

COVERING: THE IDENTITY PROJECT

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by

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Abstract

The concept of “coming out” is fairly recognizable as a social phenomenon. It usually entails a person of a marginalized identity revealing a previously hidden identity to those around them. A person’s decision to come out is often a reoccurring and lifelong process. What is often not examined, and what I chose to examine through my project, was the delicate balance marginalized people often face when deciding if and when a specific situation is safe to come out in. Covering refers to when a person does not deny their marginalized identity but is very particular about who they expose themselves to, in an attempt to conform to society as best as possible. Through in-depth video interviews with people of varying genders, sexualities, gender expressions, race and disabilities I was able to understand the implications that arise from actively covering an aspect of one’s identity on a daily basis. My goal is to provide a platform where people can reveal their authentic selves and inspire others to do the same.

Covering: The Identity Project

The Theory

I was initially attracted to the concept of covering because of its application to my own life. When the book *Covering: The Hidden Assault On Our Civil Rights* was recommended to me by a sociology professor I found myself quickly identifying with the author, Kenji Yoshino's, experience. In his book he details his experience as a gay, Asian American male and how navigating both of those identities has impacted his personal as well as professional growth. He wrote about his battle of accepting his sexuality within himself and how that resulted in him being closeted until early adulthood after college when he decided to come out. Yoshino continued to explain the concept of covering and how that differs from the concept of passing. While he spent his life until his early adulthood trying to pass as a heterosexual male, he explains that even after coming out to himself and to friends and family there was still an aspect of himself that was conditioned to hide or cover his sexuality in new or different interactions with people. This topic particularly intrigued because I knew it was something that I experience as a queer, mixed race woman and I had the notion that other people in my community experience covering as well.

The Method

I chose to execute my thesis in the form of a documentary because I believe visual storytelling is one of the most powerful methods of getting people engaged in a topic. Having a background in journalism and print writing I knew that merely transcribing my interviews with my thesis participants would not have the same effect as being able to see and hear them tell their own stories. I wanted to create as intimate of a setting as possible

so the viewer could focus on each interview singularly. I shot in black and white as to eliminate any distractions and give each interview a sense of uniformity.

Personal Reflection

As with any interview, it took a while for each participant to feel comfortable opening up to me. Especially with the presence of cameras it can be overwhelming to expect anyone to immediately start divulging about an aspect of their life they keep fairly private, especially to a complete stranger. I was extremely fortunate however that all four of my interviewees were extremely open and vulnerable with me in sharing their stories. As a journalist, we are taught to always remain completely objective with our storytelling. We never insert ourselves into a story and even when a story may be emotional, we are taught to explain information in a very factual manner. Sometimes I can find that method a bit stilted and seek the emotion that comes from visual storytelling.

Not often am I given the opportunity to reflect on the people that I interview and how their stories impact me on a personal level. The covering I do in my own life in regards to my sexuality, ethnicity, mental health status, and to a certain extent gender, is what influenced me to pursue this project. I came to the realization that if I was covering so many aspects of my life and only now becoming aware of it, certainly there were more people like me doing the exact same thing. Covering can be a tricky thing, because unlike the struggle of passing and trying to completely deny an identity within yourself, covering can be occurring and one can not even be fully aware that it is taking place. That was the case for me. Having already come out to family and friends as queer, being relatively transparent about my mixed racial identity as both Mexican and white,

speaking somewhat openly about my battles with depression and anxiety, I felt like I could not possibly be covering those identities within myself. After all I was not hiding them, at least not all the time. But I recognized that I still felt the social pressure to not speak openly about my sexuality for fear of rejection in certain circles, especially in the workplace. I do not openly discuss my mental health challenges with my family for fear that they won't take me seriously or will question my stability. I often battle with my perceived gender, and while I fully identify as a woman, I struggle with the implications of weakness that society can place on a woman.

As I learned more about the concept of covering and how it related to my own life I realized that this was a topic I had not seen exposed much outside of academic circles, but it was something I had a feeling could be relatable for a lot of people. There were aspects of each of my interviewee's stories that I could personally identify with. The story that I connected to the most however was Luciana's. Luciana was my first interview and she spoke on covering her sexuality as a gay woman. As she detailed her experience coming out to her father and the fear that she felt, even though he already had a feeling about her attraction for women and accepted that within her, I empathized so strongly with her story. She also spoke on the relationship she had with her supervisor at her on campus job. A "traditionally older Mexican woman" Luciana explained how although her relationship with her supervisor was very close, she still did not feel comfortable enough opening up to her about her sexuality for fear of how she might react to the news. Luciana began to cry as she told me that story and in that moment my own feelings about covering were confirmed.

Covering takes an immense amount of strategy and mental power to execute. It is a constant battle between the yearning to be your most authentic self with someone and the fear that they will reject you for something you cannot change about yourself. You have accepted your identity within yourself and now the struggle is understanding when and how you explain that identity to those around you. A commonality I found among all my interviewees was the relief they expressed when they spoke about the people they could be completely authentic with. In all four cases those people happened to be friends of theirs. It spoke to the importance of creating your own support system and the power that friendship and trustworthiness can have for someone.

What surprised me the most was at the end of every interview each person in some capacity thanked me for giving them the opportunity to participate. This in and of itself was so humbling to me and further exemplified what I already know as a journalist. Everyone has a story to share, but people of marginalized identities in particular, sometimes lack a platform on which to tell their story. I wanted to create a project that revolved around identity and self-discovery but most importantly respect. I wanted my subjects to have control over how they chose to reveal themselves to me because while choosing to cover is a very calculated decision, the reasons why a person might feel the need to cover are often times out of their control. I hope that through my project and the vulnerability and bravery of my participants that people will begin to understand the complexities of identity, the societal reasons why a person might feel the need to cover, and most importantly begin to break down the factors why they would need to in the first place.

Author's Note: The full documentary can be accessed at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nXeV9cWpuho>

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