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Passing as resistance through a Goffmanian approach: Normalized, defensive, strategic, and instrumental passing when LGBTQ+ individuals encounter institutions

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Abstract

Passing and coming out are two divergent individual strategies historically associated with the LGBTQ+ community as they struggle to fit in with normative expectations at work and in life. While coming out has gradually become more common in organizations and national contexts that offer safeguards for LGBTQ+ individuals, passing remains an option where no such measures are available. Drawing on interviews with working-class LGBTQ+ individuals in a country with an adversarial context, that is, Turkey, we identify how varieties of passing, defined as acting and appearing to fit with the dominant sexual orientation and gender identity norms, are used as strategies of coping with institutional norms. Working-class LGBTQ+ individuals are an important group to study as many draw their pride, power, and identity from their engagement with work and the labor market. Transcending the monolithic accounts of passing, we illustrate four variants of passing (i.e., normalized, defensive, strategic, and instrumental passing) that LGBTQ+ individuals deploy at work. Reflecting on the field study findings, we explicate how and why LGBTQ+ individuals choose to pass at work in each case.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Passing is often defined as being and appearing congruent with the normative expectations of a social or institutional context (Moscowitz et al., 2019; Sedgwick, 1990). When LGBTQ+ (i.e., Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, and other) individuals pass, they keep parts of themselves, that is, their sexual orientation and gender identity, private for protection, privacy, and survival (Gupta, 2020; Seidman, 2004). Failure to pass in some contexts may expose LGBTQ+ and non-normative individuals, as well as cis-gender and straight individuals who are mistaken for LGBTQ+ to danger and disadvantage in heteronormative environments (Fuller et al., 2009; Levitt et al., 2009). While sexual orientation and gender identity minorities such as LGBTQ+ individuals are increasingly encouraged to engage in self-disclosure and authenticity in more welcoming and inclusive environments, in adversarial contexts, LGBTQ+ orientations and identities remain stigmatized and socially sanctioned. Orne (2011) coined the term strategic outness to describe how the interplay between sexual orientation/gender identity and social context presents a constant strategic choice for LGBTQ+ individuals to pass or not to pass.

Although cis-gender, straight, and heteroflexible individuals may also experience heteronormativity as a constraining straight jacket that limits their choices, chances, and freedoms of expression in life and work (Bersani, 2011; Cisneros & Bracho, 2019; Cottingham et al., 2016; Preciado, 2021; Rubin, 1984; Sedgwick, 1987; Silva & Whaley, 2018), in this paper, we are focusing on LGBTQ+ individuals' experiences of passing in a unique context. We mobilize a Goffmanian approach to explore passing as an interactional phenomenon that occurs at the encounter of LGBTQ+ individuals and a wide range of institutions, such as family, education, employment, law, and health. LGBTQ+ equality presents a litmus test for workplace equality. Even in the most advanced contexts of equality, where there are laws against sexual orientation and gender identity discrimination, supportive public discourses and allyship for LGBTQ+ and institutional interventions to eliminate bias and discrimination, LGBTQ+ equality in practice remains a distant goal (ILGA, 2020; Ozbilgin & Erbil, 2022; Stonewall, 2020). In this paper, we turn to a country that lacks a sophisticated approach to LGBTQ+ rights and offers a toxic triangle of diversity, that is, where equality laws are ceremonial, social, and political discourses are adversarial, and organizational policies are underdeveloped (Kusku et al., 2021, 2022). In such an antagonistic context, we explore how working-class LGBTQ+ individuals adopt four forms of passing strategies to overcome discrimination, bias, and stigmatization and enhance their choices and chances at work.

2 | GOFFMANIAN APPROACH TO PASSING

Goffman (1956, 1963/2009) proposed that individuals represent themselves according to the situations to fit normative expectations in their context and avoid stigmatization. An individual's self-presentation is shaped by the conditions and the social context within which they interact. Goffman noted that "we come into the world as individuals, achieve character, and become persons" (1956, p. 12). The idea of self is becoming and dynamically shaped in interactions. The self is formed by time, circumstances, and institutions with which the individuals interact. Goffman (1963) also defines performance as an individual's effort to develop their self-identities in relationships. Individuals are on a stage of performance when communicating with others. On the social stage, individuals perform to satisfy social expectations and gain or enhance their reputations. The backstage, where individuals are not watched or observed, may provide a platform for individuals to act in different and more authentic ways, unhindered by normative expectations (Von Lehm, 2006).

Goffman demonstrated that individuals try to fit in and pass as others in the social stage or the context of work (DeJordy, 2008; Fuller et al., 2009). Yet, passing remains an elusive state, as individuals are also constrained by the extent to which they perceive a gap they need to close between the way they are and the socially desirable ways of being. So, if it is deliberative, passing is the presentation of the self to fit the social norms. Individuals may pass without intent or effort if their ways of being conformed to the social stage's expectations. Thus, passing presents an elusive state that emerges as a way of being and doing at the nexus of the dynamic relationship between the self and the social stage, which we locate at institutional encounters.

Another concept that we adopt from Goffman (1963) is stigmatization, which he defined as a socially constructed taint that tarnishes the social identity of individuals. Goffman argued that stigma is an aversive state. Individuals try to avoid stigmatization, which has three distinct dimensions: character blemishes, physical deformities, and personal features like race, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, and gender identity could also be stigmatized. Individuals often try to avoid stigmatization to enhance their social standing (Owen, 2022). In doing so, they may hide atypical aspects of their character, bodies, and personal backgrounds, fearing that such atypicality may lead to their stigmatization and loss of social worth (Ragins, 2008). Exploring the idea of passing from the Goffmanian perspective would mean that individuals may choose to pass and perform expected sexual orientation and gender identity roles to enhance their stakes and to avoid stigmatization and harm at work and in life (Jeanes & Janes, 2021).

In Goffmanian terms, we use the concept of strategy as a metaphor that frames presentations of self in all allied situations in this paper. Therefore, the concept of strategy is not an act but a way of being and framing through metaphors (Mueller, 2018). Thus, when we refer to the strategies of LGBTQ+ individuals, we use the term strategy to refer to the metaphorical and symbolic frames that individuals draw on systematically for being and doing across different situations. From a Goffmanian lens, we define *strategy* as systematic ways of being and doing through metaphors, such as the experience of passing.

3 | PASSING AS RESISTANCE AT WORK

Resistance is defined as having contradictory views, stances, and positionalities to defend or enhance one's stakes against the ideas and practices of others to shift meanings, discourses, and understandings (Laine & Vaara, 2007). As Goffman highlighted, passing could present a case of resistance against normative pressures at work and against the threat of stigmatization. Individuals may seek to join systems that reject them through passing, defying the game's rules. Although passing may not necessarily transform the system of rules that exclude a particular group, it creates defiant possibilities of participation for excluded individuals. One prominent example is the story of Tim Cook, the CEO of Apple, who came out in 2014, after securing a senior role, having passed as heterosexual for a long time in the heteronormative context of Silicon valley (Goel, 2014). In this case, and many others, passing helps the individual to secure employment opportunities and success in an otherwise hostile context. The US army's "Don't Ask Don't Tell" policy forced many LGBTQ+ armed force personnel to pass before it was repealed (Bell et al., 2011). Thus, passing was sometimes enforced as a strategy by institutions to resist the inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals. Therefore, there is a fine distinction between individual passing strategies and the institutional imposition of passing levied on LGBTQ+ individuals.

Individuals who show resistance against systems of oppression may develop abilities to rise from setbacks, learn to deal effectively with difficult situations, and establish sustainable recovery over time (Cooper et al., 2013). Resistance is often considered in its active forms, such as opposition, antagonism, and battle against the established order (Alvinius & Holmberg, 2019). Postmodern literature on resistance examines subversive and relatively passive forms of resistance. For example, one particularly poignant study from Turkey (Ozyegin, 2015) depicts the struggle of Alev, a trans man with lesbian orientation, in her efforts to reconcile her (pronoun from the source) mother's love for her and hostility toward her trans identity and lesbian orientation through what she calls acts of passive resistance of front-stage collusion and backstage contestation in an ambivalent socio-personal context. Reflecting on a different

conservative context, Lin (2021) identifies gay bars as staging grounds for a form of passive resistance in his book, Gay Bar: Why We Went Out. The author suggests that by adapting the heteronormative drinking culture to their context, gay bars displayed passive resistance against the order.

Nentwich et al. (2015) explain that in the women's movement in Switzerland, women who passed as conservative were instrumental in securing the vote for women in Appensal, the last canton to allow women the right to vote as late as 1986. Without the resistance of women who passed as conservative and campaigned for women's rights, there would not be such an election victory in a predominantly traditional canton. In this paper, we examine relatively passive and subversive forms of resistance, that is, types of passing, which are rarely considered strategies of resistance.

As seen in the above three examples of gender identity and sexual orientation, passing presents a metaphorical and passive form of resistance as individuals can resist and overcome the heteronormative exclusion and make choices and chances by passing in hostile environments. Although passing does not transform the structures of inequality, it is an act of passive resistance and defiance against the norms and laws that prevent LGBTQ+ community from social and workplace inclusion and gainful employment.

Resistance is also often studied as a struggle for heterodox, that is, legitimate views from the margins, to receive recognition in the established order, that is, orthodoxy at work. LGBTQ+ individuals and identities are often considered heterodox at work (Kamasak, Ozbilgin, Baykut, & Yavuz, 2020). In this paper, we use the categories of typical, atypical, and prototypical identities to explore the forms of passing that individuals may strategically choose. Typical individuals come from dominant and well-represented groups at work. Atypical workers are the ones who come from underrepresented and disadvantaged groups at work, such as working-class, black and minority ethnic individuals, women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and individuals with disabilities (McFadden & Crowley-Henry, 2018; Samdanis & Özbilgin, 2020). Prototypical workers are the ones who come from idealized backgrounds, such as upper class and charismatic white cis-gender men from the elite segments of society (Worst & O'Shea, 2020).

While typical and prototypical individuals may experience authenticity, that is, being as one wishes to be, as a particular privilege, authenticity could present a risky strategy for atypical workers, who may suffer from stigmatization and find it challenging to be their authentic selves in institutional structures that are designed for the life choices and chances of typical and prototypical workers (Orzechowicz, 2016). Atypical individuals experience a duality between conforming to institutional norms and being their authentic selves in normative workplaces (Samdanis & Özbilgin, 2020). For atypical individuals whose atypicality is based on different sexual and gender identities, passing may take various forms in terms of whether they are comfortable with their own identities and whether the institutions in which they interact are hostile or friendly toward their assumed orientations and identities. For example, for an atypical worker who is LGBTQ+ in a hostile environment, the struggle could be to pass to avoid the stigma or accentuation of their atypicality or to face the exclusionary and discriminatory consequences of coming out.

Lending passing a level of agency and possibilities of resistance, Sedgwick (1990) considered passing as a guarantee of privilege not only for LGBTQ+ individuals but also for heterosexuals, who may hide aspects of their identities to fit with normative expectations at work. In her paradigm-shifting book, Epistemology of the Closet, Sedgwick (1990) had a far-reaching impact on the theorization of sexuality in organizations (Priola et al., 2018; Rumens et al., 2019), as she problematized the way the homo/hetero duality that shapes the relationship between sexual desire and power as an ever-present constituting aspect and a product of modern social and cultural life. Sedwick's theorization does not only focus on the LGBTQ+ experience of sexual desire and power but questions the limits of the heterosexual matrix of power. Yet the aspect of the agentic choice of different forms of passing at the encounter of individuals and institutions is not well studied, and the Goffmanian lens offers to fill this void. In this paper, we extend the use of four strategies passing as resistance in a national context that remains antagonistic to LGBTQ+ rights at work.

4 | THE CONTEXT OF TURKEY: THE TOXIC TRIANGLE OF DIVERSITY

To understand how LGBTQ+ individuals are received in Turkey, it is essential to note the broader toxic context of diversity in the country. Kusku et al. (2021) show that Turkey has an adversarial and antagonistic diversity, which is the outcome of a lack of three aspects: equality laws, supportive political discourses, and organizational preparedness. In such a context, LGBTQ+ individuals hide their sexual orientation and gender identities at work for fear of persecution, stigmatization, harassment, and discrimination. It is helpful to explore the role of religious conservatism and nationalism, which are the two significant inspirations for antagonism against LGBTQ+ equality in Turkey. Modern Turkey was established in 1923. Starting from the early republic, treatment of sexual orientation and gender identity diversity was shaped by cultural traditions and discourses of nationalism, which normatively upheld heterosexual family-oriented values above other identities. Although the criminalization of homosexuality was evident across many European countries since the 1950s, LGBTQ+ identities were not criminalized in law in Turkey (Kabasakal Arat & Nuñez, 2017). Yet, heterosexual working families are hailed as the foundation of the Turkish nation (Kandiyoti, 1995). The first conspicuous concerns regarding LGBTQ+ identities emerged when Turkey recognized the European Court of Human Rights jurisdiction in 1987 and started pursuing EU membership in the 1990s. This period has witnessed a period of openness in which LGBTQ+ identities could be discussed in public fora. Yet, the religious and social stricture continued to suppress and delegitimize expressions of LGBTQ+ identities and relationships. In terms of LGBTQ+ rights in this era, Turkey is defined as a "country of contradictions" (Rumelili, 2008). Simultaneously, some reforms were to legitimate LGBTQ+ identities and social, economic rights, and relationships, and there were reports of extensive police brutality and harassment of LGBTQ+ individuals in Turkey (Ince Yenilmez, 2017).

The Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP), the ruling party, came to power after the economic crisis at the beginning of the 2000s. Despite emphasizing pro-EU and liberal discourses in 2004, the AKP followed rather conservative and nationalist policies. In the early 2010s, LGBTQ+ organizations expanded and became more legitimate, and LGBTQ+ individuals gained more visibility. LGBTQ+ movement started organizing in universities and held Pride marches across large cities in Turkey. However, in the last 8 years, LGBTQ+ individuals have been labeled and stigmatized as sick and abnormal by the state authorities because they threaten public morals and family structures. After the #GeziPark movement (Özbilgin & Erbil, 2021), that is, the most significant democratic uprising for civil liberties and environmental concerns in Turkish history, in 2013, the annual Pride march was canceled due to the so-called security measures. With the rise of populist conservative discourses in the last years, unjust treatment of the LGBTQ+ culture has increased. Netflix, for example, has faced pressure from the authorities to eliminate LGBTQ+ characters from its genre selection and Turkish series (BBC, 2020; Sharpe, 2020).

The Turkish labor market is dominated by middle-aged, heterosexual, Sunni Muslim, full-time male workers of Turkish ethnicity without disabilities (Göregenli et al., 2019). This group of workers are considered typical workers. The women's participation rate in the job market in 2020 is nearly 32%, which is relatively low compared to the other OECD countries (ILO, 2022). Family orientation, heterosexuality, conservatism, nationalism, and paternalism are idealized values for prototypical workers in Turkey (Dildar, 2020). Although the typical workers dominate the labor market, women, ethnic minorities, that is, Kurds, religious minorities, that is, Alevis, LGBTQ+ individuals, people with disabilities, and migrants and refugees from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan face precarious working conditions with low payment and limited job security in the labor market (Kusku et al., 2021).

Regarding the situation of LGBTQ+ individuals at work, Göregenli et al. (2019) surveyed a sample of 772 LGBTQ+ working-class individuals. They reported that 51% of the participants were either discriminated against and harassed or suffered from fear and anxiety of being harassed in their jobs. Ozbilgin (2017) explained that working-class LGBTQ+ individuals suffered more than middle- and upper-class LGBTQ+ individuals in Turkey, where all working-class LGBTQ+ venues were forced to shut down, and only a limited number of expensive and exclusive venues (clubs and bars) for LGBTQ+ remains. The situation of working-class LGBTQ+ individuals in Turkish organizations is symptomatic of the toxic diversity context in the country. Kusku et al. (2021) explain that the lack of

supportive legislation for equality, the state's failure to hold organizations responsible for diversity management, and the absence of supportive discourses have meant that Turkey suffers from a discriminatory context.

5 | METHODS

The study is based on an abductive research tradition, which allows the researcher to arrive at conceptual saturation through iterative movement between observations and theory (Bamberger, 2018; Ozbilgin & Erbil, 2019). We identified a pattern in which passing was a common strategic choice in career accounts of LGBTQ+ individuals in our study. We collected data through in-depth interviews with a sample of 14 working-class LGBTQ+ individuals in Turkey. We used a one-to-one in-depth interview technique, in which we asked semi-structured questions to explore the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals revealing or hiding their sexual orientation and gender identities at work. The third author conducted interviews; the other authors analyzed the data thematically.

5.1 | Participants

We employed a purposive sampling method with a snowball technique (Browne, 2005). At the initial stage of the sampling procedure, we approached four individuals through personal contacts, enabling us to reach 10 more respondents over 4 months. All participants self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, or queer, and their ages ranged between 18 and 41. The majority of them had a bachelor's degree. All participants are of different occupations. Detailed information about the interviewees is presented in Table 1.

We offered a cover letter to inform participants about the aim of our study. The cover letter contains our institutional affiliations, full contact details, and ethical principles and promises to ensure that participants have confidence in the study. With the consent of each participant, we recorded the interviews.

Since LGBTQ+ individuals, especially those in Turkey, are a hard-to-reach community, they are under considerable threat of exposure and harassment. We anonymized and stored the field study data, information, and related materials that could reveal a participant's identity with the utmost concern. To ensure the privacy and anonymity of

TABLE 1 Demographic information about participants

Participant pseudonyms	Age	Gender identity	Occupation	Level of education
Arda	18	Gay	Carpenter	High school
Asil	23	Gay	Chef	Vocational school
Efe	26	Trans man	Cook	University
Ferit	22	Gay	Show center employee	University
Hale	27	Bisexual	Producer in movie industry	University
Nesrin	24	Queer	Trainee in health industry	University
Murat	26	Gay	Electronic engineer	University
Osman	37	Gay	Civil engineer	University
Rasim	24	Trans man	Waiter	Vocational school
Selin	32	Lesbian	Lecturer	University
Melis	20	Trans woman	Student assistant	University (studying)
Hulya	31	Non-binary	Foreign trade specialist	University
Zafer	41	Gay	Auditor	University
Okan	30	Gay	Mechanical engineer	University

participants, we omitted information from the data set that would reveal their identities and assigned a pseudonym to each participant. We also excluded information that could be used to identify participants.

5.2 | Interview schedule

We designed a 28-item semi-structured qualitative survey for interviews. These items aimed to explicate daily life experiences of passing, the forms of resistance, career strategies of the participants across different settings, that is, workplace, education, and healthcare (Kamasak, Ozbilgin, & Yavuz, 2020) and had three main themes: the role of workplace policies and colleagues in the workplace; the role of social environments and societal values; and the role of career choices in revealing or concealing gender identities. The interview included questions on demographic variables as outlined above. The semi-structured design enabled us to maintain flexibility and spontaneity in interviews and to focus on the main themes of research (Silverman, 2005).

5.3 | Data analysis

Data for our study comes from the verbatim transcription of the recorded interviews. We analyzed the data thematically. Drawing on the thematic analysis process suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), we adopted an abductive approach: (1) We simultaneously read the transcribed interviews. (2) Each author created a list of codes. We reviewed the lists and created a coding list with the mutually agreed codes. (3) We each coded the data. (4) We compared our coding. We evaluated our non-overlapping coding and made a joint decision for each. This process also increased the reliability and validity of our qualitative data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Collaborative coding allowed us to read the data more nuancedly, capturing the richness of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2019). (5) To make sense of identified patterns, the abductive approach moved us to theory, and we revised the coding list: We removed some codes from the list and added new codes. (6) We repeated the coding with the final list. (7) By using the abductive approach, we created themes. Shifting between the coding and literature allowed us to make sense of our observations in the literature.

We also adopted the relational approach while creating the themes. The relational approach enabled us to explore the interaction between individuals at the micro, institutions at the meso, and the national context at the macro level of analyses. Thus, we had the opportunity to investigate the complex interaction and interplay between individuals and institutions through a process-relational and interactional approach (Ozbilgin & Erbil, 2019).

5.4 | Limitations

There are some limitations to our study. Participants are composed of vulnerable individuals who are challenging to reach. Choosing a working-class sample made it difficult as it was essential to gain the participants' trust; it is not easy for individuals in this group to be persuaded to join an interview, as they risk the loss of jobs and livelihoods with disclosure of gender identity and sexual orientation. On the other hand, we should state that the COVID-19 pandemic also made face-to-face meeting opportunities somewhat tricky.

For this reason, the sample size remained small and limited despite all efforts. We were also forced to offer fewer rich descriptors than possible to preserve the participants' anonymity and protect them from foreseeable risks such as hate speech, violence, and harassment. The sample size is small yet sufficiently robust regarding the varieties and strategies of passing as resistance identified among participants.

6 | FINDINGS

The experience of passing emerges at the point when an atypical individual, that is, an LGBTQ+ individual, in this case, encounters an institutional setting. In this paper, we focus on the institution as the setting where an individual's acceptance and/or rejection of their LGBTQ+ orientations and identities faces approval and/or rejection from particular institutions. We use the term institution in its broad sociological sense as a structured set of relations that an individual encounters through their life course, including family, healthcare, education, employment, law, law enforcement, and social life. Reflecting on the interview data, we identified two distinct forms of responses to disclosure of sexual orientation and gender identity. At the point of each particular encounter, individuals either choose to come out or pass. We identified that the institutional environment contributes to an LGBTQ+ individual's experience of passing. Yet, the individual's struggles with accepting or rejecting their sexual orientation and gender identity also shape their experiences of passing.

Drawing on the interview data, we identify four types of passing based on individual and institutional acceptance or rejection of LGBTQ+ identity (Table 2). If an individual and the institution with which they interact both reject the LGBTQ+ identity at the point of their encounter, we termed this type of passing *normalized passing*, where the individual and institution are hostile to the LGBTQ+ identity. This is the most common experience among our participants across their institutional encounters. Many individuals still struggle with accepting their own LGBTQ+ identity, and there is little scope among institutions to support such identity in Turkey.

Yet, we observe that several Turkish LGBTQ+ individuals have developed a positive attachment to and acceptance of their sexual orientation and gender identities. Similarly, a few families, educational establishments and workplaces are now more accepting of sexual orientation and gender identity diversity. Resultantly, individuals and institutions display varied forms of acceptance and rejection of sexual orientation diversity. In this study, we are focusing on those instances of passing.

When an institution rejects the LGBTQ+ identity, and an individual accepts it, we term the kind of passing adopted as a defensive passing, as the individual would pass to ensure their participation in the labor market or to

TABLE 2 A multidimensional model of forms of passing by LGBTQ+ individuals in their encounters with institutions

		Individual response to self LGBTQ+ orientation and identity	
		Rejection	*Acceptance*
Institutional response to LGBTQ+ orientations and identities	*Rejection*	Normalized passing	Defensive passing
	Acceptance	Strategic passing	Instrumental passing

protect themselves from the hostilities of the institutional setting. Defensive passing is also common as there is more acceptance of sexual orientation and gender identities among individuals today when institutional settings remain hostile.

In some rare cases, institutions may be accepting of LGBTQ+ identities. Individuals who struggle with their sexual orientation and gender identity may still choose to pass. This is one of the interesting findings of our study. When an institutional barrier to coming out is removed, individuals may still choose to pass for strategic purposes because of their sexual orientation and gender identity struggles. We termed this kind of passing *strategic passing*.

One of the surprising encounters we find in our study is when both the individual and the institution accept and support the LGBTQ+ identity, yet the individual chooses to pass. This form of passing is termed *instrumental passing* in our study as it happens for reasons such as the appeal of the privileges afforded to the dominant gender identity and sexual orientation in that specific context and an aversion to possible discomfort associated with coming out.

6.1 | Normalized passing

In Turkey, as in every country, compliance with social and cultural norms and beliefs provides individuals with a sense of belonging, acceptance, and comfort. Individuals whose sexual orientation and/or gender identity clashes with those idealized social norms at work may face stigmatization as deviants. Stigmatized individuals are likely to experience discriminatory treatment, reinforcing their efforts to appear normal. Being of Turkish ethnicity, cis-gender, heterosexual, married, and Sunni Muslim are the idealized norms that emanate from the dominant religious and nationalist ideology in Turkey. Individuals tend to stay in their comfort zones and avoid the burden of stigma (Papadaki & Giannou, 2021).

For this reason, LGBTQ+ individuals may internalize and normalize the homophobic, biphobic, and transphobic denigration and symbolic violence they experience. Arda, one of our participants, is not comfortable with his sexual orientation and faces hostile institutional contexts, that is, the family and workplace. For Arda, passing was a way of meeting his family's social expectations. Arda thought that by hiding his sexual orientation, he fulfilled the dominant social and institutional normative expectations. As seen in his statement, passing is a normalized lifelong experience due to the rejection of his own gay identity in his institutional encounters.

> My life has been awful since the day I was born. I could not accept myself. I thought, 'I disgrace my family' and 'I cannot look my family in the face because of my shame.' By the way, I am a very religious person. I was also thinking religiously. I told myself that you are a religious person; how can you think of such things?
>
> (Arda, 18, gay, carpenter)

Even if institutions have no restrictive politics adopted against LGBTQ+ sexual orientation and gender identities, heteronormative assumptions of institutions may cause LGBTQ+ individuals to pass to protect themselves from stigmatization (Ozturk et al., 2020). Hulya, a foreign trade specialist in the Turkish office of an international company, explains her choice to pass and reveals how institutional ignorance means that she cannot engage in LGBTQ+ issues without risking her position at work.

> I was called a 'communist' [in an offensive way by my colleagues] just because I protested against managers who did not allow us to take a holiday during the New Year. Regarding accepting gender identity, we have a long way to go [...] I don't expect my colleagues to accept my identity, even when I have difficulty claiming my legal rights. I don't find it meaningful to fight for it. I even find it somewhat dangerous. I can be fired. I can be excluded.
>
> (Hulya, 31, nonbinary, foreign trade specialist)

The discourse of "professionalism," which is highly entrenched in recent years in exclusionary discourses of religiosity and nationalism, also normalizes passing and the concealment of the sexual orientation and gender identities of LGBTQ+ individuals. For example, Selin explains how, in her view, keeping gender identity from managers and colleagues is necessary for business ethics. Selin works in the education sector, where men with typical backgrounds (i.e., heterosexual, conservative, holding traditional religious beliefs) dominate leadership positions and set institutional norms (Ermiş-Mert, 2017). Her account suggests the internalization of the homophobic discourses by which professionalism is defined in Turkey.

> I only disclosed [my sexual orientation identity] to one of my colleagues. Because [she] has always been a friend who defends the LGBT community a lot. I did not reveal to others because of their ideology and biases, not to spoil professionalism. I do not let [these situations] affect my work efficiency.
>
> (Selin, 30, lesbian, lecturer)

Normalized passing manifested among our participants who struggled with their sexual orientation and gender identities in the context of hostile institutional environments. The participants in these cases have considered their passing behaviors normal. They would accept the hostile institutional contexts as ordinary and consider their choice of passing as natural.

6.2 | Defensive passing

One of the most challenging problems LGBTQ+ individuals face is the absence of supportive legislation, such as equality laws, that can force institutions to observe equality in principle and protect sexual orientation and gender identity groups from discrimination (Göçmen & Yılmaz, 2017). The lack of coercive pressure for equality harms the economic participation of disadvantaged groups, such as women, individuals with disabilities, refugees, and LGBTQ+ individuals. Established sociological and cultural values that produce injustice and insufficient legal regulations are also responsible for the disadvantageous position of vulnerable groups in the labor market in Turkey (Atasoy, 2017; Gürsoy & Ertaşoğlu, 2019). LGBTQ+ individuals constitute a vulnerable social and organizational group in Turkey and are exposed to high levels of the labor market and employment discrimination (Bilgehan Ozturk, 2011; Göçmen & Yılmaz, 2017; Ince Yenilmez, 2020; Ozeren & Aydin, 2016). LGBTQ+ individuals cannot reveal their sexual orientation and gender identities in many industries, particularly in public sector organizations and most private and third sector organizations. Ferit, who is in the Turkish entertainment industry, is known for being more promising in inclusiveness for LGBTQ+ individuals (Bilgehan Ozturk, 2011). Even in a supposedly LGBTQ+-friendly sector, sexual orientation and gender identity-based discrimination are commonly experienced. Ferit's account is a good reflection of some of our participants who prefer passing to protect their employment rights in a hostile macro context.

> Of course, this [discrimination] is not a problem for just LGBTQ+ individuals in Turkey. Women, all minorities, Alevis, Kurds, men who do not serve their military conscription and people from atypical class distinctions would face difficulties securing the jobs they like. I'm not even talking about the challenges of getting promoted. It is at the point of entry, and they are stopped. At the point of promotion, it is a big problem. Moreover, their salaries are not often raised.
>
> (Ferit, 22, gay, show centre employee)

Defensive passing happens when participants face hostile institutional environments and when they are critical of this situation. Yet, they are at peace with their own identities. One other reason for the defensive passing was family dependency. Many participants did not earn enough income to become independent of their families. They often led semi-dependent economic and social lives. While family ties are supposed to strengthen the resilience of

individuals, if family formation does not match or support the individual's expression of identity, ties can turn into sources of conflict (Soler et al., 2018). Even the expectation of such a conflict has pushed LGBTQ+ individuals into defensive passing, by which they kept their authentic selves hidden to avoid stigmatization and discrimination (Ural & Beşpınar, 2017). In particular, high youth unemployment in Turkey intensifies the dependence of individuals on their families, and it also fuels concerns for ultimate economic and social deprivation (Çelik & Lüküslü, 2018). Accordingly, most LGBTQ + individuals have felt the urgency to hide their authentic identities as they cannot get support through alternative social and economic means (Crews & Crawford, 2015). Young LGBTQ+ individuals who cannot receive moral support from their families for their sexual orientation and gender identities pass defensively to retain access to vital resources necessary for basic needs in Turkey. The experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals who do not receive support despite coming out to their families cause them to hide their sexual orientation and gender identities in other institutional settings. In fact, as in the case of one of our participants, Murat, setting up a business was a way of escaping his family's heteronormative expectations. However, the new business venture also pushed him to defensive passing. By remaining in defensive passing until he gained business success, Murat gradually overcame social pressures.

> I have not received any financial support from my family for 11 months; I am far away [from them] anyway. When I realised that I could stand on my own feet, I could go somewhere, continue my life, not starve. Therefore, what people think, what they learned about me, and whether they used it against me have become less significant in my later life.
>
> (Murat, 26, gay, electronic engineer)

Similarly, Rasim's personal experiences show why a transgender individual uses defensive passing in the workplace. Rasim states that he was stigmatized and excluded from social and economic life due to his behavior and appearance before transitioning. Considering the transition period as a milestone in his life, Rasim expresses that he has started a new stage for himself, where he can perform life like others.

> So, when you are very frivolous and flamboyant, people love you. But unfortunately, you must be more harmonious with society. Society does not accept you anyway and does not embrace you. When you go out as yourself, and against its rules, society starts to oppose you completely. […] I couldn't find a job before [transitioning]. Now being an 'ordinary' waiter connects me to life.
>
> (Rasim, 24, trans man, waiter)

Participants often thought that if they came out, they would not be protected when exposed to injustice in the workplace and even their colleagues would turn against them. Defensive passing emerged as an intense recipe for securing access to jobs, careers, and better work relations, shielding participants from contradictory experiences. While negative experiences in previous employment institutions sometimes shaped this form of passing, the defensive passing was also shaped by the expectations of LGBTQ+ individuals based on their observations of what happens to others who do not pass at work.

6.3 | Strategic passing

The dominant normative order, firmly rooted in religious beliefs and cultural values, shapes the reasons why LGBTQ+ individuals seek to hide their sexual orientation and gender identities, even if the institutions supposedly accept these. The right-wing populist discourses against LGBTQ+ individuals are gaining popularity in Turkey (BBC Türkçe, 2020; HRW, 2020; Sharpe, 2020). Furthermore, LGBTQ+ individuals are often ridiculed and denigrated in the media (Atalay & Doan, 2019), marginalized and stigmatized (Ben-Porat et al., 2021), and presented as lacking moral

values (Giritli İnceoğlu, 2019). Such negative portrayals force LGBTQ+ individuals to pass across many institutional encounters. In the education system of Turkey, the curriculum does not combat the stigmatization of LGBTQ+ identities (Baykut et al., 2022; Erden, 2020). The absence of a supportive curriculum and a lack of supportive organizational interventions for LGBTQ+ individuals reinforces LGBTQ+ individuals' idea of hiding their sexual orientation and gender identities. Indeed, almost all participants in the study stated that homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in Turkey stem from people's lack of education and organizational ignorance. Even when they came out to some members of their families and a few trusted friends or colleagues, participants indicated that they refrained from sharing their sexual orientation and gender identities in other institutional and social settings, for example, on their social media accounts. Osman is a civil engineer and has a managerial position in his organization. He came out to his family and close friends but chose to pass at work. Although he had a relatively friendly working context, Osman displayed strategic passing as a way to benefit from the privilege of being seen as part of the dominant group. His preference to pass was mainly to eliminate unpleasant surprises.

> I did not have much trouble because I was not effeminate. I did not always introduce myself with [sexual] identity. [...] I can reveal that I am gay at my workplace. I don't think they will be offended. However, I feel more pleased with straight id. [...] Being known as gay could make my co-workers think I have weaknesses or compulsions. [...] If I have some social hardships due to my gender identity at work. I can probably overcome them. But why would I want to deal with it?
>
> (Osman, 35, gay, civil engineer)

LGBTQ+ individuals may strategically pass due to the dominant social norms in institutions. Although some institutions state that they are open to diversity, they may still lack the trust of individuals who suffered social stigmatization and exclusion (Amis et al., 2020; Fox-Kirk et al., 2020; Ray, 2019; Yilmaz, 2020). LGBTQ+ individuals face further obstacles to accessing positions of power and authority if they reveal their identities (Janssens & Steyaert, 2019). For example, policies and human resources procedures may have implicit forms of sexual orientation and gender identity biases (Suárez et al., 2020).

Much of the discriminatory practices remain invisible or subtle yet unchallenged. Zafer is an auditor who studied and worked in Frankfurt/Germany for 5 years and now lives in Istanbul. He works for an international firm with a diversity policy that supports LGBTQ+ individuals. Despite this, he chooses to pass at work. Zafer points out the relationship between macro and meso-level arrangements and reasons for passing.

> The last company I worked for was good at [rights]. It has a policy also that protects sexual orientation identity and against sexual harassment. But frankly, I do not trust any abstract discourse in Turkey. So, in all companies I worked for as a homosexual, the rules were in the hands of the executives. [...] This is not specific to my company; this understanding is something I developed against every corporation in Turkey. [...] If my company were based in Sweden, I probably wouldn't feel that way. I would probably behave differently.
>
> (Zafer, 42, gay, auditor)

Strategic passing manifests when the individuals have a complex and challenging relationship with their sexual orientations and gender identities, but they have an accepting institutional setting. This is a rare occurrence in Turkey. Those who have difficulties accepting their sexual orientations and gender identities have also reported institutional arrangements as inadequate. There could be a grain of truth in their claims, as Turkey currently operates a toxic triangle of diversity, and institutional claims may be received with scepticism. When the institutional setting accepts LGBTQ+ identity, due to a general lack of trust, participants may opt for strategic passing, which ensures that they would not have to rely on the equality and diversity policies that they did not trust.

6.4 | Instrumental passing

Institutions may espouse specific gender, ethnic, religious, and sexual orientation norms and discriminate against those who do not comply with those norms (Bates, 2021; Daum, 2020). For example, even when LGBTQ+ individuals are supposedly recognized and their identities are legitimated in their workplaces, they may not be treated equally as others (Cech & Rothwell, 2020). Despite the absence of internal pressure, LGBTQ+ individuals would pass to protect their institutional identity and reputation. Efe is a cook who applied for a job without hiding his gender identity and worked in a high school canteen for 4 years. Although his boss accepted him as a trans man at the workplace, Efe decided to quit his job as he felt that his transition might adversely affect students and families. He referred to the prevailing view in Turkey relating to the fact that transsexuality harms the family structure and goes against religious discourses (Acar & Altunok, 2013). To protect his workplace, Efe felt obliged to resign at the beginning of the gender reassignment process and preferred passing in his new job instead of revealing his identity. He explains why he chose to quit when he could not continue his instrumental passing approach, which served him well in the past:

> I was very good with the students; some knew [my transition process], but many did not. There are no problems with students. Maybe I catch someone's eye, I disturb someone, and they go and tell their family, and their family goes to the school principal. The school principal complains to the boss. I thought there might be different things. I spoke so that my boss wouldn't have a problem because of me; I quit the job.
>
> (Efe, 26, trans man, cook)

Asil has been working as a chef in a restaurant for 2 years. Although his managers approved of him disclosing his gay identity, Asil feels he is being pushed to instrumental passing. While his bosses were pleased with him to reveal his identity when LGBTQ+ customers arrived, they were hoping he would pass with non-LGBTQ+ identifying clientele.

> When my bosses learned my orientation, my managers learned. They said, 'Let the orientation itself not interfere with your work. You can continue your normal life after work. Certainly, no such incidents after entering the workplace.' This is what is ethical anyway. I shouldn't have reflected this on my work; I never did [...] Our customers mainly were transgender people and other LGBTQ+ individuals. My bosses told me, 'You already know that [LGBTQ+] segment of our customers. You may take care of them when they come.' Because they are people like me, there was no problem.
>
> (Asil, 23, gay, chef)

Instrumental passing is the most interesting among the varieties of passing we discussed. It happens when individuals accept their sexual orientation and gender identity and the institution offers a friendly and supportive environment. Even in such a case, when one would expect disclosure of sexual orientation and gender identity, our participants revealed a case of instrumental passing to the performative extent that may benefit the institution, that is, because passing makes business sense in specific contexts. In such a business sense, arguments often rest on a hidden mechanism, which limits the authentic ways of being to the instrumental ends of the organization or the individual in question. In such cases, we observe instrumental passing.

7 | CONCLUSION

Passing is often viewed as a non-agentic act of accepting the hetero- and cis-gender normative order at work. In this paper, we demonstrate that passing is an agentic choice with four different variants in contexts that are antagonistic

and adversarial to the workplace inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals. Drawing on field studies with working-class LGBTQ+ individuals, we demonstrate that different forms of passing could serve as strategies of resistance in different institutional settings. In line with a Goffmanian approach that considers passing as an interactional phenomenon where individuals and institutions encounter, we extend passing as a strategy to overcome stereotyping and discrimination by identifying four distinct types of passing that emerge in the encounter of individuals and institutions. Passing is often framed and interpreted as a hapless assimilation of LGBTQ+ individuals in the extant literature and as selling out, or co-opting, which diminishes passing as merely an outcome of one's circumstances. In this paper, we demonstrate how varieties of passing are emergent and agentic phenomena at the encounter of individuals and institutions. Using Goffmanian concepts of presentation of the self on social stage and backstage, aversive state of stigmatization, and strategy as metaphorical framing of being and doing at the interface of individual and institutions, we contribute to the theorization of passing as a relationally constituted dynamic phenomenon that emerges at the encounter of the individual with the broader institutional context. All our participants had a front stage of passing due to an incongruence of their self-concept, individual norms, and social and institutional expectations. Varieties of passing also manifested in the backstage context of more intimate relations, such as encounters with family members or close friends.

In a context of antagonism against LGBTQ+ individuals, passing may appear to be the only viable choice for individuals to survive or continue to thrive in institutional encounters. Nevertheless, for some LGBTQ+ individuals, such a choice may not always be available, as sexual orientation and gender identity markers are embodied. Under these conditions, individuals may accept their self-concealment and choice of passing as natural.

In institutional settings where the LGBTQ+ identity is rejected or received with hostility, depending on the individuals' take on their identity, they may either adopt *normalized passing* if they also struggle to accept their sexual orientation and gender identity, or *defensive passing* if they accept their identity but wish to pass to be able to have access to essential resources to address their basic wants and needs.

Individuals may still strive to pass in a setting where the LGBTQ+ identity is accepted or approved. The passing strategy may vary according to how LGBTQ+ individuals perceive their identity in this situation. LGBTQ+ individuals who have a complicated relationship with their sexual orientations and gender identity may adopt *strategic passing*. Those who maintain favorable relations with their LGBTQ+ identity may perform *instrumental passing* to garner dividends of the dominant sexual orientation and gender identity ideology. Yet even in the settings where LGBTQ+ identity is accepted, most LGBTQ+ individuals still maintain scepticism about the sincerity of this welcoming context in Turkey. Indeed, passing strategies to avoid stigmatization were not followed by only LGBTQ+ individuals. Still, other groups subject to confessional or ethnic otherness (i.e., Alevis or Kurds) in Turkey have adopted similar strategies (Goner, 2017). For example, Alevis and Kurds often pass to avoid confessional and ethnic stigmatization and discrimination.

Our findings challenge the monolithic treatment of passing as a submissive strategy, accounting for the emergence of passing as an agentic strategy at the nexus of individual and institutional encounters. The Goffmanian approach helps us show how an atypical individual might avoid stigmatization and not being socially sanctioned through passing and how passing could be used to benefit from the privileges afforded to the dominant social groups. Instead of associating passing with assimilation, selling out, or co-opting conservatively, we present how passing might be used by LGBTQ+ individuals in more agentic and strategic ways in their encounters with different institutional settings.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors whose names are listed immediately below certify that they have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge, or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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