroups (e.g., Black, Asian, or Latino). Consequently, the variance attributable to identity tends to be smaller than that attributable to person, as it reflects only the broader categorical structure of identity domains. Situation also contributes smaller variance than the variance attributable to the person random effect. This modeling approach allows us to quantify how much variability is explained by broad identity domains compared to situation and person factors, recognizing that the most substantial variance resides at the level of individuals' specific intersectional experiences.



Fig. 3. Per each identity threat faced in the past week by all participants, frequencies of the threatened social identity and the identity threat situation (Studies 1–3).

4.4. Predicting feelings of disidentification

Emphasizing similarity and downplaying identity both significantly predicted greater disidentification (Table 1). A follow-up general linear hypothesis test directly comparing these coefficients indicated that emphasizing similarity was more strongly associated with disidentification than was downplaying, $difference = -0.084, SE = 0.04, z = -2.13, p = .033, 95\% CI [-0.163, -0.007]$.

4.4.1. Studies 1b and 1c

In Studies 1b and 1c, we examine the robustness of these effects by replicating Study 1.

5. Method

We aimed to recruit 200 participants per study (Study 1b: $N = 206$; Study 1c: $N = 206$). We preregistered the data collection, exclusions, and analysis plan on OSF (Study 1b; <https://osf.io/52vhj> Study 1c: <https://osf.io/xah39>). Three respondents indicated at the end of the study providing fabricated responses in Study 1b, as did two participants in Study 1c. Additionally, one respondent did not consent to participate in Study 1b, and two respondents did not consent to participate in Study 1c. Their data were excluded, as preregistered, yielding a final sample of 202 participants (123 women, 79 men; $M_{Age} = 40.26, SD = 12.74, 95\% CI [38.49, 42.03], range = 20-74$) in Study 1b and 202 participants (109 women, 92 men, 1 non-binary/other; $M_{Age} = 37.26, SD = 11.81, 95\% CI [35.62, 38.90], range = 18-78$) in Study 1c.

Table 1
Study 1a results.

	<i>b</i>	95% CI	SE	df	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Inauthenticity		0.495,				<
Downplaying	0.543	0.591	0.024	1630	22.57	.001
Emphasizing similarity	0.114	0.162, 0.156,	0.025	1643	4.54	<.001
Disidentification	0.207	0.257	0.026	1641	7.96	.001
Disidentification		0.106,				<
Downplaying	0.156	0.206	0.025	1611	6.17	.001
Emphasizing similarity	0.240	0.196, 0.285,	0.023	1638	10.63	<.001
Inauthenticity	0.180	0.136, 0.224	0.023	1625	8.00	<.001

Note: Results are from a linear mixed-effects model predicting disidentification from emphasizing similarity, downplaying, and inauthenticity. Coefficients (*b*) are unstandardized estimates with associated standard errors (SE), *t*-statistics, *df*, 95% confidence intervals (CIs), and *p*-values. Per each analysis, all variables are entered simultaneously. Participant, situation, and identity are included as random effects in each model. Strongest predictor (as indicated by non-overlapping 95% CIs) in bold.

5.1. Sample size determination

As in Study 1a, we performed simulation-based power analyses using

the *simr()* R package with 1000 simulations. We used the effect sizes from Study 1a as an estimate for the expected effects for Studies 1b-c ($0.11 \leq \beta \leq 0.54$).⁴ For Study 1b, we obtained an estimated power of at least 98.7% (95% CI [97.79, 99.31]) with 1639 observations across 202 participants. For Study 1c, our estimated power approached 100% (95% CI [99.44, 100.00]) with the 2167 observations collected across 202 participants.

5.2. Measures

We measured downplaying one's identity, emphasizing similarity, disidentification, and inauthenticity using the same items from Study 1a.⁵

6. Results

6.1. Identity threats

Study 1b participants reported experiencing 1639 identity threats in total, across the 30 situations included in the ITQ. On average, each participant experienced about 8 identity threats in a week ($M = 8.11$, $SD = 5.52$, 95% CI [7.35, 8.88]). Study 1c participants reported experiencing 2167 identity threats in total, across the 30 situations included in the ITQ. On average, each participant experienced between 10 and 11 identity threats in a week ($M = 10.73$, $SD = 6.84$, 95% CI [9.78, 11.68]).

6.2. Predicting feelings of inauthenticity

Replicating Study 1a, downplaying identity predicted felt inauthenticity more strongly than emphasizing similarity in Studies 1b and 1c, as indicated by non-overlapping 95% CIs (see Tables 2 and 3).

6.3. Predicting feelings of disidentification

In Study 1b, emphasizing similarity and downplaying one's identity were both significantly associated with disidentification (see Table 2). A general linear hypothesis test comparing the coefficients indicated that the association between emphasizing similarity was not significantly different than the association between downplaying and disidentification, $difference = -0.074$, $SE = 0.04$, $z = -1.93$, $p = .054$, 95% CI [-0.149, 0.001]. In Study 1c, however, downplaying identity more strongly predicted disidentification than did emphasizing similarity, as indicated by non-overlapping 95% CIs (see Table 3).

6.3.1. Study 2

Studies 1a-c had highly diverse samples of participants holding at least one marginalized identity across a range of identities, including race, culture, religion, age, sexual orientation, and SES, among others. That said, our participants were all U.S. residents. To confirm that the results were not contingent on this sampling, we examined the generalizability of these effects outside of U.S. contexts and identities.

7. Method

We recruited a sample of participants outside of the United States. Otherwise, Study 2 was identical to Study 1. We preregistered our data collection, exclusions, analysis plan on OSF (<https://osf.io/4gz3m>).

⁴ The effect sizes from Study 1a multilevel models were as follows: downplaying ($\beta_{disidentification} = 0.16$; $\beta_{inauthenticity} = 0.24$) and emphasizing similarity ($\beta_{disidentification} = 0.54$; $\beta_{inauthenticity} = 0.11$).

⁵ We collected exploratory moderators in Studies 1b and 1c. We report the regression results from those analyses in SOM Tables S7 and S10.

7.1. Participants and sample size determination

We recruited 408 English fluent non-U.S. participants from Prolific with the same advertisement from Study 1. Three respondents did not consent to participate. Eight additional respondents indicated providing fabricated responses and their data were excluded, as preregistered, yielding a final sample of 397 participants (189 women, 201 men, 7 non-binary; $M_{Age} = 30.04$, $SD_{Age} = 8.93$, 95% CI [29.16, 30.92], range = 19–67). We recruited a diverse set of self-reported threatened identities from people across 43 countries (see Table S11 in SOM). Nearly 97% of participants reported having a clearly stigmatized identity, such as being a woman (in a male dominant context), multiple racial groups, diverse sexual orientations, religions, regions, countries of birth, education, disability. A power analysis revealed using the effect size from Study 1c ($0.14 \leq \beta \leq 0.51$) indicated our estimated power approached 100% (95% CI [99.63, 100.0]) with the 4136 observations collected across 397 participants.

7.2. Measures

Participants responded to the same measures of identity downplaying ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 1.89$, 95% CI [2.97, 3.09]), emphasizing similarity ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.78$, 95% CI [3.13, 3.24]), inauthenticity ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 2.03$, 95% CI [3.16, 3.28]), and disidentification ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.70$, 95% CI [2.62, 2.72]) used in prior studies.

8. Results

8.1. Identity threats

Participants reported experiencing 4136 identity threats in total, across the 30 situations included in the ITQ. On average, each participant experienced 10.42 identity threats in a week ($SD = 6.57$, 95% CI [9.77, 11.07]).

8.2. Predicting feelings of inauthenticity and disidentification

Consistent with Studies 1a-1c, downplaying was more strongly associated with felt inauthenticity than emphasizing similarity, as indicated by non-overlapping 95% confidence intervals. Similarly, downplaying identity was more strongly associated with disidentification than emphasizing similarity, as indicated by non-overlapping 95% confidence intervals (see Table 4). Together, this evidence suggests that the effects of identity management may be similar across U.S. and non-U.S. settings.

Table 2
Study 1b results.

	<i>b</i>	95% CI	<i>SE</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Inauthenticity						
Downplaying	0.561	0.512, 0.611	0.025	1603	22.43	<.001
Emphasizing similarity	0.088	0.035, 0.142	0.027	1627	3.24	<.001
Disidentification	0.270	0.214, 0.326	0.029	1623	9.40	<.001
Disidentification						
Downplaying	0.153	0.107, 0.200	0.024	1592	6.50	<.001
Emphasizing similarity	0.227	0.184, 0.271	0.022	1610	10.28	<.001
Inauthenticity	0.188	0.149, 0.227	0.020	1621	9.36	<.001

Note: Per each analysis, all variables are entered simultaneously. Participant, situation, and identity included as random effect in each model. Strongest predictor (as indicated by non-overlapping 95% CIs) in bold.

Table 3
Study 1c results.

	<i>b</i>	95% <i>CI</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Inauthenticity		0.463,				<
Downplaying	0.505	0.547	0.021	2153	23.92	.001
Emphasizing similarity	0.189	0.148, 0.230	0.021	2136	9.03	<.001
Disidentification	0.193	0.151, 0.235	0.021	2134	9.09	.001
Disidentification		0.194,				<
Downplaying	0.238	0.283	0.023	2106	10.53	.001
Emphasizing similarity	0.136	0.095, 0.177	0.021	2124	6.58	<.001
Inauthenticity	0.197	0.156, 0.237	0.021	2128	9.53	.001

Note: Per each analysis, all variables are entered simultaneously. Participant, situation, and identity included as random effect in each model. Strongest predictor (as indicated by non-overlapping 95% CIs) in bold.

8.2.1. Study 3

In Study 3, we explored whether identity distancing is more or less adaptive depending on the social climate within which individuals experience identity threats. For example, downplaying a threatened identity might be less detrimental if one feels they are avoiding possible interpersonal discomfort or discrimination, whereas emphasizing similarity to others might be more detrimental when others are antagonistic to such an approach. We therefore examined the prediction that downplaying identity and emphasizing similarity predicts greater inauthenticity and disidentification in environments that feel more hostile toward one's threatened identity and predicts less inauthenticity and disidentification in environments that feel more supportive toward one's threatened identity.⁶

9. Method

We asked participants to reflect on situations from the last month rather than the last week.⁷ We also added items measuring hostile and supportive climate. Otherwise, Study 3 was identical to Studies 1–2. We preregistered our data collection, exclusions, analysis plan on OSF (<https://osf.io/z8wmk>).

9.1. Participants

We aimed to recruit 200 participants from MTurk with the same advertisement from Study 1. We recruited a total of *N* = 205 participants. Six respondents did not consent to participate. Eight additional respondents indicated providing fabricated responses and their data were excluded, as preregistered, yielding a final sample of 191 participants (104 women, 85 men, 2 non-binary; *M*_{Age} = 39.28, *SD*_{Age} = 13.34, 95% *CI* = [37.38, 41.19], range = 18–78). A power analysis using the effect sizes observed in Study 2 (0.13 ≤ β ≤ 0.45), results indicated our estimated power approached 100% (95% *CI* [99.6, 100.0]) for our predictors given our recruited sample of 2065 observations with 191 participants.

⁶ We preregistered testing social climate as predictors of identity distancing strategies. We report those results in SOM Table S17. We found that hostile climates were associated with greater downplaying and emphasizing similarity. We found that participants were more likely to emphasize similarity, but not downplay their identity, in supportive climates.

⁷ As COVID-19 shelter-in-place orders went into effect before this study, we asked for participants' experiences in the last month so as to capture a similar breadth of experiences as in previous studies.

Table 4
Study 2 results.

	<i>b</i>	95% <i>CI</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Inauthenticity		0.444,				<
Downplaying	0.475	0.506	0.016	4107	30.57	.001
Emphasizing similarity	0.165	0.134, 0.195	0.016	4112	10.62	<.001
Disidentification	0.318	0.286, 0.350	0.016	4007	19.39	.001
Disidentification		0.178,				<
Downplaying	0.208	0.237	0.015	3940	13.83	.001
Emphasizing similarity	0.145	0.118, 0.173	0.014	4084	10.38	<.001
Inauthenticity	0.257	0.230, 0.283	0.013	3906	19.20	.001

Note: Per each analysis, all variables are entered simultaneously. Strongest predictor (as indicated by non-overlapping 95% CIs) in bold.

9.2. Measures

In addition to the measures from Studies 1–2, participants also reported the degree to which each identity threatening situation was hostile (“I assumed that people would show a lack of respect for my identity”; “I assumed that people would think of me as inferior because of my identity.”) and supportive (“I assumed that people would be accepting of my identity”; “I assumed that people would be understanding.”) using a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

10. Results

10.1. Identity threats

Participants reported experiencing 2065 identity threats in total, across the 30 situations included in the ITQ. On average, each participant reported experiencing 10–11 identity threats in a week (*M* = 10.81, *SD* = 7.42, 95% *CI* [9.75, 11.87]).

10.2. Predicting feelings of inauthenticity

Consistent with Studies 1–2, downplaying identity predicted felt inauthenticity more strongly than emphasizing similarity, as indicated by non-overlapping confidence intervals. The interactions of downplaying with supportive climate and hostile climate were both not significant (Table 5).

10.3. Predicting feelings of disidentification

Emphasizing similarity and downplaying one's identity were both significantly associated with disidentification. A general linear hypothesis test comparing the coefficients revealed that the association between emphasizing similarity was not significantly stronger than the association between downplaying and disidentification, *difference* = −0.024, *SE* = 0.03, *z* = −0.72, *p* = .475, 95% *CI* [−0.09, 0.042]. The interaction between downplaying and supportive climate was significant (*p* < .001) while the interaction between downplaying and hostile climate was not significant (*p* = .207). In contrast, the interaction between emphasizing similarity and hostile climate was significant (*p* = .002) while the interaction between emphasizing similarity and supportive climate was not significant (*p* = .500). See Table 5.

10.4. Effects of supportive and hostile climates on disidentification (Exploratory)

Probing the significant interactions, we found that downplaying more strongly predicted disidentification when the climate was more supportive of one's identity (+1 SD: $b = 0.26$, 95% CI [0.20, 0.32], $SE = 0.03$, $t(2033) = 8.50$, $p < .001$) than when it was less supportive (−1 SD: $b = 0.08$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.13], $SE = 0.02$, $t(1987) = 3.08$, $p = .002$; see Fig. 4).

Emphasizing similarity more strongly predicted disidentification when the climate was more hostile toward one's identity (+1 SD: $b = 0.24$, 95% CI [0.19, 0.30], $SE = 0.03$, $t(2024) = 9.11$, $p < .001$) than when the climate was less hostile (−1 SD: $b = 0.14$, 95% CI [0.09, 0.19], $SE = 0.03$, $t(2019) = 5.60$, $p < .001$; see Fig. 4).

In sum, downplaying the relevance of a threatened identity is especially costly (i.e., associated with greater disidentification) when one feels that others are more accepting and supportive of one's identity. Furthermore, emphasizing one's similarity to others is more costly when one feels that others are actively hostile toward them because of their identity.

Notes. Plots depict simple slopes at $\pm 1SD$ of supportive and hostile climates, probing significant interactions depicted in Table 5. Left panel shows predicted disidentification as a function of downplaying in supportive climates. The right panel show predicted disidentification as a function of emphasizing similarity in hostile climates. All figures based on variables (not grand-mean centered) including random effects of participant, identity, and situation.

10.5. Pooled analysis of studies 1–3

Across studies, reported here for economy of presentation, we also assessed identity concealability and two indicators of well-being: psychological stress and self-reported health. Importantly, given that the number of participants would be substantially smaller than the number of identity threats experienced, as per prior work (Slepian & Jacoby-Senghor, 2021), we pooled data across Studies 1–3 for these *person-level* measures.^{8–9} Pooling yielded $N = 1140$ person-level observations (to correspond with experiences of 11,656 total identity threats per analysis) across studies, and provides adequate statistical power to compare to the person-level analyses reported in Studies 1–3 (see Table 6). In these pooled analyses, we explored whether the harmful effects of identity distancing (at the level of identity threat) can depend on the concealability of one's threatened identity (at the level of person). An open question exists as to whether concealability is or is not protective in instances of identity threat (Camacho et al., 2020; Quinn, 2017; also see Le Forestier et al., 2022, 2025). Because identity

⁸ Study 3 was launched in May 2020 after widespread onset of shelter-in-place due to COVID-19. We omitted measures of health and stress from this study due to the direct effect this event would have on these variables. Across Studies 1–3, we also measured self-reported loneliness as an outcome. However, we variably measured loneliness at the person- or situation-level. See pre-registered analysis for loneliness in Study 1a in Table S4). For clarity of presentation, we report these results in SOM. We conducted exploratory mediation analyses on loneliness (see Table S37 in SOM). Significant mediation for loneliness pathways mirror those of stress.

⁹ We originally pre-registered conducting a cross-lagged analysis to examine whether identity distancing strategies predicted well-being (i.e., health and stress) and identity centrality over time (https://osf.io/vce9a/?view_only=74072a82ca03461aac4bc7eb4a5387b6). However, we performed a different set of analyses in the manuscript, focusing on concealability rather than effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (see preregistration deviation table in the SOM). Cross-lagged analyses revealed that emphasizing similarity at Time 0 predicted greater disidentification, inauthenticity, and lower work satisfaction at Time 1, whereas downplaying showed weaker or nonsignificant effects. See Tables S38–40 in the SOM.

distancing is a common threat response across identity types (Van Veelen et al., 2020), we hypothesized that identity distancing should negatively impact authenticity and disidentification whether or not the threatened identities are concealable.

We also explored whether identity distancing (at the level of identity threat) relates to wellbeing (at the level of the person). We hypothesized that identity distancing strategies will negatively relate to one's physical health and psychological stress through inauthenticity and disidentification. Data and analysis script are available on OSF: <https://osf.io/c6kqiw>.

10.6. Measures

We measured identity concealability by asking participants, “Are people aware that you have this identity without telling them you have it?” (1 = *never*, 4 = *sometimes*, 7 = *always*; *reverse-scored*) for each reported identity. To measure physical health, participants completed the often-used General Health subscale from the RAND 36-Item Health Survey (from 0 to 100, e.g., “I am as healthy as anybody I know; Hays et al., 1993). To measure psychological stress, participants completed the 10-item Perceived Stress Scale (1 [*never*] to 5 [*very often*], e.g., “In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and stressed?”; Cohen et al., 1983).

10.7. Analytic strategy

For the exploratory analyses examining whether concealability moderated the relationship between identity distancing and outcomes (inauthenticity and disidentification), we specified cross-classified multilevel models as in prior studies, including random effects for participant, identity threat situation, and the identity (or identities) threatened per situation. Because health and stress were measured once per participant, we conducted mediation analyses at the participant level. We grand mean-centered downplaying, emphasizing similarity, disidentification and inauthenticity for this analysis. Given there is no standard practice for bootstrapping indirect effects in cross-classified multilevel models, we used the $Z_{\text{Mediation}}$ statistic (Jacobucci, 2012) to examine mediation. This approach calculates the product of the a and b path coefficients divided by their pooled standard error, which produces a standardized representation of the indirect effect that can be evaluated using a $Z_{\text{Mediation}}$ statistic while maintaining the logic of a traditional indirect effect analysis (see Slepian & Jacoby-Senghor, 2021).

11. Results

First, as shown by the 95% confidence intervals, we replicated the prior analyses (Table 7): 1) downplaying one's identity more strongly predicts feelings of inauthenticity than does emphasizing similarity and 2) downplaying a threatened identity and emphasizing similarity predict greater disidentification to similar degree.¹⁰

¹⁰ We performed regression models to replicate the primary analyses from Studies 1a–2 (see SOM Tables S19–20). The pooled models reproduce the main effects: downplaying one's identity is more strongly associated with inauthenticity than emphasizing similarity, and both identity distancing strategies significantly predicted disidentification. We also examined whether these relationships varied as a function of (1) holding a single versus multiple threatened identities and (2) group status (non-marginalized [i.e., straight white male] vs. marginalized identities). Holding a single threatened identity versus multiple threatened identities generally did not moderate these effects (see Tables S21–22 and Figure S4), with one exception: the effect of downplaying on inauthenticity was stronger for people with a single threatened identity than for people with multiple threatened identities, though significant for both groups. Additionally, analyses of group status revealed a significant interaction between emphasizing similarity and group status. The relationship between emphasizing similarity and disidentification was stronger for non-marginalized participants than marginalized participants (see Tables S23–24 and Figure S5).

Table 5
Study 3 results.

	<i>b</i>	95% <i>CI</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Inauthenticity						
Downplaying	0.402	0.361, 0.444	0.021	2032	18.93	<.001
Emphasizing similarity	0.132	0.091, 0.174	0.021	2034	6.28	<.001
Disidentification	0.153	0.108, 0.197	0.023	2033	6.73	<.001
Hostile climate	0.183	0.144, 0.221	0.019	2048	9.37	<.001
Supportive climate	-0.028	-0.065, 0.009	0.019	1911	-1.49	.136
Downplaying*Hostile	-0.011	-0.031, 0.008	0.010	2004	-1.18	.239
Downplaying*Support	-0.012	-0.031, 0.007	0.010	2006	-1.22	.224
Emphasizing*Hostile	0.003	-0.015, 0.021	0.009	1992	0.33	.744
Emphasizing*Support	-0.001	-0.021, 0.018	0.010	2009	-0.13	.899
Disidentification						
Downplaying	0.168	0.125, 0.211	0.022	2013	7.71	<.001
Emphasizing similarity	0.192	0.153, 0.231	0.020	2035	9.59	<.001
Inauthenticity	0.139	0.097, 0.180	0.021	2023	6.61	<.001
Hostile climate	0.106	0.068, 0.143	0.019	2020	5.57	<.001
Supportive climate	0.175	0.140, 0.210	0.018	1913	9.90	<.001
Downplaying*Hostile	-0.012	-0.030, 0.007	0.009	1981	-1.26	.207
Downplaying*Support	0.049	0.031, 0.068	0.009	2010	5.25	<.001
Emphasizing*Hostile	0.028	0.010, 0.045	0.009	1981	3.11	.002
Emphasizing*Support	-0.006	-0.025, 0.012	0.010	1997	-0.68	.500

Note: Per each analysis, all variables are entered simultaneously. All predictor variables are grand-mean centered. Strongest predictor (as indicated by non-overlapping 95% CIs) in bold.

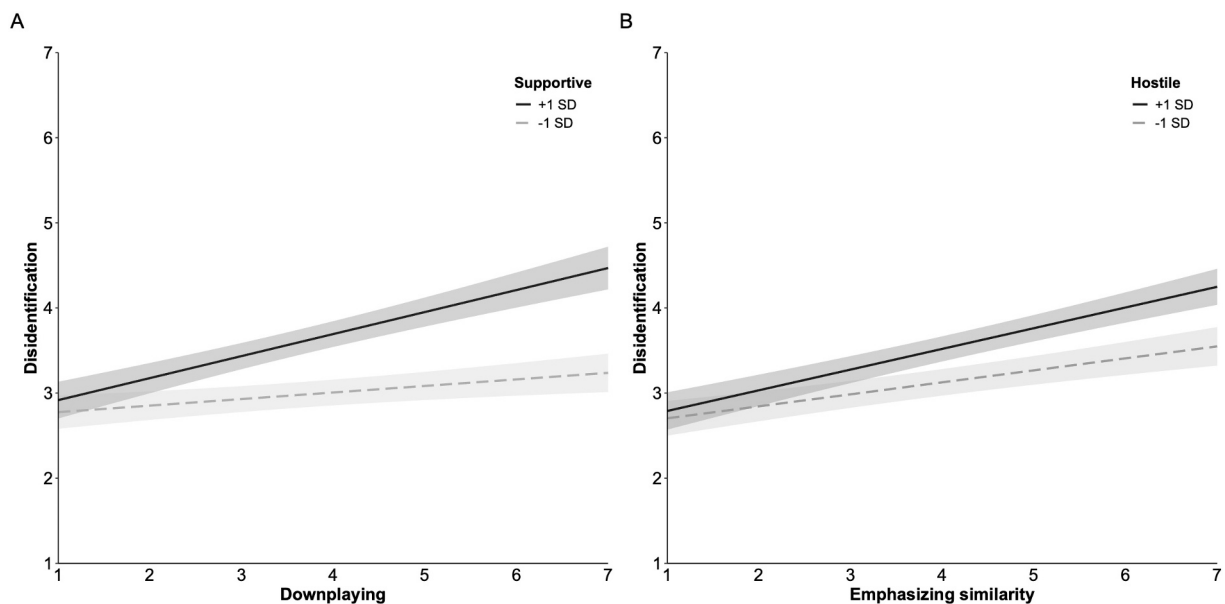


Fig. 4. Predicted disidentification as a function downplaying (in supportive contexts) and emphasizing similarity (in hostile contexts), Study 3.

Table 6
Measurement of person-level variables.

	Study 1a	Study 1b	Study 1c	Study 2	Study 3	# of observations
Concealability		x	x	x	x	8309
Psychological stress	x	x	x	x		9590
Self-reported health	x	x	x	x		9591

Follow-up general linear hypothesis tests comparing coefficients indicated that there was a significantly stronger association between downplaying and inauthenticity relative to emphasizing similarity, *difference* = 0.33, *SE* = 0.02, *z* = 17.54, *p* < .001, 95% *CI* [0.29, 0.36]; the association between downplaying and disidentification was not significantly different than the association between emphasizing similarity and

disidentification, *difference* = 0.025, *SE* = 0.02, *z* = 1.43, *p* = .152, 95% *CI* [-0.01, 0.06].

11.1. Concealability

The concealability of one's threatened identity significantly moderated the effect of downplaying, but not emphasizing similarity, on inauthenticity (Table 7). Specifically, downplaying one's identity was more strongly associated with greater inauthenticity for more, versus less, concealable identities (+1 SD; *b* = 0.51, *SE* = 0.014, *t*(8243) = 36.59, 95%*CI* [0.48, 0.53], *p* < .001; -1 SD; *b* = 0.47, *SE* = 0.015, *t*(8202) = 31.48, 95%*CI* [0.44, 0.50], *p* < .001; Fig. 5).

Concealability also significantly moderated the relationship between both identity distancing strategies and disidentification (Table 7). Specifically, both downplaying one's identity (-1 SD; *b* = 0.226, *SE* = 0.043, *t*(8075) = 15.85, 95% *CI* [0.20, 0.25], *p* < .001; +1 SD; *b* = 0.168, *SE* =

Table 7
Pooled analyses Studies 1–3, moderation by concealability.

	<i>b</i>	95% <i>CI</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Inauthenticity						
Downplaying	0.487	0.466, 0.509	0.011	8210	44.89	<.001
Emphasizing similarity	0.162	0.140, 0.183	0.011	8240	14.66	<.001
Disidentification	0.253	0.231, 0.276	0.011	8231	22.07	<.001
Concealability	0.025	0.005, 0.045	0.010	1068	2.45	.015
Downplaying*Conceal	0.010	0.001, 0.020	0.005	8197	2.09	.036
Emphasizing*Conceal	0.002	−0.008, 0.013	0.005	8205	0.42	.676
Disidentification						
Downplaying	0.197	0.176, 0.219	0.011	7783	18.05	<.001
Emphasizing similarity	0.172	0.152, 0.192	0.010	8168	16.96	<.001
Inauthenticity	0.218	0.199, 0.238	0.010	7949	22.18	<.001
Concealability	−0.029	−0.047, −0.010	0.009	303	−3.14	.002
Downplaying*Conceal	−0.016	−0.025, −0.007	0.005	8139	−3.39	.001
Emphasizing*Conceal	−0.011	−0.020, −0.001	0.005	8160	−2.17	.030

Note: Per each analysis, all variables are entered simultaneously. All variables are grand-mean centered using the mean across the pooled sample. Strongest predictor (as indicated by non-overlapping 95% CIs) in bold. Analyses include random effects for participant, identity, and situation.

0.014, $t(7870) = 12.28$, 95%CI [0.14, 0.19], $p < .001$) and emphasizing similarity (−1 SD; $b = 0.19$, $SE = 0.014$, $t(8196) = 13.80$, 95%CI [0.17, 0.22], $p < .001$; +1 SD; $b = 0.152$, $SE = 0.014$, $t(8180) = 11.13$, 95%CI [0.13, 0.18], $p < .001$) was associated with relatively greater disidentification for identities that were less, versus more, concealable (Fig. 5). Thus, downplaying one's identity and emphasizing similarity are generally related to disidentification, but more so for people whose threatened identities cannot be strategically concealed.

11.2. Wellbeing

We conducted mediation analyses examining whether downplaying identity and emphasizing similarity predict physical health or psychological stress via feelings of inauthenticity and disidentification. We again utilized the $Z_{\text{Mediation}}$ statistic which allowed us to test indirect effects in multilevel data.

11.3. Physical health

Downplaying one's identity predicted worse physical health ($b = -0.120$, $SE = 0.03$, $t(881) = -4.24$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.18, −0.06]), controlling for emphasizing similarity. Emphasizing similarity was not significantly associated with physical health when controlling for downplaying ($b = 0.005$, $SE = 0.03$, $t(861) = 0.18$, $p = .859$, 95% CI [−0.05, 0.06]).

When potential mediators were added to the model, neither downplaying nor emphasizing similarity predicted health (and thus there were no direct effects). However, inauthenticity significantly predicted physical health, raising the possibility of a unique mediation pathway (Table 8). Indeed, downplaying identity significantly predicted lower physical health through feelings of inauthenticity (Table 9).

11.4. Psychological stress

There was a significant direct effect of downplaying identity on stress ($b = 0.143$, 95% CI [0.089, 0.197], $SE = 0.028$, $t(914) = 5.15$, $p < .001$), controlling for emphasizing similarity. There was also a significant direct effect of emphasizing similarity on stress ($b = 0.085$, 95% CI [0.032, 0.137], $SE = 0.027$, $t(899) = 3.15$, $p = .002$), controlling for downplaying. Thus, both downplaying and emphasizing similarity were associated with greater stress.

As before, when potential mediators were added to the stress model, neither identity distancing strategy predicted stress but inauthenticity and disidentification did, suggesting possible mediation pathways (Table 8). Indeed, both downplaying a threatened identity and emphasizing a shared identity predicted greater psychological stress via both

feelings of inauthenticity and disidentification (Table 9).¹¹

11.4.1. Study 4

Thus far, we provide correlational evidence that the extent to which one downplays a threatened identity and emphasizes similarity with others is associated with negative psychological outcomes, namely greater feelings of inauthenticity and greater feelings of disidentification. Because our prior studies sought to estimate these relationships in naturally occurring contexts, they cannot speak to whether engaging in these identity distancing behaviors are *causally* related to these psychological costs. To address this, we conducted a seven-day longitudinal experiment to examine whether enacting identity distancing strategies shapes subsequent experiences of disidentification and inauthenticity.

12. Method

12.1. Participants and design

We recruited 600 participants from Prolific to participate in the baseline survey. Two respondents indicated providing fabricated responses and their data were excluded as preregistered, yielding a final sample of 598 participants (294 women, 298 men, and 6 non-binary; $M_{\text{Age}} = 41.16$, $SD_{\text{Age}} = 12.84$, range = 19–79). Participants were compensated \$3.00 for completing the baseline survey and \$1.00 for each daily follow-up survey. To minimize attrition, we provided a \$2.00 bonus to participants who completed all surveys. Therefore, participants were provided between \$3.00–\$12.00 for participating in this experiment.

In this experiment, we randomly assigned participants to one of three conditions: downplaying their identity, emphasizing similarity with others, and affirming their identity (a comparison condition used in past work, e.g., Mussweiler et al., 2000; Sherman et al., 2013, which, like emphasizing similarity, is an often-promising strategy that can sometimes backfire; see Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Each day after a baseline survey, participants completed the ITQ in which they reported identity-relevant situations per each day, selected how they enacted their randomly assigned strategy through a tailored appraisal prompt, and reported authenticity and disidentification for each situation. This

¹¹ Swapping the proposed IVs and mediators yielded nonsignificant indirect effects for physical health, suggesting the proposed model better fits the current data. Though this reverse mediation analysis revealed significant indirect effects for stress, the magnitude of the indirect is larger for each of the proposed directions. We report these results in the SOM, see Tables S35–37.

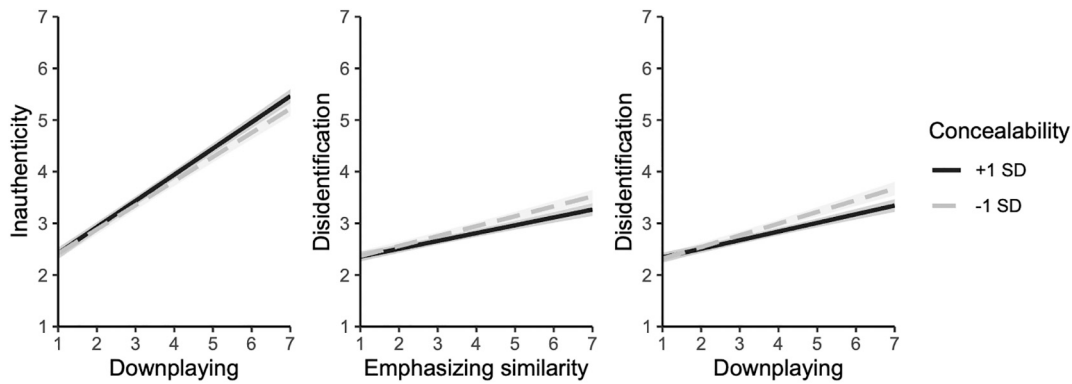


Fig. 5. Predicted inauthenticity and disidentification as a function identity distancing behaviors and concealability (Pooled analysis). Note. Plots depict simple slopes at $\pm 1SD$ of identity concealability. Left panel shows predicted inauthenticity as a function of downplaying. The middle and right panels show predicted disidentification as a function of emphasizing similarity and downplaying, respectively. All figures based on variables (not grand-mean centered) including random effects of participant, identity, and situation.

Table 8
Predicting self-reported stress and physical health (Studies 1–2).

	<i>b</i>	95% <i>CI</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Physical health						
Downplaying	-0.025	-0.062, 0.013	0.019	892	-1.28	.201
Emphasizing similarity	0.030	-0.019, 0.079	0.025	877	1.19	.235
Inauthenticity	-0.110	-0.165, -0.056	0.028	888	-3.96	<.001
Disidentification	-0.014	-0.072, 0.044	0.029	947	-0.47	.636
Stress						
Downplaying	0.030	-0.008, 0.067	0.019	935	1.55	.121
Emphasizing similarity	0.040	-0.009, 0.089	0.025	917	1.61	.108
Inauthenticity	0.100	0.046, 0.154	0.027	925	3.64	<.001
Disidentification	0.073	0.017, 0.130	0.029	978	2.53	.011

Note. To aid interpretation, we z-scored stress and self-reported health. All other predictors were grand mean centered. All variables were entered simultaneously, and all models included random effects for participant, identity, and situation.

design therefore enabled us to assess both within-person and between-condition difference in trajectories of authenticity and disidentification over the course of a week. We preregistered our design, hypotheses, measures, and analytic plan here: <https://osf.io/ey6ux>.¹²

13. Procedure

13.1. Baseline survey

Participants first completed a shortened version of the ITQ, in which they identified which aspects of their identity made them feel like they did not belong and the situations in which these feelings emerged. Participants then responded to baseline measures of our main variables: downplaying, emphasizing similarity, identity affirmation, disidentification, and authenticity (see Table S41 in SOM for correlations and descriptive statistics). We then randomly assigned participants to one of three identity management conditions in which we asked them to enact a specific strategy over the course of seven days: downplaying,

Table 9
Wellbeing pooled mediation analyses (Studies 1–2).

<i>IV</i>	Mediator	<i>DV</i>	<i>Z_{Mediation}</i>	<i>p</i>
Physical health				
Downplaying	Inauthenticity	Health	-4.14	<.001
Downplaying	Disidentification	Health	-1.25	.212
Emphasizing similarity	Inauthenticity	Health	-5.18	<.001
Emphasizing similarity	Disidentification	Health	-2.42	.015
Stress				
Downplaying	Inauthenticity	Stress	5.02	<.001
Downplaying	Disidentification	Stress	3.88	<.001
Emphasizing similarity	Inauthenticity	Stress	5.80	<.001
Emphasizing similarity	Disidentification	Stress	4.53	<.001

Note. In bold, significant mediation pathways which also had a significant direct effect.

emphasizing similarity, or affirming.

In the downplaying condition, we asked participants to “*downplay that aspect of your identity and try not to behave in a way that is typical of people with this identity,*” when they encountered situations where they felt like they did not belong (*n* = 198). In the emphasizing similarity condition, we asked participants to “*emphasize the ways you are similar to those around you or play up an identity you do share with others around you.*” (*n* = 191). Finally in the affirming condition, participants were asked to “*foster a sense of control or affirm your identity in the moment*” (*n* = 209).

We bolstered our strategy manipulation in two important ways to strengthen engagement. First, we asked participants to consider how they would enact their randomly assigned strategy across all situations included in the ITQ. To do so, we asked participants to think about which situations they anticipate encountering over the seven-day period. For each situation, they were presented with three appraisal statements that corresponded to different ways of enacting their assigned strategy (see Table 10) and asked to endorse the one that best fit their anticipated action. This approach is modeled from existing work on emotion appraisal manipulations which leads to greater participant engagement, makes the manipulation more personally meaningful, and puts participants in an assimilative mindset (e.g., Cohen & Ochsner, 2018; Liu et al., 2023). Second, we asked participants to write a brief reflection on how they would recognize situations they feel like they do not belong and how they would apply their assigned strategy in those moments.

¹² Data and analysis code for Study 4 can be found here: https://osf.io/ey6ux/overview?view_only=35e4c7563d5c424bb8ca95c8f7a50e44

Table 10
Experimental identity management strategy appraisal items (Study 4).

Strategy appraisal	Prompt: When in this situation...
Downplaying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ ...I downplayed an aspect of my identity. ○ ...I tried not to behave in a way that was typical of people with my identity. ○ ...I hid part of my identity.
Emphasizing similarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ ...I emphasized how I am similar to those around me. ○ ...I played up an identity that I shared with other people around me. ○ ...I found ways to feel similar to those around me. ○ ...I found ways to gain a sense of control over how I came across.
Affirming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ ...I affirmed for myself positive aspects of my identity. ○ ...I reminded myself what was important to me in that situation.

Note. Items drawn from prior studies (i.e., downplaying and emphasizing similarity items) and from previous work (affirm; Cohen et al., 2006, 2009; McQueen & Klein, 2006).

13.2. Daily follow-up

Each wave followed the same procedure in which participants completed the ITQ each day over a period of seven days. Participants who completed the baseline survey and passed the manipulation check ($n = 598$) were invited to participate in these daily follow-up surveys. A total of 502 unique participants completed at least one day of the daily follow-up, (248 women, 248 men, 6 non-binary; 60.2% White, 20.9% Black, 7.17% Hispanic/Latino, 6.77% Asian, 3.98% Multiracial, 0.98% Other; $M_{Age} = 41.22$, $SD_{Age} = 12.72$, range = 19–79). We were able to recruit most participants from the baseline survey across conditions across the seven days: affirm (87.6%, $n_{ppts} = 183$, $n_{idThreats} = 3997$), downplay (81.8%, $n_{ppts} = 162$, $n_{idThreats} = 3426$), and emphasizing similarity (82.2%, $n_{ppts} = 157$, $n_{idThreats} = 3146$). Participants responded to an average of 3 out of 7 days ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.96$).

Participants first indicated the aspects of their identity that made them feel like they did not belong and the situations they encountered the day these feelings emerged. Participants then completed a manipulation check to ensure they enacted the strategy in line with their randomly assigned condition. For each situation participants selected from the 30 options, participants were asked which of the three strategy options best fit how they enacted the identity management strategy. Participants then completed measures of disidentification and inauthenticity with the same items as described in Studies 1a–3. As in prior studies, participants responded to one situation before being shown the next.

13.3. Measures

We measured disidentification and inauthenticity using the items as Studies 1a–3. See SOM for descriptive statistics for variables across each wave.

14. Results and discussion

14.1. Analysis plan

We predicted that participants randomly assigned to downplay their identity or emphasize similarity with others would report greater daily disidentification and inauthenticity compared to those who were assigned to affirm their identity. We also examined whether emphasizing similarity and downplaying predicted disidentification and inauthenticity to a greater degree over time. To test these predictions, we performed cross-classified multilevel models including strategy condition and day as interacting predictors, which allowed us to examine both between-condition difference and within-person trajec-

tories over the span of the experiment. We conducted separate models for disidentification and inauthenticity as dependent variables. As in previous studies, we included participant, identity threat situation, and threatened identity as random effects.¹³ A power analysis based on the specified multilevel models indicated that we approached 100% power (95% CI [99.63, 100]; 1000 simulations) to detect a small condition \times day interaction effect ($\beta = 0.15$), given our final sample of 502 participants (10,569 observations).

14.2. Identity threats

Participants reported experiencing 10,569 identity threats in total, across the 30 situations included in the ITQ over the course of seven days. Participants experienced an average of 4–5 identity threats per day over the course of the week ($M = 5.42$, $SD = 4.94$, 95% CI [4.99, 5.85]).

14.3. Predicting feelings of inauthenticity

As shown in Table 11, participants randomly assigned to downplay their identity reported greater inauthenticity compared to those in the affirm condition. Similarly, participants assigned to emphasize similarity with others reported greater inauthenticity compared to the affirm condition, though the effect of emphasizing similarity was smaller than that of downplaying, as indicated by non-overlapping 95% CIs. We also found some evidence that identity distancing predicted greater inauthenticity over time. Participants in the downplay condition reported significantly greater inauthenticity over time compared to those in the affirm condition. In contrast, participants in the emphasizing similarity condition did not report significantly greater inauthenticity over time relative to those in the affirm condition, though the direction of the effect is consistent with greater inauthenticity over time (see Fig. 6, right panel).^{14,15}

14.4. Predicting feelings of disidentification

As above, participants randomly assigned to downplay their identity reported greater disidentification compared to those in the affirm condition. Similarly, participants assigned to emphasize similarity with others reported greater disidentification compared to the affirm condition, though the effect of emphasizing similarity was smaller than that of downplaying, as indicated by non-overlapping 95% CIs (see Table 11 and Fig. 6, left panel).

Study 4 extends our earlier findings by providing experimental, longitudinal evidence that distancing from a threatened identity not only correlates with but causally predicts greater disidentification and inauthenticity in daily life. Over the course of a week, participants randomly assigned to downplay their identity or emphasize similarity with others reported greater levels of disidentification and

¹³ We include the pre-registered exploratory analyses in the SOM.

¹⁴ We also examined the simple slopes for each model. Simple slopes analyses revealed a non-significant slope in the affirm condition, thus participants in the affirm condition did not show significant changes in disidentification ($b = 0.016$, $SE = 0.01$, 95% CI [-0.004, 0.04], $t(9,304) = 1.60$, $p = .11$) or inauthenticity ($b = -0.007$, $SE = 0.01$, 95% CI [-0.028, 0.015], $t(9,397) = -0.61$, $p = .542$) over time. This result supports the use of affirming one's identity as a viable control. In contrast, participants in the emphasizing similarity condition experienced significantly greater disidentification ($b = 0.03$, $SE = 0.01$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.05], $t(10,356) = 2.61$, $p = .009$) but not inauthenticity ($b = 0.016$, $SE = 0.012$, 95% CI [-0.01, 0.04], $t(10,353) = 1.29$, $p = .196$). Participants in the downplaying condition similarly experienced significantly greater disidentification ($b = 0.03$, $SE = 0.01$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.05], $t(10,054) = 3.02$, $p = .003$) and inauthenticity ($b = 0.03$, $SE = 0.012$, 95% CI [0.008, 0.054], $t(10,083) = 2.64$, $p = .008$).

¹⁵ See SOM for additional figures on daily changes in inauthenticity and disidentification across conditions per day.

Table 11
Study 4 experimental results.

	<i>b</i>	95% <i>CI</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Inauthenticity						
Downplaying	1.388	1.06, 1.71	0.166	503	8.36	<.001
Emphasizing similarity	0.475	0.15, 0.80	0.167	502	2.84	.005
Day (centered)	−0.007	−0.03, 0.01	0.011	9473	−0.61	.542
Downplaying*Day	0.038	0.01, 0.07	0.016	9889	2.36	.019
Emphasizing similarity*Day	0.023	−0.01, 0.05	0.016	10,110	1.38	.169
Disidentification						
Downplaying	1.100	0.80, 1.40	0.150	508	7.31	<.001
Emphasizing similarity	0.379	0.08, 0.68	0.152	507	2.50	.013
Day (centered)	0.016	−0.004, 0.04	0.010	9095	1.60	.110
Downplaying*Day	0.016	−0.01, 0.04	0.014	9699	1.12	.264
Emphasizing similarity*Day	0.013	−0.02, 0.04	0.015	10,000	0.89	.374

Note: Affirming one's identity was included as the reference group in each model. Strongest predictor (as indicated by non-overlapping 95% CIs) in bold.

inauthenticity. These effects persisted above and beyond baseline levels of disidentification and inauthenticity before they were assigned to identity management condition (see Table S45 in SOM).

Notably, these results align with our cross-sectional studies showing that, while downplaying one's identity consistently exerted stronger negative effects than emphasizing similarity, both identity distancing strategies reliably increased inauthenticity and disidentification. The addition of a control condition further strengthens these conclusions. Specifically, the control condition also asked participants to engage in an experimentally imposed identity management behavior, allowing us to speak whether the effects are a consequence of being experimentally instructed to manage one's identity. Participants randomly instructed to affirm their identity did not experience comparable increase in disidentification or inauthenticity, demonstrating that the observed effects are not an inevitable consequence of managing one's identity.

15. General discussion

Researchers have long questioned whether distancing from threatened identities is beneficial or costly to the individual. In searching for answers, researchers have understandably focused on specific identities in specific contexts (cf. Camacho et al., 2020; Goh et al., 2019; Newheiser et al., 2017). The present work adopts a broader methodological approach to capture an expansive range of everyday identity threat situations and the diverse identities implicated within them. Using a multilevel analytic approach, we accounted for the variance explained by (1) which identities were threatened, (2) the situations in which threats occurred, and (3) the individuals who experienced them to estimate the relationship between two behavioral identity distancing strategies (i.e., downplaying identity and emphasizing similarity) and reported psychological outcomes (i.e., felt inauthenticity and disidentification).

We find that downplaying a threatened identity and emphasizing similarity with others are two separable forms of identity distancing utilized across various identities and contexts with distinct patterns of results. This distinction maps onto Van Veelen et al.' (2020) taxonomy of self-group distancing, in which people cope with threat by either *moving away* from a threatened identity—akin to downplaying—or *moving toward* another identity—akin to emphasizing similarity. Greater downplaying of the threatened identity was strongly related to feeling inauthentic. This corresponds with research showing that feeling that one cannot reveal aspects of oneself reduces feelings of authenticity (Schmader & Sedikides, 2018; Slepian et al., 2017; Sun & Slepian, 2020). Emphasizing similarity with others was significantly less associated with feeling inauthentic relative to downplaying. Yet, both identity distancing strategies generally predicted disidentification to a similar degree, as indicated by general linear hypothesis tests.

Our results are at the level of situation (see Slepian & Kalokerinos,

2024), meaning that *the extent to which participants engaged in identity distancing* in response to a situation significantly predicted *the extent they reported feeling inauthentic or disidentified with the threatened identity in that same situation*. Because our multilevel models simultaneously account for differences across individuals, identities (e.g., race, sexual orientation), and situations (e.g., workplace, travel, etc.), these relationships cannot be attributed to any single participant, threatened identity, or context. Thus, our novel approach uniquely shows that, across different individuals, instances of identity threat, and threatened identities, how people respond to those identity threats influences how they feel and think about themselves.

It is crucial to emphasize that we are not suggesting that each identity-threatening situation evokes the same level of threat. We do not assume that threats across identities are equivalent in form, severity, or consequence, nor do we intend to minimize disproportionate burdens faced by marginalized communities. Certain situations may be more threatening than others. The threat of certain identities might sting more sharply. And, within situations and identities, certain people may feel more threatened than others for a host of reasons (e.g., disposition, unique history). To some degree, the extent to which people engage in identity distancing relates to experienced threat, but it is important to remember they are far from redundant constructs. Our models begin with the threat having been experienced. Our studies ask and document what happens next.

It is worth noting that the average levels of identity distancing, disidentification, and inauthenticity fall below the scale midpoint, suggesting these are small-to-moderate responses rather than expressions of complete alienation from one's identity. Yet, as the present work illustrates, even these moderate degrees of identity distancing carry meaningful and reliable psychological consequences.

Past work on concealability has often centered psychological decisions to conceal or reveal one's stigmatized identity, given that disclosure can both harm individuals by inviting discrimination or benefit them by bridging the psychological distance created by hiding an identity (Quinn, 2018; Quinn & Earnshaw, 2011). By measuring downplaying and emphasizing similarity simultaneously and continuously—while accounting for the nuance that not concealing does not mean disclosing, and not disclosing does not mean concealing—our research aligns with emerging evidence that actively hiding one's threatened identity is more frequently predictive of psychological wellbeing than is the act of disclosure (Camacho et al., 2020; also see Le Forestier et al., 2022, 2025). Our results extend this work by revealing that wellbeing is predicted not merely by managing the risk of being found out, but by the need to manage one's identity at all.

We also find some exploratory evidence that the effects of identity distancing on disidentification depends on contextual factors, though the overall pattern was mixed. Downplaying had a weaker effect on disidentification in less supportive environments compared more

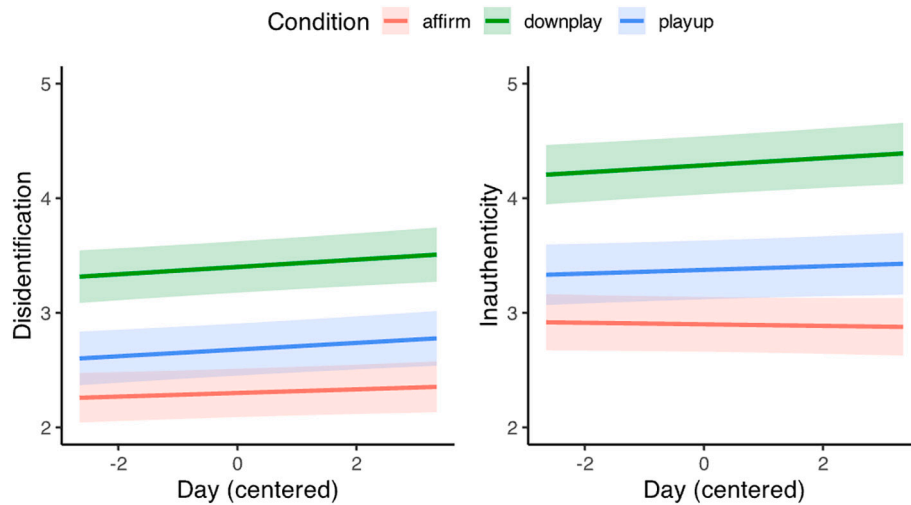


Fig. 6. Identity management strategy condition on disidentification and inauthenticity, Study 4.

Note. Results from the cross-classified multilevel models, including participant and identity situation as random effects. Disidentification depicted in the left panel and inauthenticity depicted in the right panel.

supportive ones, echoing past stigma research demonstrating that concealment may be less harmful when discrimination is possible (e.g., King et al., 2017; Quinn, 2017). The present work extends this finding by showing that overt discrimination may not be necessary: merely feeling that one will not be readily accepted by peers may justify downplaying one's identity. In contrast, downplaying when other people are accepting of one's identity may be a more consequential choice, leading people to distance themselves from the threatened identity. Perhaps for similar reasons, we find that emphasizing similarity predicts significantly greater disidentification when others are hostile. In this case, aligning more closely with those antagonistic toward one's identity may feel, in the moment, like an abandonment of a part of oneself regardless of whether the strategy is intended as protection. Although identity distancing can at times serve an adaptive function (e.g., Major & O'Brien, 2005; Pachankis et al., 2020; Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009; also see Steele et al., 2002), future work should further probe the reliability of these effects across cultural and organizational settings, and clarify when identity distancing functions as a protective identity management mechanism versus when it undermines identification and authenticity.

In contrast to disidentification, identity distancing generally predicted greater inauthenticity regardless of how readily apparent an identity is or the social climate. One important exception was that downplaying predicted inauthenticity more strongly for people with more concealable identities. This pattern suggests that inauthenticity may emerge similarly across contexts because any incongruence between one's inner self and outer expression should engender feelings of inauthenticity (e.g., Bailey & Levy, 2022). Because disidentification reflects an enduring shift in one's self-concept, it may be more dependent on contextual cues that encourage or discourage continued identification with a threatened identity. These moderation effects require further systematic investigation but raise important questions about when and why identity distancing translates into deeper changes in one's identity.

Inauthenticity and disidentification each uniquely predicted well-being. Feeling inauthentic more strongly predicted poorer health than did disidentification, while both significantly predicted elevated psychological stress. Consistent with an indirect effect model, downplaying and emphasizing similarity predicted lower physical health through feelings of inauthenticity, and predicted greater psychological stress via both feelings of inauthenticity and disidentification. These indirect effect models suggest three key patterns: identity-distancing strategies are closely tied to inauthenticity, both downplaying and emphasizing similarity relate to disidentification, and each pathway uniquely predicts physical and psychological outcomes through alternative directions and

explanations remain possible (see Tables S35–37 in SOM).

Critical questions remain, however, about how stigma, status, identity, and context intersect to shape the magnitude of these effects (e.g., Le Forestier et al., 2022). Relatedly, while our experiment contrasts identity distancing with an identity-affirming response, future work would benefit from utilizing a no-action control condition to more precisely isolate the psychological costs of identity distancing from other responses people may naturally adopt. Such designs would clarify when and for whom identity distancing is especially harmful, and help identify interventions nuanced enough to reduce the deleterious effects of identity distancing that are especially acute for specific identities and specific threatening situations (e.g., Monheim & Himmelstein, 2024).

As noted earlier, while the present work documents effects of identity distancing strategies that cannot be attributed to any specific threatened identity or situation, this does not imply that the experience of threat is equivalent across identities. For marginalized groups, emphasizing similarity may often entail aligning with majority groups (e.g., Van Veelen et al., 2020), potentially intensifying the psychological costs of a strategy that may be less deleterious to advantaged group members. The effects of identity concealability similarly suggest that the burden of identity distancing is not evenly distributed: downplaying was associated with greater inauthenticity for more concealable identities, whereas both forms of identity distancing were associated with greater disidentification for less concealable identities. For those who can conceal, downplaying may exact a tax on one's felt authenticity; for those who cannot, identity distancing may feel more like a detachment from oneself. It would be important for future research to systematically explore these asymmetries within the context of specific identities and specific identity-threatening situations.

Our findings provide promising targets for interventions aimed at mitigating the negative effects of specific stigmas in context. Strategies that alleviate pressures to downplay one's identity or emphasize one's similarity with others may have broad psychological and health benefits. The present findings highlight that identity concealment is not a salve for threat. Rather, it may be even more critical to alleviate pressures to downplay for groups with more concealable identities, as these strategies appeared more harmful with respect to inauthenticity (which was associated with physical health). At the same time, those least able to conceal their threatened identity suffered the strongest link between identity distancing and disidentification (which was associated with stress), suggesting that being unable to avoid detection only increases the drive to detour psychological connection to threat.

15.1. Concluding thoughts

In sum, the present work illuminates how identity distancing strategies relates to profound psychological and physical costs to stigmatized individuals that pervade across diverse identities and situations. Our findings reveal a critical paradox: the very strategies individuals choose to cope with threatening situations ultimately undermines their wellbeing through disidentification and feelings of inauthenticity—and these patterns arise across a diverse set of stigmatized identities, situations, and people. Together, this work suggests that institutions may need to go beyond convincing individuals that their threatened identities are welcome and instead take more consequential steps toward allowing people to feel safe and able to express their authentic selves.

Open practices

All studies were preregistered and all materials, data, and analysis script files have been made publicly available at Open Science Framework and can be accessed at: https://osf.io/qtfp4/?view_only=7a0f2de6b77143ec9afbc7576cd5a005.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

N. Derek Brown: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Drew S. Jacoby-Senghor:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Allyson P. Mackey:** Conceptualization. **Michael L. Slepian:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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