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To be or not to be (ethnic): Public vs. private expressions of ethnic identification differentially impact national inclusion of White and non-White groups

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ABSTRACT

Many pluralistic nations are witnessing vigorous debate about multiculturalism. In the U.S., Americans generally embrace principles of ethnic diversity but dislike minorities who express strong ethnic identification. Two experiments examined this seeming contradiction by differentiating between ethnic identity expressed in private vs. public by non-White and White individuals. Then we tested whether individuals' identity expressions differentially affected perceivers' construal of their entire ethnic group as legitimately American. Results indicated that at a conscious level, White and non-White ethnic groups were held to the same standard and construed as significantly less American when members expressed their ethnic identity publicly vs. privately. However, at an unconscious level, a double standard emerged: non-White ethnic groups were implicitly rejected as less American if members expressed ethnic identity publicly, while White ethnics were implicitly accepted as legitimate Americans regardless of where they expressed ethnic identity.

The 20th century witnessed mass migration of people across the globe making many countries, especially those in North America and Western Europe, substantially more pluralistic than ever before. Such patterns of global migration have continued unabated into the 21st century. On the heels of increased pluralism have come debates about how to preserve the national character of one's country and achieve national unity in the face of diversity. The popularity of "English-only" movements in many parts of the U.S. (Baron, 1990; Schildkraut, 2003, 2005), laws banning women from wearing head scarves and burqas in parts of Europe (Byrd, 2010; Ruitenberg, 2008), and the importance placed on language proficiency tests in many Western nations (Etzioni, 2007; McNamara & Shohamy, 2008) are contemporary attempts to preserve national character and reduce the influence of ethnic cultures that are not in the national majority. In this debate, two sociopolitical ideologies—assimilation and multiculturalism—attempt to promote national unity in very different ways.

Assimilation proposes that the best method to ensure the peaceful coexistence of diverse groups within a nation is by dissolving intergroup differences and emphasizing shared values and cultural practices (Hirschman, 1983; Schmidt, 1997). According to this ideology immigrants should adopt the values, norms, and ethnocultural practices of the host country and give up (or at least relegate to secondary status) values, norms and ethnic practices of the "old country" as a way of reducing their difference from the majority culture. This ideology finds support in the similarity–attraction hypothesis, which proposes that people prefer individuals who are similar to themselves compared to others who are different (Byrne, 1971). Historically, assimilation had been a dominant ideology in the U.S. when generations of immigrants migrated and assimilated into American society. As a result, non-English languages disappeared from the collective memory of immigrant families as did many ethnocultural norms, practices, and values (Alba, 1990; Birman & Trickett, 2001).

In contrast, multiculturalism proposes that national unity is best achieved by encouraging ethnic groups to maintain unique ethnic identities while simultaneously identifying with the larger national group (Foster & Herzog, 1994; Moghaddam, 2008; Taylor, 1991; Wolsko, Park, & Judd, 2006). This ideology is supported by social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and related theories (e.g. Hornsey & Hogg, 2000) which argue that membership in various social groups are essential to one's self-concept and identification with such groups may satisfy a fundamental need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), provide purpose and meaning to individuals' lives (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2000), and reduce feelings of uncertainty about one's place in the social world (Hogg, 2007). Furthermore, individuals prefer to identify with smaller rather than larger groups (see optimal distinctiveness theory; Brewer, 1991, 1993), which partially explains why ethnic identity is not easily erased (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004). In the U.S., multiculturalism became a popular ideology in the 1960s as the country evolved from being one that emphasized cultural assimilation to one that was more accepting of cultural diversity (Downey, 1999; Moghaddam, 2008; Plaut, 2010;

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Wolsko et al., 2006). Today, Americans tend to embrace principles of ethnic diversity and believe that people should be allowed to maintain distinctive cultural identities as well as an American identity (Schildkraut, 2003, 2007; Tsai, Mortensen, Wong, & Hess, 2002).

However, endorsement of multicultural principles does not fit with recent evidence which shows that people dislike ethnic minorities who express their ethnic identity compared to others who downplay it (Dovidio, Gaertner, Schnabel, Saguy, & Johnson, 2010; Kaiser & Pratt-Hyatt, 2009; Yogeeswaran, Dasgupta, & Gomez, 2011). For example, Kaiser and Pratt-Hyatt (2009) demonstrated that Whites exhibit greater prejudice toward ethnic minorities who are strongly identified with their ethnic group compared to their weakly identified counterparts. Similarly, Whites are more likely to empathize with and help a Black individual who emphasizes his university identity and de-emphasizes his racial identity compared to an equivalent person who emphasizes his racial identity only or both racial and university identities (Dovidio et al., 2010). These findings suggest that strong ethnic identity is negatively evaluated even though it is a central tenet of multiculturalism. How can one resolve these discrepant findings?

Under what conditions do perceivers accept or reject expressions of ethnic identification?

We propose that perceivers draw a bright psychological line separating public from private expressions of ethnic identity. Strong ethnic identity is likely to be accepted when it is practiced in the privacy of one's home but rejected when it is practiced in public life because public expressions threaten the positive distinctiveness of the national group by overtly violating the national prototype (see Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Marques & Paez, 1994). In support of this prediction, previous research has shown that group members who deviate from mainstream norms, values, and practices elicit harsh penalties for threatening the positive social identity of their ingroup (i.e., black sheep effect; Marques & Paez, 1994; Marques & Yzerbyt, 1988). Moreover, exposure to ethnic minorities who embrace their ethnic heritage has been found to elicit perceptions of threat to national distinctiveness which, in turn, exacerbates the rejection of their entire ethnic group from the nation state (Yogeeswaran et al., 2011). Public displays of ethnic identity that sharply deviate from the national prototype are, therefore, particularly likely to elicit distinctiveness threat compared to private displays of ethnic identity that one does not have to see. Consider for example, situations in which ethnic identity is maintained and expressed through languages other than English. People may speak their ethnic language with co-ethnics only in the privacy of their home or also in public spheres such as workplaces, schools, etc (see Hitlan, Kelly, Schepman, Schneider & Zarate, 2006). We propose that when perceivers learn that ethnic minorities speak a language other than English in public spaces they are more likely to see this group as un-American because it more noticeably challenges mainstream norms and practices compared to when they learn that ethnic minorities speak their language at home.

Are White and non-White ethnic groups held to the same standard regarding the acceptability of expressing ethnic identification in private but not in public?

Since Americans tend to endorse egalitarian values (Devos & Banaji, 2005; Sears, Henry, & Kosterman, 2000), they may explicitly hold White and non-White ethnic groups to the same standard in terms of which expressions of ethnic identity are considered acceptable. That is, people may report that private expressions of ethnic identity are acceptable for any group of Americans while public expressions are not acceptable for any Americans. An alternative hypothesis comes from several studies which have found that Americans of all races implicitly perceive Whites to be more authentically American than any ethnic minority group (Devos & Banaji, 2005; Devos, Gavin, & Quintana, 2010; Devos & Ma, 2008; Yogeeswaran & Dasgupta, 2010). These studies suggest that the prototypical "true" American is automatically envisioned to be White rather than of any other race. Based on these findings, it is possible that White ethnic groups may be implicitly regarded as American no matter how they express ethnic identity—publicly or privately; but non-White ethnic groups may be implicitly regarded as American *only* if they limit ethnic identity expressions to the home.

Goals of the current research

Two experiments investigated whether and how different types of ethnic identity expressions influence perceivers' construals of White vs. non-White ethnic groups as legitimate citizens of their superordinate nation. We made the following predictions. First, we predicted that people will accept private expressions of ethnic identity confined to one's home but reject public expressions of ethnic identity that spill over into the public domain.

Second, we predicted a divergence between perceivers' conscious standards compared to their unconscious standards. At a conscious level people will hold White and non-White ethnic groups to the same standard; private expressions of ethnic identity will be explicitly evaluated as acceptable for everybody while public expressions will be viewed as unacceptable for everybody. However, at an unconscious level, we predict a double standard such that White ethnic groups will be implicitly accepted as American regardless of how they express ethnic identity while non-White ethnic groups will be implicitly accepted as American *only* if they express ethnic identity in private and rejected as un-American if they express ethnic identity in public.

We used language as a marker of ethnic identity in the current research. Language is a fundamental way in which ethnic identity is experienced, expressed, and transmitted through generations. It is a powerful carrier of culture and knowledge of a culture's language allows people to become immersed in the group's norms, practices, and religion (Fishman, 1999; Haarman, 1986). In some cases, language is the only distinctive characteristic that identifies an ethnic group and moving away from one's ethnic language is perceived as distancing oneself from one's ethnic group (Bailey, 2000; Fought, 2006). The importance of language as a carrier of culture is starkly illustrated by historical events of forced acculturation in which special emphasis was placed on destroying ethnic languages. For example, in the 19th century, a U.S. government sponsored program placed Native-American children in boarding schools where they were forbidden to speak Native languages as part of a systematic attempt to "civilize" native tribes by stripping them of their ethnic culture (Lomawaima, 1993; Reyhner & Eder, 2004). For all these reasons, we elected to use language as the marker of ethnic identity in the present research.

Experiment 1

Experiment 1 focused on the ethnic identity of Native-Americans as the target group of interest because as the original inhabitants of the land one cannot doubt that they are truly American. Yet, we expected that Native-Americans who express their ethnic identity in public would be construed as less American compared to the same individuals who express their ethnic identity in private and also compared to a control condition.

Method

Participants

A total of 108 (96 females and 12 males) American undergraduates received course credit for participation. The sample comprised 90 Whites (83%), 10 Asians (9%), 3 Blacks (3%), 2 Hispanics (2%), 1