



Essentializing ethnicity: Identification constraint reduces diversity interest



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We primed essentialism with instruction to “Check One”, rather than “Check All”, ethnicities.
- Minorities reduced diversity engagement, distancing from activities that express background.
- Essentialist European-Americans showed less interest in intergroup friendship.
- Interaction with chronic essentialist beliefs replicated in a non-race-related context.

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ABSTRACT

The present research investigates the effects of a subtle essentialist cue: restricting individuals to identify with only one ethnicity. Although this constraint is mundane and commonly used in everyday life, it sends a message of essentialized group differences. Three studies illustrate the harmful impact of this essentialist cue on diversity. Studies 1a and 1b show that it decreases Asian-Americans' desire to participate in ethnicity-related activities. Study 2 reveals that it reduces essentialist European-Americans' desire for friendship with a minority target. Study 3 illustrates the mechanism through which an essentialist cue reduces intergroup contact, with perceivers' chronic beliefs moderating this effect. Together, these findings demonstrate the powerful impact of the seemingly small act of how we ask people to identify with an ethnic group.

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What is your ethnicity? Check one only

In this manner, people are frequently asked to identify their ethnicity. However, this question signals that a person cannot be a member of multiple ethnic groups, and that membership in one group is mutually exclusive with membership in any other group. By heightening perceived boundaries between ethnic groups, this seemingly innocent question may hinder people from capitalizing on the benefits of diversity and impede intergroup relations.

Demographic questions that restrict identification with membership in only one group, such as the Check-One constraint, may cause people to perceive unbridgeable group differences. As race and ethnicity are category-based information, this framing may signal rigid boundaries between racial or ethnic groups; in other words, it may serve as a cue for racial essentialism. When boundaries are perceived to be rigid and

therefore unbridgeable, differences between members of two groups are interpreted as immutable and reflecting their group's essences (Chao, Hong, & Chiu, 2013; Demoulin, Leyens, & Yzerbyt, 2006; Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000; Miller & Prentice, 1999; Yzerbyt, Corneille, & Estrada, 2001).

Not surprisingly, essentialist beliefs have strong implications for group dynamics. Research has shown that essentialist beliefs, particularly the belief that racial differences are rooted in a biological essence, are associated with stereotype endorsement and outgroup marginalization (Bastian & Haslam, 2006; Jayaratne et al., 2006; Keller, 2005; Verkuyten, 2003; Williams & Eberhardt, 2008). Whereas studies have examined negative implications of essentialist beliefs by focusing on stereotyping and prejudice, less attention has looked at how essentialism could *prevent* positive intergroup interactions. In a multicultural context, what situational factors discourage people from publicly celebrating or sharing their unique backgrounds, or reduce people's interest in intergroup friendship? By examining diversity-related outcomes, the current research investigates what keeps people from promoting or capitalizing on diversity.

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Furthermore, the role of racial essentialism on perceivers' everyday behaviors may be extremely subtle. That is, contextual cues of racial essentialism may lurk around us and influence behavior just as potentially as more overt declarations that racial groups are distinct, meaningful, and inalterable. In this research, we investigate a contextual cue that is used regularly, but which may impact diversity outcomes: the framing of ethnicity such that a person can belong to only one group. In doing so, we also demonstrate how majority and minority group members respond differently to situational cues of racial essentialism.

Divergent diversity concerns for Asian-Americans and European-Americans

Managing diversity entails pursuing different goals for the cultural majority group (i.e., European-Americans) and minority groups. A primary concern for ethnic minorities is being able to celebrate their cultural heritage and having their background accepted and respected (Bergsieker, Shelton, & Richeson, 2010; Haritatos & Benet-Martinez, 2002; LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Plaut, 2002). The Check-One constraint implies large, inalterable group differences, and minority group members may feel their backgrounds are presented in stark contrast from the predominant majority group. Consequently, some groups may feel discouraged from engaging in activities that draw attention to their ethnicity and culture.

The current research focused on Asian-Americans because they are among the most likely to be seen as an outgroup in mainstream American society. They are often confused for foreigners (Armenta et al., 2013; Cheryan & Monin, 2005; Devos & Banaji, 2005; Lee, Wong, & Alvarez, 2009; Park, 2011), and sometimes seen as less American than non-Americans (Devos & Banaji, 2005). Furthermore, their American identity is regularly questioned (Cheryan & Monin, 2005; Devos & Banaji, 2005). As Asian-Americans are sensitive to their minority status and diversity (Chao, Chen, Roisman, & Hong, 2007; Cheryan & Monin, 2005; No et al., 2008), these various types of (mainstream) cultural identity denial have negative implications for their identity and psychological adjustment (Armenta et al., 2013; Huynh, Devos, & Smalarz, 2011) as well as how they respond in public (Cheryan & Monin, 2005; Guendelman, Cheryan, & Monin, 2011). These public behaviors may be aimed at asserting their belongingness by engaging in prototypical mainstream behavior (e.g., eating American food and demonstrating knowledge of American cultural practices and customs; Cheryan & Monin, 2005; Guendelman et al., 2011). When faced with the Check-One constraint, then, Asian-Americans may respond by reducing behaviors that identify them as minority outsiders.

As the cultural default group, European-Americans do not have a salient or pressing concern to demonstrate that they are American; this status is bestowed on them. People show a tendency to perceive Whites, more than any other ethnicity, as American (Devos & Banaji, 2005). Therefore, European-Americans' approach to diversity takes a different form — one that is *intergroup*-oriented. Diversity-related concerns for majority group members include having harmonious interactions with members of other groups (Plaut, 2002) and being liked, and appearing moral and not prejudiced in these interactions (Bergsieker et al., 2010). Because European-Americans' concerns about diversity revolve around the intergroup interaction, when faced with the Check-One constraint, these individuals might perceive group differences that they would need to overcome in order to form positive intergroup relations. These differences may feel too large and divisive to overcome, consequently reducing desire for intergroup contact.

Using the same manipulation across studies, we report findings from two studies that assess the psychological consequences of an essentialist cue on Asian-Americans and European-Americans, and one study that illustrates the impact of an essentialist prime on intergroup contact in a non race-related context. We contend that the Check-One constraint is similar to the process of essentializing group differences, which is harmful to diversity in at least two ways — by discouraging

Asian-Americans from participating in cultural diversity and by lessening European-Americans' desire for intergroup contact.

Studies 1a and 1b: essentialism and impact on Asian-Americans' diversity expression

Study 1 was designed to examine the impact of essentializing differences on Asian-Americans' diversity participation. Research has shown that context matters for minorities' cultural expressions. For example, bicultural individuals' two internalized cultures take turns guiding their thoughts and behaviors (cultural frame-switching paradigm; Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000). Many situational cues, such as context (e.g., home or school) and symbols (e.g., language and cultural icons) that are psychologically associated with one specific culture (Alter & Kwan, 2009; Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee, 1999; Hong et al., 2000; Oyserman & Lee, 2008; Ross, Xun, & Wilson, 2002), elicit behaviors concordant with different cultural ways of thinking.

However, an essentialist cue implies that only one group is, or should be, most important. The restriction to one ethnic group depicts it as highly contrasting in value compared to the majority group, and may devalue the minority group's culture or identity. In response, they may conform to mainstream social norms (Cheryan & Monin, 2005; Tafarodi, Kang, & Milne, 2002) or distance themselves from behaviors that highlight their outgroup or minority status. In the current study, we expect that an essentialist cue would dampen Asian-Americans' willingness to express their ethnic backgrounds fully, rather than encourage them to participate in activities that might subject their background to scrutiny and continue to depict them as outside the mainstream. Diversity events (e.g. showcasing ethnic dance performances) whose purpose is to celebrate differences, ironically, may backfire by reminding Asian-Americans of their minority status and depicting them as “forever foreigners” (Park, 2011). Therefore, we predicted that Asian-Americans would respond to an essentialist cue by reducing their diversity expression (i.e., what makes them stand out from the mainstream culture). We did not expect the essentialist cue to have an impact on European-Americans' participation in ethnicity-specific activities because these groups are directly tied to ethnicity and may be seen as less relevant to European-Americans or exclusive to minorities (Plaut, Garnett, Buffardi, & Sanchez-Burks, 2011).

Study 1a

Method

Participants

One hundred and three students (60 European-American, 43 Asian-American; 66 women, 37 men) at a small northeastern university completed the study in exchange for \$5.

Measures

Essentialist cue. To prime group differences as essential, we restricted the number of ethnic groups in which a person could simultaneously claim membership. There were two conditions: the Check-All instruction stated, “Ethnicity: (Select all that apply)”, while the Check-One instruction stated, “Ethnicity: (Circle only one).” In both conditions, six options followed: Caucasian, African-American, Asian, Hispanic, Puerto Rican, and Other.

Diversity expression. Participants rank-ordered their top five choices from a list of 18 campus clubs and activities. We were interested in participants' selection of “Ethnic Studies Groups” and “Culture Clubs.” Other choices included options such as “Volunteer Activities” and “Theater Groups.” On a separate page, participants indicated the activities in which they were already involved.

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