

The concept of passing in the united states

Society



Passing occurs when someone who is classified as a member of one racial group but claims heritage or membership in another racial group for perceived privileges, acceptance, or access to social benefits. This term has been used in the United States to describe persons who have African ancestry but could present as White or of European descent, because of physical features such as lighter skin and straight hair. These physical features were legally used in race determination trials, and the concept of passing reflects America's legal and institutionalized system of creating and maintaining racial identity.

Historically in the United States, racial identity was socially and legally defined in hypodescent laws or what is commonly known as the one-drop rule. This implicates that there is a racial purity of being White and impurity for non-Whites. Up until the early twentieth century, some states adopted laws that regulated persons of mixed race heritage that even a small portion of African heritage (such as one-eighth blood or a Black great-grandparent) places him or her into a lower status of a non-White category. Thus, when slavery was still in effect in the United States, those who descended from European ancestry due to being children of slave owners and slaves were still considered Black and legally slaves, despite physical features of lighter skin and straight hair. Thus, "passing" and "one drop rule" are racial concepts that are tied to American history and race relations and are hardly known outside the United States with rare exceptions, such as Jewish persons during the Nazi reign who looked "Aryan" and concealed their identity.

Kennedy defines passing as, “ a deception that enables a person to adopt specific roles or identities from which he would be barred by prevailing social standards in the absence of his misleading conduct.” Thus, passing is an act where the person purposely conceals his or her racial identity and deceives others into believing that she or he is a different racial identity. This is different from someone who is mistaken or assumed to be another racial identity. Kennedy (2001) gives the example of a child with a White mother and fair-skin Black father, who thought he was White until age ten. This is when his parents divorced and the father revealed his heritage. Up until the point of revelation, the child was not passing because he was unaware of his African ancestry. Therefore, when someone knowingly presents him or herself as a member of another racial group it is perceived as deceiving the public with a false identity. Often, this means that once revealed, the individual loses the social status and privileges from being associated with the false racial identity. However, in recent years, more scholars are researching the complexities of passing beyond the opportunistic advantages of upward mobility. Professor Allyson Hobbs (2014) discusses the consequences of rejecting Black identity, such as leaving friends and family behind and living in exile from the only life one has known. This portrays the traumatic ordeals of those who pass and must hide in public.

Passing is a product and a tool of racism as those who pass often must move to predominantly White neighborhoods and also have their children attend predominantly White schools. This perpetuates segregation and maintains the racial hierarchy of endowing social and economic benefits to those who are White to the detriment of communities of color. There is also another

loss to non-White communities, as passers may join a group that is continuing discrimination and not use their newfound privilege to advocate from within the group.

Because of the secretive nature of passing, the exact number of individuals or descendants with a hidden racial identity is not known. It has been estimated that as many as 100, 000 persons passed each year during the twentieth century. Hobbs (2014) notes that the reasons for passing have also changed over the last century. Historically, it was to escape slavery, then after the American Civil War to escape legal discrimination, but not necessarily to escape “blackness”. Today, undocumented immigrants pass for citizens or there is passing into non-White racial groups too. Passing is also used in gender identity.

Some cases of passing include assistant professor in Africana studies, Rachel Dolezal (passing as a Black woman), runaway slave Jane Morrison in Morrison v. White 1857 freedom lawsuit (passing as a White woman), and artist Jimmie Durham (passing for Cherokee Indian heritage). Passing is portrayed in pop culture, in some books such as Mark Twain’s 1894 novel, *The Tragedy of Pudd’n head Wilson* and Fannie Hurst’s 1933 novel, *Imitation of Life* (also a movie). Some movies that portray passing are *The*

Human Stain, starring Anthony Hopkins and *White Chicks*, starring comedians Marlon and Shawn Wayans. It has also been featured in popular American television shows such as *Cold Case* and *Law & Order: SVU*.