NSF Award in Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences

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- **Project:** The Cost of Covering: Psychological and Physiological Implications of Managing a Stigmatized Identity
- **Start Date:** July 1, 2009
- **Total Award Amount:** $274,325

**How the results of this project will benefit society:**
Given the widespread benefits of increased diversity in educational and employment domains, it is important to understand the experiences of racial minority individuals who attempt to persist and succeed in the face of severe numerical under-representation and prevalent negative group stereotypes.

This research, therefore, has the potential to directly benefit institutions of higher education, by informing academic leaders as they seek to increase racial diversity, design environments that facilitate positive interracial contact experiences for all students, and create programs that contribute to minority students’ academic success. Insight into these issues undoubtedly will aid in the development of interventions to improve the quality of life of members of racial minority groups who manage to persist in the face of negative group expectations, as well as increase the number of individuals who are able to do so.

**The problem the project is trying to solve:**
Studies of intergroup contact often focus on how members of visibly stigmatized groups, such as racial minorities, maintain high levels of self-esteem after they have experienced poor treatment or otherwise have been reminded of their group’s devalued status. Less attention, however, has been devoted to how members of socially-devalued groups attempt to manage these interactions and the costs these efforts may entail.

**How this project will work:**
One strategy that members of racial minorities may adopt in interracial interactions in anticipation of negative treatment by others, with the objective of preempting it, is “covering,” a self-presentation strategy where individuals shift, suppress, or otherwise avoid discussing topics that are closely associated with their group membership during interracial interactions. This strategy is designed to reduce any negative reactions that their interaction partners may have to their group membership.

This project will examine covering behavior on the part of racial minority (Black and Latino) students of an elite, predominantly White, private university, a context in which these individuals are both numerically underrepresented and culturally devalued. In a series of laboratory studies, this research will examine (1) the extent to which racial minority individuals engage in covering during interactions with and/or communications directed toward racial majority group members, and (2) the potential costs of covering, including feelings of shame, increased loneliness, physiological stress reactions, and impaired cognitive performance.

This award is funded under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, NSF Award number: 0843872.