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Passing and Transcendence in Political Identities and Socioeconomic Status

Ginger Brooker, Sophie Hamblett, Megan MacKenzie, and Sam Poulin

Colby College

Introduction

Passing: when an individual tries to hide a part of their identity, or takes on a new false identity in order to fit in with a certain social context (Button, 2004)

- May be especially important in a college setting
 - ✓ Political identity (Astin, 1993)
 - ✓ Socioeconomic status (Seider, 2008; Johnson et al., 2011)

Self-transcendence: a characteristic involving the ability to see one's life as part of a broad worldview (Garcia-Romeau, 2010)

- Positively correlated with informational identity style
- Negatively correlated with conformity of expectations (Beaumont, 2009)

How do political identity, socioeconomic status, and transcendence influence levels of passing in a selective, liberal arts college?

Hypotheses...

In social situations where an individual's political identity or socioeconomic status makes them a minority, we predict that they will be more likely to attempt to pass as the majority identity.

Individuals with low transcendence scores will be more likely to pass.

Higher levels of passing in unfamiliar situations than in familiar situations (with close friends).

Results

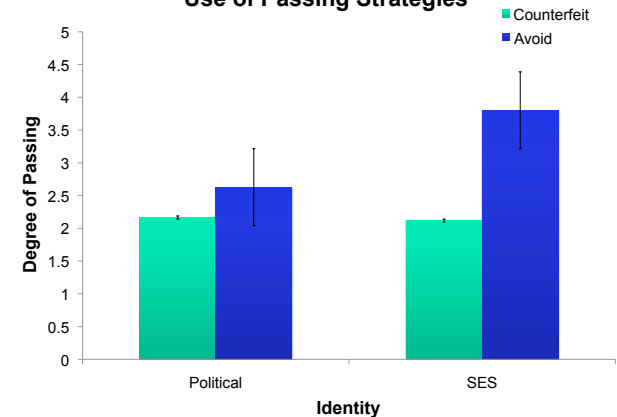
Primary Findings:

- Socioeconomic status is negatively associated with passing via counterfeiting ($p=.049$).
- No main effects for transcendence or familiarity of social situation on passing

Post Hoc Analyses:

- Students of relatively high SES tend to have more conservative views on healthcare than students of lower SES ($p<.001$).
- Trend: Students with relatively conservative views on health care tend to pass via counterfeiting more than students with more liberal healthcare views. ($p=.114$)
- Students tend to pass more via avoidance than counterfeiting ($p<.001$).

Use of Passing Strategies



Method

77 Colby College undergraduate students
• 30 males, 45 females

Adult Self-Transcendence Inventory (ASTI)
(Levenson et al., 2005)

Passing Questionnaires: Political Identity + SES
Based on Identity Management Strategy Survey (Button, 2004)

Demographics Survey

-Low SES: Poor, Working, and Lower Middle Class
-High SES: Upper Middle Class and Upper Class

Assesses reported levels of passing in terms of political identity and SES among close friends and acquaintances

Examples:

"I sometimes adjust my level of participation in political conversation to avoid revealing my political views."

"I sometimes adjust the way I speak, via pronunciation of words or choice of words, in order to fit in with a different SES."

Discussion

- These findings are supported by the idea that individuals of minority identities may use counterfeit or avoidance strategies to avoid revealing their true identity (Button, 2004)
- Future research should investigate the psychological differences between the various passing strategies, and why in certain situations some strategies may be preferred over others.
- The Colby student body's generally liberal attitude could explain the lack of variance in political views. It remains unclear how this variable would function in more diverse populations.
- Healthcare emerged as the least polarized political issue. It would be interesting to investigate why opinions on this issue varied more than on others.

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Abstract

Passing is a phenomenon that occurs when an individual tries to hide a part of their identity, or takes on a new false identity in order to fit in with a certain social context. Passing might be especially important in a college setting, where students are in a stage of emerging adulthood and exploring new identities. This process can occur with all sorts of identity, commonly one that makes the individual a minority. This study focuses specifically on the phenomenon of passing in political views and socioeconomic status identities, as well as how it relates to self-transcendence. Given past research, we hypothesized that individuals with low transcendence scores would be more likely to attempt to pass in a social situation in which their true identity makes them a minority. Results showed that SES is negatively associated with passing via counterfeiting, but had no significant impact on passing via avoidance. Political ideology did not correlate significantly with either passing strategy. Students tended to pass more via avoidance than counterfeiting with both political views and SES. This study also found that students of relatively high SES (upper-middle class and middle-class) tended to have more conservative views on health care than students of lower SES (poor, working class, and lower-middle class). A trend was found that students with relatively conservative views on health care were more likely to pass via counterfeiting than students with more liberal health care views. Our findings open the doors for more research on various types of passing in different categories of identity.

Keywords: passing, transcendence, socioeconomic status, political views

Passing and Transcendence in Political Identities and Socioeconomic Status

Liberal arts colleges often give students the opportunity to explore different facets of their identity in an environment that encourages critical thinking and self-reflection. The age of students typically range from the late teens to the mid-20s, a period now referred to as *emerging adulthood* (Arnett, 2000). During this developmental stage, an individual is no longer an adolescent, but not yet an adult. Emerging adulthood is characterized by identity exploration, possibilities, instability, self-focus, and feeling in-between (Arnett, 2007). Peers, both familiar and unfamiliar, establish social norms that may influence identity exploration. Certain identities (e.g., race, nationality) remain relatively stable in different contexts; however, the perception of these identities may change as a result of the campus climate and the diversity of the student population (Navarro et al., 2009; Doyle & Kao, 2007). Liberal arts colleges enable the exploration of less stable identities (eg., religion) during emerging adulthood (Longest & Smith, 2011; Howard, 2000).

Unfortunately, college students with minority identities may face stigmatization, which impacts their academic performance and feeling of belonging. According to Major and O'Brien, stigma stems from the devaluation of a social identity in a particular context (2005). Rather than explore their minority identity, individuals may try to hide their identity or take on a new false identity. This phenomenon, known as *passing*, explains an individual's attempt to fit in with the majority identity in a certain social context. Researchers have just started to investigate passing and most research has focused on minority sexual identities. Button (2004) found that gay and lesbian employees tend to use three identity-management strategies at work: counterfeiting a false heterosexual identity, avoiding the subject of sexuality, and integrating their sexual identity into the workplace. Passing might be especially important in a college setting, where students are

exploring new identities in emerging adulthood. Research has not yet addressed passing in the areas of socioeconomic status and political identity; however, a number of studies have addressed the influence of socioeconomic status and political identity on the college experience.

Socioeconomic Status (SES) in College

Socioeconomic status (SES), similar to social class, refers to an individual's social standing or class as determined by his or her education, income, and occupation (Langhout, Rosselli, & Feinstein, 2006). Language and clothing often reflect one's SES, but they can also be used to hide one's true SES (Seider, 2008). This could make it easier for individuals to pass as the majority SES in a certain situation. Ample research has investigated the importance of SES in the college experience. Ostrove and Long (2007) found a positive relationship between class background and adjustment mediated by a sense of belonging. Higher-class backgrounds, both objective and subjective, were related to higher levels of social and academic adjustment. While a higher-class background can positively impact one's college experience, a lower class background can have negative effects. College students of lower SES possess an underrepresented and stigmatized identity at elite universities (Johnson, Richeson, & Finkel, 2011). They tend to experience more concerns of academic fit and less self-regulation as a result of managing these concerns. Students, particularly women, from less privileged social class backgrounds (e.g., working-class) report facing more systematic discrimination and feeling more alienated and marginal (Langhout et al., 2006; Ostrove 2003). These negative experiences could potentially be attributed to the increased sensitivity to relative privilege of peers for students of lower household incomes (Johnson et al., 2007). These previous findings related to a variety of negative health outcomes lead us to believe that students with lower SES will be more likely to pass as the majority SES at an elite, liberal arts college.

Political Identity in College

Past research has also studied political identity in relation to other identities of college students. Astin (1993) observed significant effects of gender and race on the political views of college students. He found that women tend to adopt increasingly liberal views throughout their time in college, whereas men become more conservative. While white students tend to become more conservative, black students tend to become more liberal. Socioeconomic status and college environment of students also influence their political ideology and activity. Seider (2008) found that low-income students at a State College expressed more progressive views but remained politically inactive, whereas low-income and affluent students at a Little Ivy became more conservative and decreased their political activism during their time in college.

Political ideology may negatively impact an individual's college experience as a result of discrimination. Linvill and Havice (2011) found that students who identified as conservative reported more political bias in their professors and more significant reactions to these biases. Since professors and liberal arts college climates tend to support more liberal ideology, students with conservative ideology may hold a stigmatized identity in the college setting. Some of the measures on the Political Bias in the Classroom Survey (PBCS) relate directly to the idea of passing (e.g., "I believe I should censor my own political beliefs to preserve my grade when my political beliefs are different than my professors' political beliefs") (Linvill & Havice, 2011). These findings suggest that students who hold conservative ideology will be more likely to pass in a college setting where their political identity is considered a minority and stigmatized identity.

In addition, both political ideology and information related to political ideology (eg., attitude towards homosexuality) can influence the formation of peer relationships (Poteat et al.,

2011). Jost (2006) found that most individuals use a liberal-conservative dichotomy to make distinctions about in-group and out-group peers, so those individuals may also be more likely to form friendships based on the ideological dichotomy. The basic similarity-attraction effect suggests that people are attracted to and form friendships with others who have similar identities and attitudes (Byrne, 1971). Therefore college students may not need to pass as a different identity amongst friends since their friendships would be partially based on a similarity of identities. In contrast, students may feel the need to pass more amongst less familiar individuals, such as classmates with whom they are not friends.

Self-transcendence and Passing

Self-transcendence refers to an individual's ability to see his or her life as part of a broad worldview (Garcia-Romeu, 2010). Abraham Maslow described it as a holistic human consciousness that serves as an ends rather than a means to other human beings, other species, and the universe (1969). Past research found a positive correlation between transcendence and an informational identity style, which involves greater autonomy, empathy, openness to experience, and introspectiveness. On the other hand, a lack of self-transcendence has been linked to avoidance, frustration, and conformity to expectations (Beaumont, 2009). Since passing relates to conformity of expectations, we expect to find that individuals with low transcendence scores will be more likely to attempt to pass in a social situation in which their true identity makes them a minority. These effects should be exacerbated in unfamiliar situations versus those in which participants are among close friends.

Method

Participants

Seventy-seven participants (44 women, 30 men, 2 unidentified, $M_{\text{age}} = 19.8$, age range = 18-23) were approached at random by researchers in Miller Library and other highly frequented locations on campus. Participants were all currently enrolled at Colby College and some, but not all, were compensated with extra credit for a psychology course. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Materials and Procedure

Those who agreed to participate were asked to complete 3 separate questionnaires and a demographics survey in a quiet, semi-private area of the library. The study took about thirty minutes to complete, after which participants were debriefed and released.

Adult Self- Transcendence Inventory (ASTI). The first questionnaire was the ASTI, administered to measure participant levels of self-transcendence. This inventory was developed by Levenson, Jennings, Aldwin, and Shiraishi (2005) and consists of 18 items assessing self-transcendence on a Likert scale from 1 (disagree strongly) to 4 (agree strongly). Responses were analyzed on two subscales, self-transcendence and alienation (both demonstrate acceptable internal validity, 0.75 and 0.64, respectively). Items measuring self-transcendence include statements such as, “*Compared to five years ago, my sense of self is less dependent on other people and things,*” and “*Compared to five years ago, material things mean less to me.*” Those measuring alienation include statements such as, “*Compared to five years ago, I feel that my life has less meaning*” and “*Compared to five years ago, I feel more isolated and lonely.*”

Passing Questionnaires. Next, participants completed two questionnaires to assess levels of passing, one in terms of political identity, and another in terms of socioeconomic status

(see Appendices A and B for complete questionnaires). These questionnaires, developed for the specific purposes of the present study, were based on Button's Identity Management Survey (2004). The original survey was designed to gauge levels of passing among gay and lesbian individuals in the workplace, and consisted of 29 Likert-scaled items ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Each item in Button's Identity Management Survey corresponded to one of four strategies of identity management: counterfeiting (*"I sometimes comment on, or display interest in, members of the opposite sex to give the impression that I am straight"*), avoiding (*"When coworkers talk about dates, romances, and friendship, I usually remain silent"*), acknowledging (*"In daily activities, I am open about my homosexuality whenever it comes up"*), and advocating (*"I let my coworkers know that I am proud to be lesbian/gay"*). Similarly, all items in the present study's passing questionnaires corresponded to one of these categories, but analysis focused primarily on counterfeiting and avoiding. The SES and Political Identity questionnaires contained 24 items each describing behaviors associated with the four categories. Participants reported how often they engaged in each type of behavior in two contexts: *"amongst close friends"* and *"amongst people I do not know very well, such as in a class discussion at the beginning of the semester."* This was another modification to the Button study, which asked only about behaviors in the workplace, and was included to determine the role of context in passing behaviors.

Demographics Survey. The last section of the study was included to collect data on participant demographics. It asked questions to determine basic demographic information (age, class year, major/minor, nationality, zip code, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, and type of high-school attended), as well as several other questions pertaining to socioeconomic status and political identity.

Items obtaining information about socioeconomic status included: a self-reported estimate of participants' SES (poor, working, lower middle, middle, upper, or other), an approximation of annual family income (on a scale from 0 to 160,000 dollars), education levels of both parents (less than high school, high school/GED, some college, Bachelor of Arts or Sciences, masters level degree, or doctoral level degree), and occupation levels of both parents (unemployed, semi-skilled labor, skilled labor, clerical/technical, administrative, minor professional, or major professional). These items were adapted from a previous study that explored social class and belonging in college (Ostrove & Long, 2007). An additional item asked participants to indicate how confident they were in the answers they had provided about family SES on a seven-point Likert scale (1= not at all, 7= extremely).

The next set of questions corresponded to participants' political beliefs. In order to gain a comprehensive view of political identity, the questions did not ask questions about party affiliation or generalized political stance (i.e. liberal or conservative). Alternatively, this section looked at participants' views on eight relevant political issues: abortion, gay rights, immigration, healthcare, gun control, creationism/evolution being taught in schools, global warming, and legalization of marijuana. For each issue, participants were asked to provide their viewpoint on a 7-point scale ranging from "Very Liberal" to "Very Conservative." This allowed for a more in depth analysis of political identity.

In addition, two more questions provided information about the role of socioeconomic status and politics in participants' day-to-day lives. These items, assessed on a 7-point Likert scale (1=Never, 7= Always), were: "*Please circle how often you think about how much money you have,*" and "*Please circle how often you think about political issues.*" The purpose of these

questions was to gauge the importance of political identity and socioeconomic status to each participant, and the amount they reported the issues influencing their lives.

Results

The dependent variables for the present study were level of passing via avoidance, and level of passing via counterfeiting. Passing in political identity and SES were analyzed separately. Composite passing scores were computed by averaging responses on the passing questionnaires. Factor analysis of the ASTI results revealed one factor structure for transcendence. Questions targeting concern for the opinions of others, degree of focus on the present, dependence, materialistic tendencies, and compassion did not factor with this structure, thus were omitted from the composite score. This result suggests that factors identified by the literature as influential to transcendence may differ from those on a college campus. Future research should consider making modifications to the ASTI in order to reflect potential differences in adult samples. Familiarity of social situation was excluded from analysis due to widespread participant confusion.

Summary Statistics

Summary statistics are presented in Table 1. Contrary to our hypothesis, highly transcendent students reported more frequent passing. Low SES individuals were, consistent with predictions, more likely to pass in SES via counterfeiting. However, they were typically less likely to pass via avoidance. Conservative students tended to pass more often than liberal students; given conservatives are the statistical minority, this result was expected. Interestingly, high SES students were much more likely to pass via counterfeiting in their political views. These findings simply indicate trends in mean scores. To evaluate significant effects of

transcendence, SES, political ideology, and familiarity of social situation on passing, several correlations were conducted using SPSS statistical software.

Primary Findings

SES was computed using self-selection into class (e.g. working, middle, upper-middle) - income was disregarded due to perceived inaccuracies in participant estimates. SES was found to be negatively associated with passing via counterfeiting, $r(75) = -.23, p < .05$, but had no significant impact on passing via avoidance, $r(75) = .14, p = .22$. Political ideology did not correlate significantly with either counterfeiting, $r(73) = .06, p = .62$, or avoidance, $r(73) = .02, p = .86$. Level of transcendence had no impact on passing in political identity or SES, regardless of passing strategy.

Post Hoc Analyses

Post hoc analyses revealed several significant findings. Concerning political identity, students tended to pass more via avoidance than counterfeiting, $t(76) = -3.30, p < .01$. This was also the case with SES – students avoided more than they counterfeited, $t(76) = -14.15, p < .001$ (see Figure 1). Factor analyses revealed unique trends regarding views on health care. Students of relatively high SES (upper-middle class and middle-class) tended to have more conservative views on health care than students of lower SES (poor, working class, and lower-middle class), $r(74) = .44, p < .001$. A trend was found relating health care views and passing strategies: students with relatively conservative views on health care were more likely to pass via counterfeiting than students with more liberal health care views, $r(74) = .18, p = .11$.

Discussion

Overall, our findings support the idea that individuals of minority identities may use counterfeit or avoidance strategies to avoid revealing their true identity. Students of lower

socioeconomic status are more likely to attempt to pass than are students of higher socioeconomic status, which makes sense where the majority of the student body is more affluent. Previous studies have shown that individuals use identity management related to their sexuality in order to fit in with the majority (Button, 2004), and this study finds that individuals also use these identity management techniques with socioeconomic status and political views.

Our findings suggest that individuals use the avoidance passing technique more than the counterfeit technique. Future research should investigate the psychological differences between these two strategies. For example, is avoidance preferred because it is less stressful or takes less cognitive energy? Additionally, it may be possible that the preferred passing technique depends on the context in which passing is occurring, such as perhaps there are some contexts in which counterfeit is either easier or less stressful. Finally, attitudes towards certain identities may shift rapidly in this fast-paced modern world. Johnson (2002) brings to light how even in the face of anti-discrimination laws against identities such as sexuality, passing still occurs towards the privileged identity, suggesting that even moderated discrimination does not protect individuals from feeling the need to hide their true identities.

Students at Colby College have generally liberal political views. This could explain the lack of variance in political views. It is unclear how this variable would function in more diverse populations, where there is not such a dominant political attitude. A similar study done at a large public university with more students and higher diversity might show different results than what we found. For instance, maybe passing in political beliefs would not be as prevalent if it is easier to find a group of friends with more similar political beliefs; meanwhile, maybe there would be a

different behavior of passing in the classroom setting on a campus where there is not one clear majority political stance.

Another interesting finding is that healthcare was the least polarized political issue. For instance, even individuals who reported having liberal opinions on all other political issues reported a wide range of views on healthcare. There is something about this issue that makes it stand out from the others. Perhaps the amount of information that students have on healthcare, and their little experience with it in the real world, make their views not as strongly grounded to one side.

In conclusion, passing is a phenomenon that occurs in a variety of social contexts. Our study has shed some light on identities that individuals attempt to manage through avoidance and counterfeit, but it also has raised more questions on how these identity management strategies are used and why.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics		Political Views		SES	
		Counterfeit	Avoid	Counterfeit	Avoid
Transcendence	High	2.21	2.66	2.19	3.85
		0.95	1.38	1.14	0.60
	Low	1.92	2.46	1.79	3.58
		0.81	1.28	0.50	0.31
SES	High	2.40	2.55	1.89	3.95
		1.10	1.37	0.97	0.74
	Low	1.87	2.55	2.44	3.67
		0.80	1.44	1.38	0.55
Political Views	Conservative	2.36	2.72	1.98	3.75
		1.00	1.52	0.87	0.62
	Liberal	1.92	2.51	2.29	3.87
		0.77	1.13	1.26	0.58

Means are reported in black. Standard deviations are reported in red.

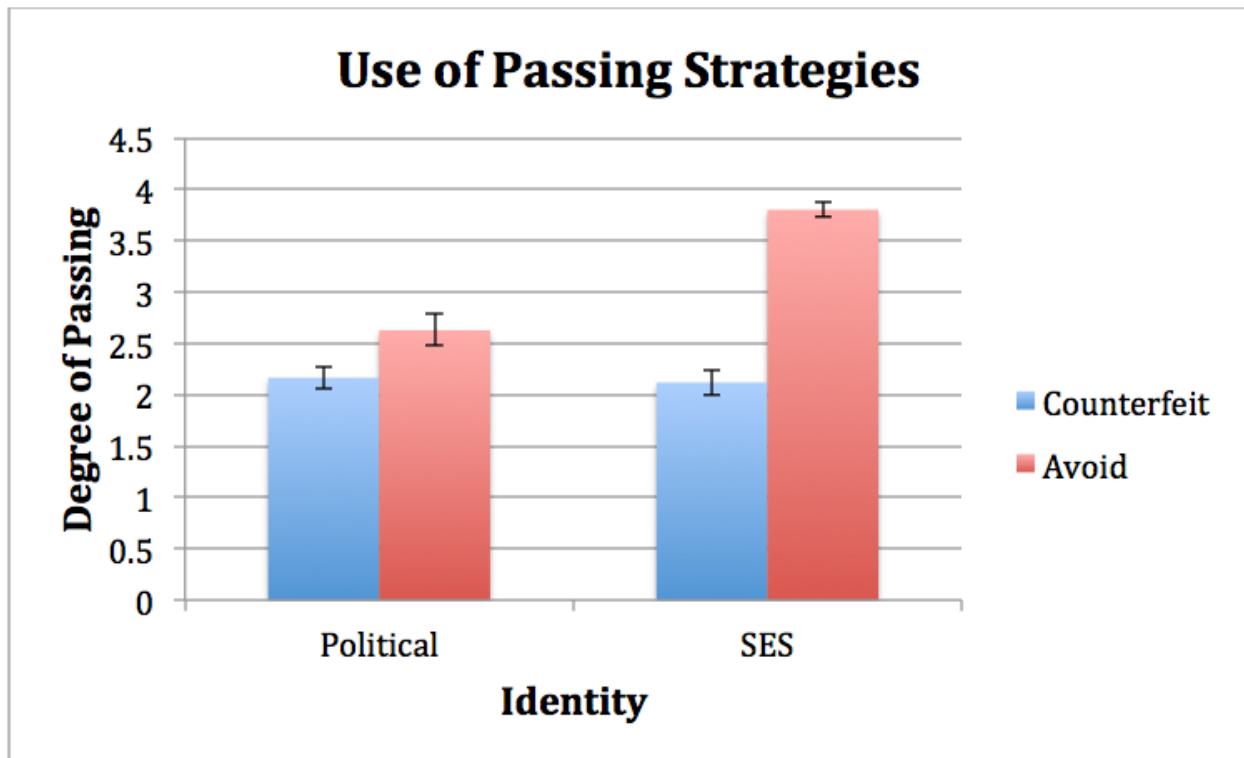


Figure 1. Mean degree of passing as a function of identity and passing strategy. Error bars reflect standard error of the mean.

Appendix A

Questions from “Political Views Questionnaire” measuring levels of passing in political identity.

1. To appear of a different political party, I sometimes lie about who I voted for in past elections.^(COUNT)
2. I sometimes positively comment on, or display interest in, issues or actions of a political party other than my own to give the impression that I am of that political party.^(COUNT)
3. I sometimes adjust my level of participation in political conversation to avoid revealing my political views.^(COUNT)
4. I make sure that I don’t behave in the way people expect people of my political party to behave.^(COUNT)
5. I sometimes actively conceal information about myself in order to appear like a member of a different political party.^(COUNT)
6. I sometimes laugh at jokes that insult my own political views in order to fit in with the people around me.^(COUNT)
7. I avoid peers who frequently discuss political views that oppose my own.^(AVOID)
8. I avoid situations (e.g., long lunches, parties) where people with different political views than my own are likely to ask me questions about political issues.^(AVOID)
9. Rather than answer questions about politics that would reveal my political views, I try to change the topic of the conversation.^(AVOID)
10. I let people know that I find political questions to be inappropriate so that I am not faced with them.^(AVOID)
11. I avoid political questions by never asking others about their political views.^(AVOID)
12. I withdraw from conversations when the topic turns to political issues.^(AVOID)
13. I let people think I know nothing about politics so they will not ask me questions about my political views.^(AVOID)
14. When peers of opposing political views talk about controversial political issues, I usually remain silent.^(AVOID)
15. In my daily activities, I am open about my political views whenever they come up.^(ACKNOWL)
16. Most of my peers are aware of my political beliefs.^(ACKNOWL)
17. Whenever I’m asked about my political beliefs I always answer in an honest and matter-of-fact way.^(ACKNOWL)
18. I often engage in discussion of political issues with people whose views oppose my own views.^(ACKNOWL)
19. My peers are aware of my political views.^(ACKNOWL)
20. I look for opportunities to tell my peers about my political views.^(ADVOC)
21. When policies, laws, or debates come up regarding abortion, Obamacare, or gay marriage, I tell people what I think.^(ADVOC)
22. I let my peers know about my political views.^(ADVOC)
23. I openly confront others when I hear someone make a statement that conflicts with my political views.^(ADVOC)
24. I display objects (e.g., stickers, posters, symbols) that indicate my political beliefs.^(ADVOC)

^(COUNT) = Measure of counterfeiting

^(AVOID) = Measure of avoiding

^(ACKNOWL) = Measure of acknowledging

^(ADVOC) = Measure of advocating

Appendix B

Items from “Socioeconomic Status Questionnaire,” measuring levels of passing in SES identity.

1. To appear of a different SES, I sometimes talk about fictional experiences that I have had. ^(COUNT)
2. On some occasions, I wear clothes to appear of a different SES. ^(COUNT)
3. I sometimes comment on, or display interest in, issues relevant to an SES other than my own to give the impression that I am of that SES. ^(COUNT)
4. I sometimes adjust the way I speak, via pronunciation of words or choice of words, in order to fit in with a different SES. ^(COUNT)
5. I have adjusted my level of participation in certain activities in order to hide my SES. ^(COUNT)
6. I make sure that I don’t behave in the way people of my SES behave. ^(COUNT)
7. I actively conceal information about myself in order to appear that I am of a different SES. ^(COUNT)
8. I sometimes laugh at jokes about my SES in order to fit in. ^(COUNT)
9. I avoid peers who make fun of people of different SES. ^(AVOID)
10. I avoid situations where peers are likely to be discussing issues relevant to their SES but not mine. ^(AVOID)
11. Rather than answer questions that would reveal my family’s wealth, I always try to change the topic of the conversation. ^(AVOID)
12. I let people know that I find personal questions about money to be inappropriate so that I am not faced with them. ^(AVOID)
13. I avoid personal questions by never asking others about money. ^(AVOID)
14. In order to keep my SES private, I avoid talking about what my family does on vacation and at what restaurants we go out to eat. ^(AVOID)
15. I withdraw from conversations when the topic turns to things like money, vacations, or shopping. ^(AVOID)
16. I purposely do not wear clothes with brand names so people will not know how much money I spend on clothes. ^(AVOID)
17. When peers talk about activities outside of my SES, I usually remain silent. ^(AVOID)
18. In my daily activities, I am open about my SES whenever it comes up. ^(ACKNOWL)
19. Most of my peers are aware of my SES. ^(ACKNOWL)
20. Whenever I’m asked about my SES, I always answer in an honest and matter-of-fact way. ^(ACKNOWL)
21. I’ve invited friends of different SES to my house. ^(ACKNOWL)
22. I look for opportunities to tell my peers about how I spend my money. ^(ADVOC)
23. When a policy or law is hurts people of my SES, I make a point to voice my opinion. ^(ADVOC)
24. I openly confront others when I hear them insult someone’s SES. ^(ADVOC)

^(COUNT) = Measure of counterfeiting

^(AVOID) = Measure of avoiding

^(ACKNOWL) = Measure of acknowledging

^(ADVOC) = Measure of advocating