

Hiding a Disability and Passing as Non-Disabled

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People with disabilities often have some control over whether or not other people know that we are disabled.¹ Some disabilities, such as blindness, deafness, autism, traumatic brain injury, and chronic fatigue, may not be immediately perceptible to casual bystanders. The obvious symptoms and signs of other disabilities, such as missing limbs or physical deformities, can sometimes be disguised or covered. And many disabled people can conceal their disabilities by mostly isolating themselves from others.

Suppose someone has a non-perceptible disability and is deciding whether or not to pursue a general and long-term policy of hiding his disability and passing as a non-disabled person in contemporary Western society. He is considering whether or not to embark or continue on a systematic course of deception, pretense and concealment so that others do not know he has a disability and do not think of him as disabled. His policy would extend to most everyone besides a very small group of confidants whom he trusts to keep his secret and, in some cases, assist him in his ruse.

Attempting, in this way, to impersonate a non-disabled person may seem to be an irrational, unwise and immoral project for a disabled person to undertake. Hiding most kinds of disabilities, including ones that are not immediately perceptible, is very difficult or impossible to pull off, especially over an extended period of time. It seems foolish to forgo accommodations that would allow a disabled person to perform various major life activities and otherwise actively engage in social life, just to keep his disability under wraps. And, deception, manipulation and lying are generally regarded as morally wrong

in many circumstances, especially when they are pre-meditated and methodically and systematically employed.

A far more pressing concern for people with imperceptible disabilities, it may seem, is not with whether to conceal their disabilities but with convincing others that they are actually disabled. Ordinary people are often skeptical about the supposed disabilities of others when those conditions are not readily apparent, so when people who have imperceptible disabilities ask for special treatment or fail to meet certain expectations, they tend to be regarded as malingerers and frauds (Stone 2005).

Most of my own life, however, was spent successfully concealing the fact that I am legally blind from teachers, friends, colleagues and most everyone else. There have also been periods in my life when my disability was widely known among some groups, so I have first-hand experience of what it is like both to be accepted as non-disabled and to be regarded as disabled. I have often asked myself why I spent so much time and effort concealing my disability and whether it was prudent, wise and morally justifiable for me to have done so. Many other disabled people continue to confront these same kinds of questions about hiding, downplaying or covering for their disabilities. My aim in this essay is to draw on my own experiences, as well as those of other disabled people, to explain how a disabled person can hide her disability and pass as non-disabled, why she might want to do so and what costs and moral risks she and others might face along the way.² The issue of how, if at all, to portray one's disability in public, I argue, involves many competing and complex considerations that are difficult to interpret, apply and combine together, but my more general aim is to show that there are important

lessons to be learned about disability from understanding and assessing why a person might try to hide his own disability.

<1>Passing

Let's begin with the general idea of "passing" as, for example, male, white, heterosexual or non-disabled. According to Erving Goffman, a person passes as a member of a social group when she is accepted as or is believed to be a member of that group even though she does not qualify as part of it (Goffman 1959, 1963). Passing can be deliberate, as when Jews pretended to be Christian in order to avoid the wrath of the Nazis or women pretended to be men so that they could fight in the Civil War, but passing can also result from a person's accidental qualities and appearances, as when someone of black ancestry is regarded as white because of his light skin or a gay person is assumed to be straight because of his unintentional mannerisms and habits.³

Many people with disabilities have attempted to pass as non-disabled, with varying degrees of success.⁴ With the help of his trusted advisors and a compliant press corps, Franklin D. Roosevelt, for example, portrayed himself to the general public as a healthy person who had recovered from polio, despite the fact that he needed crutches, braces and wheelchairs to compensate for his very limited mobility (Gallagher 1985). Before John Howard Griffin wrote his famous account of passing as a black man in the Jim Crow South, he lost most of his vision in World War II and successfully passed as sighted for many years until his vision was suddenly restored (Griffin 2004, Brune 2013). And, in my own case, I spent most of my life passing as fully sighted even though I am legally blind as a result of an uncorrectable and congenital eye condition.

The desire to pass as non-disabled, along with the talents and skills that are necessary to do so, are often encouraged in disabled children by their doctors, families, schools and wider societies. Polio survivors in the 1920's, for example, were often taught to walk naturally with painful leg braces that could be concealed, to lean on sturdy objects for support and to make eye-contact with people rather than look down to avoid obstacles (Sheed 1995, Gallagher 1985). Blind children frequently learn to hold their heads in the same ways as sighted people do when having conversations, to adopt a general expression of preoccupation, to walk quickly and purposefully, and to act as if they misplaced their glasses if they are asked to read something (Kleege 1999, Griffin 2004, Titchkosky 2003). Therapy for people with certain mental illnesses is often aimed at teaching them strategies to mask the external symptoms of their conditions such as not to wring their hands, talk to themselves, or furtively move their eyes in public (Cox 2013). And one of the main approaches to Deaf education has been to emphasize methods of oral communication, rather than manual methods such as sign-language, by teaching Deaf children to read lips, to mimic the sounds of ordinary speech and to use hearing aids so that they can more easily integrate into mainstream culture (Van Cleve 2007, Harmon 2013).

<1>How to pass as non-disabled

A person with an imperceptible disability who is deciding whether or not to pursue the goal of passing as non-disabled should consider whether he can achieve this goal and, if he can, what it would take for him to do so effectively and efficiently. Scott, let's assume, is a legally blind person who is not generally known to be disabled, perhaps because he has recently moved to a new place. The few people who do know about his

visual impairment are likely to keep his secret if he asks them to. His disability is not perceptible to casual observers, so he does not have to worry about others simply concluding that he is disabled from casual observation. A policy of passing as non-disabled obviously requires Scott not to tell others about his disability and to be very cautious about who he does confide in, for fear that they will, intentionally or not, pass on his secret to others.

It may seem unlikely that Scott and other disabled people can actually manage to hide their disabilities, at least without extraordinary talents and resources that are beyond the reach of most people. The following are some general techniques, heuristics and rules of thumb, however, that Scott and other people with imperceptible disabilities might use to hide their disabilities and pass as non-disabled. Many of them are not especially difficult or taxing while some are made easier by implicit or unconscious cooperation from the very people Scott is attempting to deceive.

The most difficult obstacle that Scott must overcome in order to be accepted as a person without a disability is that others are likely to infer that he has a disability on the basis of various kinds of indirect evidence.

Asking for or using certain kinds of adaptive equipment or special accommodations when others are around, for example, would likely arouse their suspicion that he has a disability, so he should generally refuse to use identifiable adaptive equipment or special accommodations in the company of all but his most trusted confidants. If he does make use of accommodations for his disability, he should ask for them privately and insist that they are either provided discretely so that others will not recognize them as special assistance or demand that they are made available to all

participants so that no one knows who, if anyone, needs them. He could generally limit his participation at meetings, for instance, to those that follow the principles of what has come to be called “universal design,” which is a design philosophy that aims to make buildings, products and environments accessible for all people by, for example, requiring that electronic copies of handouts are made available to all participants (Connell et al. 1997, Cureton 2017).

Scott should generally avoid associating with other people with disabilities, participating in programs and groups for disabled people, or advocating for disabled people, because others may think that the most likely explanation for his special interest in these activities is that he is disabled himself. He should instead favor activities, occasions and environments that allow him to be an active participant while still keeping his disability hidden. I have made excuses, for example, for why I would not be attending certain large gatherings where I would have trouble identifying people from a distance or participating in sports that involve small balls.

When Scott is around other non-disabled people and wants them to accept him as one of them, he must not only imitate their mannerisms, appearance and behavior, but he must also seem to do so with normal ease and grace. There are many ways that disabled people have devised for accomplishing these tasks. Someone with a mobility impairment may, for instance, learn to appear as if he walks and stands naturally even though doing so is quite painful and burdensome to him. A person with a speech impairment may avoid words that cause him to stutter. Someone who is hearing impaired may speak softly, let her sentences trail, and develop generic reactions for occasions in which she does not hear what people say (Brueggemann 1997). And someone, like me, who has a

visual impairment can learn to fake eye contact, pretend to read what others give to me by holding the paper at a normal distance, use memory, context clues and the reactions of others to guess at what I am supposed to be observing at a distance or how I am expected to respond, memorize texts that I might be asked to read aloud, scout unfamiliar environments in advance, identify people by the sound of their voice or the motion of their gate, ignore or smile at people who approach me or call me from a distance, and rely on widely-used devices, such as smartphones, to find my way.

Other people can be especially useful in covering for a disability. Confidants can help disabled people to spot others in a crowd, find the nearest restroom, or take the blame for mishaps. Even when others are not aware of Scott's disability and so have no intention to accommodate it, he can nonetheless use them in various ways without arousing suspicion. He can, for example, ask them apparently innocuous questions in order to gain information about his surroundings, take note of what they order at a restaurant when he cannot read the menu, covertly listen to other conversations, and surreptitiously walk with them to the next meeting location. A Deaf person might sit next to a person with a loud voice at a noisy restaurant or keep a watchful eye on how others are reacting to a musical performance.

Even when these techniques are applied reasonably well, a person with an imperceptible disability may not always be able to hide some of the effects of his disability. His covering tactics might sometimes appear somewhat odd or unusual; he may let his guard down on some occasions or fail to predict or plan for certain eventualities; or he may simply be unable to conceal the markers of his disability. In order to pass as non-disabled, Scott must develop back-up strategies for maintaining his

cover. If others notice that a person with an imperceptible disability is exhibiting behavior that is unusual or strange for a non-disabled person, he should prevent them from drawing what is often the natural conclusion, which is that he is disabled.

One technique is to lead others to think that there are better explanations for the effects of his disability other than that he is disabled. For example, I have sometimes allowed and encouraged people to assume I am dim-witted, ignorant, unprepared, aloof, uninterested or easily bored when I cannot see what is being discussed, slovenly when I have unnoticed stains on my shirt, indifferent or uncaring when I fail to notice that someone needs assistance, rude when I do not acknowledge people or insincere when I acknowledge everyone I see, buffoonish when I trip or spill something, haughty or lazy when I refuse to participate in certain activities, or absent-minded, eccentric or inept when I leave things behind, miss typos or make the text on my computer larger than normal.

I have also acted as if my unusual behavior or appearance is actually intentional and part of a larger project. When someone points out to me that I am headed in the wrong direction, I would usually make up some plausible excuse for why I meant to be going that way. My questions to teachers and presenters have sometimes been founded on assumptions that were explicitly rejected in the handout or slideshow, but instead of admitting that I could not see the material, I have simply “rephrased” my question in a way that showed it had some “deeper” point.

A second technique to prevent others from concluding that a person who exhibits signs of disability is actually disabled involves humor, abrupt changes of subject and other forms of misdirection so that they quickly forget what they perceived about the

person or do not bother to seek an explanation for it. On one occasion, for example, after it was clear to my dinner companions that I was unable to read a street sign, I casually began “reading” the names of distant restaurants that I remembered from a map so that my mistake would be quickly disregarded.

As long as Scott portrays himself as having abilities and attributes that fall within normal ranges for non-disabled people, he is likely to be accepted as one of them. Deaf people who are native English speakers, for instance, have found that they can sometimes explain away their Deaf accent by claiming to be German (Brueggemann 1997). People with mobility impairments who are uneasy on their feet have led others to think that they are simply under the influence of alcohol (Stone 2005). Disabled people who walk with assistive aids will sometimes use underarm crutches rather than forearm crutches so that their impairment appears to be temporary rather than permanent (Siebers 2004). And I have sometimes conceded that I could not “see well” in a way that still gave the impression that my visual acuity was only somewhat low but within the normal range.

Despite his best efforts at passing as non-disabled, other people may sometimes come to know that Scott has a disability. When this happens, he may be able to maintain his cover by leading others to forget or doubt this fact or not attend to it in their thinking. He can refuse to break his cover by simply denying that he is disabled, perhaps while feigning surprise at the suggestion that he is, while continuing on as before in the hope that, after enough time has passed, they will no longer regard him as disabled. But when the jig is finally up and someone has caught him out, he can attempt to mitigate the damage this might cause to his overall project by downplaying the severity of his

condition while also trying to convince the person that she should respect his privacy and not share his secret with others.

Using these strategies and techniques effectively in order to pass as non-disabled takes significant study, planning, practice and guesswork. A disabled person must also possess realized talents and skills of improvisation, attention, memory, adaptability, creativity, patience and cunning in order to maintain his cover. Developing the necessary abilities and habits may take many years, perhaps stretching back to early childhood. The person's disability may have to be predictable and not very severe in order for him to put on a convincing performance. And, perhaps most importantly, others in society must be susceptible to his deception. I have found that hiding my disability is much easier than it may seem because most people tend to ignore, overlook and act as if I do not have a disability as long as I am reasonably effective at blending in. Even when there is ample evidence that I am visually impaired, most people do not become suspicious that I am disabled but instead overlook these obvious signs, accept what can be ludicrous explanations for the effects of my disability that they do notice, quickly forget that I am disabled if they do find out and otherwise seem to unconsciously want to accept my pretense of normalcy (see Siebers 2004, Stone 2005). Perhaps some of these people were playing along with my attempts at deceiving them, knowing full well that that I was disabled, but many people, I suspect, have genuinely accepted me as a non-disabled person (see Brueggemann 1997).

<1>Social circumstances

Let's suppose, then, that Scott has the ability to pass as non-disabled. We can next ask whether doing so is in Scott's interests. Answering this question depends, in

significant part, on the social circumstances in which Scott lives. Hiding one's disability may be necessary to avoid being euthanized, as in Nazi Germany, or forcibly sterilized, as in certain parts of America in the 1920s (Kevles 1985). In the United States before the Americans with Disabilities Act, someone may wish to hide her disability because she would otherwise face explicit discrimination in employment, education, housing, healthcare and transportation. Revealing one's disability in these kinds of societies carried significant risks, but passing as non-disabled was also very difficult without studded walkways, large-screen monitors and other accommodations that a disabled person can covertly use without being regarded as disabled.

Let's further suppose, then, that Scott lives in a society that guarantees people with disabilities the same basic civil rights as others, bans various forms of outright discrimination against the disabled, and requires public and private organizations to make the environment accessible and to honor specific requests for reasonable accommodations.

In societies of this sort, the costs and benefits to a person of passing as non-disabled depend largely on the negative social attitudes that people generally have about disabled people. Everyone does not hold these attitudes; those who hold them do not do so to the same degree; and many people may not be aware that they possess negative attitudes about disabled people. Although most people with disabilities have experienced some form of stigma because of their disability, there is also a danger of exaggerating how widespread or deeply held these attitudes are by extrapolating from a few egregious instances. We must be careful not to be too confident in attributing bias and prejudice to people. A person who is deciding whether to hide his disability in these circumstances

must therefore consider, as best he can, how others are likely to react if his disability is widely known.

The following are some of the negative social attitudes that, in my experience, disabled people face when and because others know that we are disabled.

I have noticed that people who know that I have a visual impairment are more likely to ignore me than those who are unaware of my disability. I have also noticed that people tend to be more awkward, uncomfortable and standoffish in their interactions with me when they are aware of my condition. People also tend to be preoccupied with my disability when they are aware of it. Their attention seems to be mostly focused on what I can and cannot see, how I manage to get around, the workings of the adaptive equipment I use, other people they know who have similar impairments, and the nature and causes of my underlying condition. People often steer our conversations to my disability or seem distracted by it because they are clearly thinking about my condition even if they are too polite to say so. One reason for their preoccupation may be a sort of morbid curiosity with a condition that painfully reminds them of their own vulnerability and that may provide a cautionary tale for how they can avoid such a fate themselves. I have even been subjected to disconcerting whispers, stares, ridicule and derision on account of my disability and its effects. I suspect that my disability has been my most salient feature to many people who tended to see me primarily as a disabled person.

When people know that I have a disability, they tend to have lower expectations of me and assume I am much less capable than I am. In some cases, people have simply told me so, but more often they simply refuse to assign important responsibilities to me, to trust or rely on me to accomplish various goals, to give me opportunities to collaborate

with them on shared projects, to include me in cooperative enterprises, or to hold me to high standards by blaming me when I fail to meet those expectations or praising me when I manage to do so. When considering what abilities I have, people seem to rely on stereotypes, folk wisdom and their own guesses about how they would fare with a visual disability: They often assume, for example, that having a visual disability implies that I have a cognitive disability, that my visual impairment has prevented me from acquiring certain knowledge and skills, that I am likely to take longer and require more assistance in order to accomplish various goals, and that most of the mistakes I do make are a result of my disability rather than the more typical causes of mistakes.

Rather than seeing me as a capable person who can fully participate in joint activities, many people who know that I am disabled instead tend to regard me as more or less helpless. Some people respond to me by offering assistance in ways that are unwanted, unneeded, ineffective and in some cases even burdensome and disrespectful to me (Cureton 2016, Driver 1997). They seem to be motivated by misplaced compassion or pity because they regard my visual impairment as a serious misfortune that calls for beneficence and charity, along with accompanying gratitude on my part, rather than as calling for rightful and just accommodation. These people tend to aim at making my life more comfortable and pleasant rather than putting me in a position to participate in social activities on an equal footing with others. Other people, it seems, want to avoid the inconveniences and extra responsibilities that they think come from assisting me, or they are simply unsure how to help and wish to avoid the awkwardness of asking me directly. My accomplishments and successes, I have sometimes noticed, are less likely to be appreciated by others because my successes tend to be attributed more to my

accommodations rather than my abilities, while the admiration I do receive is more often for my ability to overcome my disability rather than for my successes themselves.

When I have openly asked for or used certain accommodations, especially ones that are not widely understood, some people seem to assume that I am griping, malingering, making illegitimate excuses or taking unfair advantage of others (see Siebers 2004). Because my visual impairment is not readily apparent to others, people are particularly likely to wonder why I need or deserve certain accommodations and to express their resentment and indignation at what they see as my unjustified special pleading. When I ask for one kind of accommodation, such as extra time on an exam, but afterwards join in a soccer match, people have questioned whether I even have a disability or whether I am simply attempting to “game the system.” In order to avoid these attitudes and secure important accommodations I need, I have sometimes been forced to exaggerate my disability in humiliating ways by playing the part of what most people expect from a visually impaired person.

<1>Benefits of passing as non-disabled

Many of the negative social attitudes that people with disabilities face are unjustified and mistaken, but if we assume that they are part of the social world in which Scott and other people with disabilities currently live, we can next ask what Scott might stand to gain by avoiding these attitudes. What follows is a list of some of the benefits that a policy of passing as non-disabled might have for Scott and other disabled people.

One reason someone may want to pass as non-disabled is that he values social acceptance for its own sake and he suspects that if others know about his disability then they are less likely to form personal relationships or group ties with him. One reason for

this is that the types of interpersonal interactions that help to forge social bonds tend to be less natural, spontaneous and fluid when other people are awkward, standoffish, fixated on a person's disability, lamenting his misfortune or thinking about what they need to do to help him. The reactions a disabled person has to these attitudes can sometimes get in the way as well. I have brusquely refused assistance, for example, expressed exasperation when accommodations were not forthcoming, or shown annoyance when others have bombarded me with questions about my condition. A further difficulty is that when others know that a person is disabled, they tend to see him as someone to be cared for and tolerated, whose opinions, values and talents are not taken as seriously as those of others. This makes it less likely that a disabled person will be included as a full, contributing and valued member of the group whose skills and talents are valued and appreciated.

A disabled person may also value for its own sake participating in joint activities and cooperative projects. Yet he knows that if others are aware of his disability then he is less likely to be trusted with important responsibilities, allowed to take up positions of authority, or otherwise permitted to contribute to the shared ends and activities as an equal.

A disabled person may want to pass as non-disabled in order to avoid painful feelings of embarrassment that tend to arise in him when others know about his disability. He may feel embarrassed in such cases because he knows that others tend to regard his disability as a defect or flaw and they tend to look down on him because of it.

A disabled person may aim for a kind of independence or self-reliance in which he does not depend on the charity or beneficence of others. Hiding his disability, he may

think, will tend to diminish the beneficent acts that others do for him and allow him to pursue his goals by his own efforts, talents, rights and luck. He will also be forced to develop various talents and skills that make him less vulnerable when others are not around to assist him.

Scott may know that his self-esteem and sense of his own worth depend in various ways on being accepted and appreciated by others. He may want to hide his disability so that it is easier to fit in with them, form relationships with them, engage in joint projects and secure their appreciation for his accomplishments, talents and skills as ways of avoiding feelings of despondency and self-doubt and of securing a sense of his own worth.

Scott may worry that if he is subject to common social attitudes about disability then he will eventually internalize these attitudes himself. He may be concerned, in particular, that he would come to adjust his aspirations and motivations to the low expectations others have of people with his kind of impairment, lose his sense of independence and purpose, and come to see himself as incapable, pitiful or malingering. The attitudes that others have about him, he may worry, are often difficult for him to resist, so he may choose to hide his disability in order to avoid adopting those attitudes about himself.

If Scott has partially internalized some of these social attitudes already then he may feel ashamed of his disability because he regards it as a personal fault or defect. Hiding his disability from others may be a way of deceiving himself that he is not disabled after all so that he can avoid the feelings of shame he would have if he were regularly treated as a person with a disability.

Scott may take pride in his abilities and talents. When people express their low expectations of him, tell him he cannot do something, express pity for him, or attribute his successes mainly to his accommodations, he may in some cases form a desire to show himself that he is more capable than they think. His pride may also be at risk when he wonders, perhaps at the prompting of others, whether the various accommodations he receives are forms of unfair special treatment. He may wish to resist most all accommodations so that he is sure to avoid any illegitimate complaining, whining or special pleading. Accomplishing these goals, he may think, is more difficult if others know he has a disability, so he may aim to hide his disability as a way of maintaining a sense of pride and satisfaction in himself.

A disabled person may seek to pass as non-disabled in order to pursue other personal goals and projects he has, such as securing a good job, maintaining personal safety and preventing his children from being taken away by overzealous child welfare officials. He may also want to develop his strength of will to overcome obstacles and ignore inconvenience and pain, as well as cultivate other talents and skills, free from various kinds of interference from others.

A disabled person may wish to pass as non-disabled so that others are not inconvenienced or made to feel uncomfortable by his disability, its effects or the measures they would have to take in order to accommodate it. Sign-language interpreters, for example, can be distracting, producing accessible print materials is sometimes annoying and insisting on accessible restaurants can be disruptive, so a disabled person may prefer to hide his disability rather than burden others with it (Zola 1982).

Finally, a person with an imperceptible disability may, in some ways, feel like a fraud when he considers the challenges that people with more severe disabilities face. Those people, he may think, are the ones who truly deserve special consideration, whereas his limitations are moderate by comparison, so hiding his disability may be his way of not presenting himself as meriting the same kind of concern and respect that is due to people with more significant disabilities (Stone 2005).

<1>Costs to passing as non-disabled

There are also various costs to Scott embarking on a systematic policy of hiding one's disability in the social environment that currently exists:

A systematic policy of hiding one's disability can exact a significant psychological toll. Scott must be constantly vigilant about keeping his secret, maintain a heightened awareness of how he is perceived by others, and take extensive precautions so that his true identity is not discovered. He is likely to be in a perpetual state of worry, anxiety and fear that his cover will be blown, which may sometimes be debilitating or prevent him from enjoying the common pleasures of naturalness, spontaneity and tranquility. As with any personal project, he also risks self-reproach when he does not carry out his policy effectively as well as regret if his policy is unsuccessful as a result of unfortunate circumstances and bad luck. And Scott is likely to meet with deep frustration when he must find unorthodox ways to accomplish various tasks or at least appear to accomplish them, avoid certain kinds of activities he would like to participate in, and otherwise put up with hardship that results from his disability without revealing that he has one.

Not only is a policy of passing as non-disabled likely to be psychologically exhausting, but the policy itself, as well as the time, effort and attention that go into it implementing it, may interfere with his pursuit of other goals and aims. On many occasions, for example, I have missed flights, gotten off at the wrong bus stop, misplaced my wallet and keys, settled with unwanted food because I could not read the menu, avoided social gatherings or conferences I would like to have attended, been bored at events I could not see, avoided interacting with other blind people and been late to meetings and classes because I refused to reveal that I had a disability. I did not spend much time at art galleries, theatre performances or my children's sporting events because I refused to use visual aids. At certain times of my life, hiding my disability was such a fundamental aspect of my identity that I explicitly or unconsciously adapted and adjusted many of my other goals and projects to what I thought I could accomplish while keeping my disability secret. Who knows whether I would have wanted to be a surgeon, historian, musician or physicist if I had been willing to accept accommodations for my visual impairment at an early stage of life, but as things stand my choice of one career over others was probably influenced, to some extent, by the deep desire I had to hide my disability.

Choosing to hide one's disability can also interfere with developing and exercising one's skills and talents. When I was in school, I did not allow most of my teachers to know that I had a visual impairment. I refused to use large-print materials, magnifying glasses or telescopes but instead bumbled my way through dissections, guessed at what was in books I could barely read, hoped that someone would happen to recite what was on the board, and listened intently in order to piece together what we

were supposed to be learning. At the time, I knew I was not performing to my full potential or learning the material as well as I could if I had accepted accommodations, but I was willing to accept these costs because of the social benefits that came from passing as non-disabled. I was fortunate to have done well enough in school in spite of these obstacles, to have eventually found accommodations that have allowed me to overcome many of them, and to have chosen a profession where the critical thinking, listening and social skills I developed serve me well, but it nonetheless seems that in general choosing to hide one's disability can dramatically interfere with the development and realization of one's talents and skills. Moreover, because I aimed to keep my disability a secret at an early age, I did not practice some of the skills that are needed to make effective use of accommodations for visually impaired people, such as reading Braille or using canes, guide-dogs or text-to-speech readers, although I did develop more convoluted ways of achieving some of same results while keeping my disability hidden.

There may be physical costs to hiding one's disability as well. In my case, eye strain and bright florescent lights can be very painful even though I could ameliorate these discomforts in various ways that would make my disability obvious. It is sometimes dangerous for me to walk in unknown environments where I risk tripping, walking into traffic or getting lost in unsafe places where I am especially vulnerable.

A further danger to hiding a disability is that others may depend on Scott to know where he is going, alert them to dangers or assist them if they are in trouble. He may also be more likely to stumble into other people, step on their toes, or nudge them into traffic. I have developed various strategies to make myself more dependable, but I may not be as

reliable as I appear to be, which may give others a false sense of security and put them at some risk of danger.

Although a person who aims to hide his disability may secure social acceptance and some appreciation for his talents and accomplishments, he also risks social disapproval from others when they regard him as foolish, rude, uncaring or dim-witted for actions and behaviors that actually result from his hidden disability. As long as these attributions are within the normal range, however, he is still likely to be treated as a full and equal member of various social groups than if others know that he has a disability. He may not be as successful at realizing his talents or contributing to shared goals because of his hidden disability, but in some cases he may receive more appreciation from others for his skills and accomplishments than if they knew he was disabled. His sense of his own worth may be further reinforced by the hidden knowledge that he would be even more effective if he made use of accommodations in a social environment that did not disadvantage people for doing so.

Although hiding his disability may allow him to secure greater social acceptance, Scott may also feel somewhat isolated and lonely because he cannot openly share certain important features of himself with others or allow them to get to know him too well for fear that they would come to learn about his disability. He may have a few close confidants that he can trust with his secret, but he may lose out on some of the values of friendship and solidarity because he cannot tell other people the real reasons why he is frustrated, anxious or depressed or rely on their emotional support and understanding when he finds his disability and his attempts to hide it particularly burdensome.

Scott may come to worry that by refusing to ask for and utilize various accommodations that are due to him as a matter of right and justice, he is adopting an inappropriately servile attitude that denies his equal moral status within the true system of moral rights. If he does not understand his moral rights to accommodations or if he places a comparatively low value on them as compared to others then his policy of hiding his disability may express a form of servility that is incompatible with proper self-respect. If, on the other hand, he fully acknowledges and appreciates the value of his rights and his moral status, but chooses to hide his disability for other reasons, he may not betray a lack of self-respect (Hill 1991).

Scott also risks a kind of self-abnegation if comes to believe his own deceptions and so no longer see or accept himself as a disabled person. Or Scott may come to recognize that many of the social attitudes and stereotypes that tempt him to hide his disability are unjustified. If he chooses to pass as non-disabled without also fighting to change them, he may betray some lack of integrity by acting in accordance with attitudes that he believes are mistaken while allowing or even encouraging others to maintain those same attitudes.

A disabled person may also worry that passing as non-disabled would harm other disabled people by implicitly supporting or failing to challenge the oppressive social attitudes that he aims to avoid for himself. Many disability activists see this kind of passing, if it becomes widespread, as a threat to the political power, culture and collective identity of disabled people (Adam 1978, Siebers 2004, Gill 1997, Longmore 2003).

Finally, a significant risk to passing as non-disabled is that doing so involves deceiving, manipulating and sometimes lying to others. Such acts are thought to be

wrong in many contexts, but it is less clear how we should think about the morality of deception, manipulation and lying when openness and honesty are likely to be met with oppression, discrimination and stigma. Moreover, having and exercising a right to privacy with regard to certain aspects of oneself may, in certain circumstances, imply a permission to deceive, manipulate or perhaps lie to others when doing so is necessary to protect that personal information. There may also be differences among these types of acts that make them more or less open to moral criticism – an outright and solemn lie that I do not have a disability when someone asks me to watch her children may be wrong, while politely declining her request in a way that deceives her about my condition may be permissible.

<1>Further reflection on whether or not to pass as non-disabled

These are just some of the complex and competing factors that should figure into a disabled person's decision about whether or not to hide his disability and pass as non-disabled. I suspect that the wisdom of hiding one's disability will depend on the person's particular circumstances and require significant reflection and informed judgment to balance these and other conflicting considerations. One source of uncertainty is about the various instrumental benefits and costs of hiding one's disability as well as the likelihood that such a policy will be effective. One way Scott might proceed is by reflecting more deeply on his goals and the relative priority that they have for him.

Scott might reflect first on the relative importance of developing his talents and skills as compared to certain aspects of social acceptance such as the conveniences, comforts and pleasures of fitting in. On reflection, he may decide that one set of ends is more important than the other. Matters may be more difficult if he stands to be ostracized

if others know he has a disability or if social inclusion is necessary for other important ends he has, but even so he may discover ways of scheduling his final ends by, for example, accepting accommodations for his disability during his education and training while playing down his disability in later life.

Scott may worry that adopting a policy of hiding his disability because of the social attitudes he would face if his disability were known cedes too much control to other people over his life and makes him an instrument of his own oppression (Frye 1983). He may think that he should be more secure in himself without needing the approval, admiration or acceptance of others in order to live a happy and fulfilled life. Although it may be difficult, he may decide to give less consideration to the attitudes of others in his choice of plans and projects, seek to maintain his sense of his own worth by his own rights, efforts, talents and accomplishments, and learn to bear the social costs of his stigma with self-possession and grace.

Scott may come to think that his efforts to hide his disability arise in some way from his own difficulties in accepting himself as a person with a disability. He may think that he should come to terms with who he is and refrain from deceiving himself about basic aspects of himself. If he can manage to do these things, his desire to hide his disability from others may somewhat subside.

On reflection, Scott may think that the kinds of relationships and ties that depend on hiding his disability are less valuable to him than the relationships he might have with people who would accept him for who he is. If some people would exclude or look down on him for his disability then they may not be the kinds of people he wants to relate with anyway.

Suppose one of Scott's reasons for hiding his disability is that he takes pride in his abilities and talents, which he aims to develop and utilize in fair and open competition with others without unjustified special treatment. Some accommodations, he may recognize, are legitimate while others may not be, so instead of hiding his disability altogether to avoid special pleading, he may try to be honest and meticulous in only accepting the accommodations that he needs to compete on a fair and equal basis with others.

Finally, when Scott is uncertain about how others would react to his disability, he might adopt a stance of reasonable hope that they will eventually overcome their stereotypes about people with disabilities and come to accept him as a full and equal member of society. Perhaps his assessment of the consequences of openly living his life as a person with a disability should not be simply based on a calculation of the odds but should also incorporate some degree of reasonable hope that social attitudes about disability will someday become less oppressive.

<1>Alternative policies to passing as non-disabled

As Scott deliberates about whether or not to pass as non-disabled, he should also consider alternative policies for how, if at all, to present his disability in public:

One possibility is to openly rebel against the oppressive social attitudes that disabled people face by wearing his disability as a badge of honor and adopting the customs and norms of blind culture. He may gain social acceptance in disability circles, take on positions of authority and responsibility in the disability rights movement, and secure appreciation from others for combating stereotypes and advocating for disabled people (Gill 1997, Griffin 2004, Brune 2013, Siebers 2004). He may also take pride in

his talents, skills and accomplishments in service of these shared aims, regard his disability as a valued part of his identity, and prize the relationships that his disability makes possible.

Another policy is not to hide his disability or to openly advertise it either. He may think “this is who I am, I am not embarrassed or ashamed by my disability, so others should simply deal with it.” He may come to find that he is not especially concerned with gaining social acceptance from people who stigmatize people with disabilities and he may value the sense of self-acceptance, self-respect and integrity that come from living his life in accordance with the attitudes, values and commitments that he thinks everyone should have.

Finally, Scott may take a more nuanced approach to how he portrays his disability in public by generally keeping it private unless doing so conflicts with other important ends he has. Under this policy, he would be more willing to ask for and use accommodations in certain circumstances but still refuse them for more trivial matters. In many cases he would hide his disability in order to overcome the initial reluctance people have to engage with people with disabilities, but once they get to know him, he would be more willing to share his disability with them if there were compelling reasons to do so. One such reason may be to combat stereotypes about people with disabilities by leading them to recognize how resourceful, trustworthy and talented people with disabilities can be.

<1>Conclusion

Decisions about whether or not to hide one’s disability are often more complicated than they may initially appear. I have explored some of the moral and non-

moral considerations that may figure in these decisions and suggested that wisdom, judgment and sensitivity are needed to make a reasonable choice about how, if at all, to portray one's disability in public. For my I own part, I have given up my charade of passing as a non-disabled person to some extent, but I am not sure exactly why I have done so or whether I have gone far enough.

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² Recent work in epistemology has suggested that testimonial evidence from members of oppressed groups should be regarded as especially reliable evidence about our own lives and experiences (Fricker 2007, Alcoff 1991).

³ See the following for discussions of passing in the context of race (Piper 1992, Fabi 2001, Wald 2000, Ginsberg 1996, Griffin 1961), sexual orientation (Mohr 1992, Cooley and Harrison 2012, Lingel 2009, Card 1995, Sedgwick 1990), gender (Meyerowitz 2002); and religion (Shirer 1960).

⁴ For discussion of passing in the context of disability, see Roding et al. (2003), Stone (2005), Siebers (2004), Samuels (2003), Kleege (1999), Griffin (2004), Titchkosky (2003), Corey (1968), Kuusisto (2006), Shakespeare (1998), Zola (1982), Gallagher (1985), Thomas (2013), Brueggemann (1997).