

# “Where Are You *Really* From?”: Asian Americans and Identity Denial

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Five studies investigate *identity denial*, the situation in which an individual is not recognized as a member of an important in-group. Asian Americans are seen as less American than other Americans (Study 1) and realize this is the case, although they do not report being any less American than White Americans (Studies 2A and 2B). Identity denial is a common occurrence in Asian Americans' daily lives (Study 3). They react to instances of identity denial by presenting American cultural knowledge and claiming greater participation in American practices (Studies 4 & 5). Identity denial furthers the understanding of group dynamics by capturing the experience of less prototypical group members who desire to have their common in-group identity recognized by fellow group members.

**Keywords:** Asian American, identity, acceptance threat, rejection, prototype

“Where are you from?” is a question I like answering. “Where are you *really* from?” is a question I *really* hate answering. . . . For Asian Americans, the questions frequently come paired like that. Among ourselves, we can even joke nervously about how they just about define the Asian American experience. More than anything else that unites us, everyone with an Asian face who lives in America is afflicted by the perpetual foreigner syndrome. We are figuratively and even literally returned to Asia and ejected from America. (Wu, 2002, p. 79)

This quotation, from legal scholar Frank Wu (2002), captures a predicament faced daily by American citizens of Asian descent: Although they may feel, think, and act American, they are routinely treated as though they are foreigners and do not belong in America to the same degree as other Americans. For millions of Asian Americans who fully self-identify as Americans (Berry, 1989; LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Minoura, 1992), this results in being reminded again and again that a core identity of theirs is at best questioned, at worst denied. We propose the term *identity denial* to describe this type of acceptance threat (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999) wherein an individual who does not match the prototype of an in-group sees that identity called into question or unrecognized by fellow group members. The recurrent questions “Where are you really from?” and “Do you speak English?” serve as palpable reminders of identity denial, of the fact that one is being relegated outside one's in-group because one does not fit the picture

that is America. As with other forms of social identity threat, targets are often quite aware of identity denial and react by altering their behavior when the threat looms large or when it is perceived to do so (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2001). This article explores the origins and manifestations of identity denial as well as the strategies that individuals deploy in reaction to it.

According to self-categorization theory (Turner, 1987), prototypicality is defined as the degree to which an individual matches a set of characteristics or attributes strongly associated with the group. The more a person deviates from these attributes, the less prototypical he or she is considered by others. The plight of identity denial is shared to various degrees by everyone whenever an important group membership is called into question because one differs from the prototype of that group. Consider the frustration of a female executive yet again confused for a secretary by a fellow executive, the impatience of an African American golfer repeatedly mistaken for a caddie by other country club members, or the irritation felt by a social psychologist who notices amusement on a physicist's face when she introduces herself as a fellow scientist at a university function. We have chosen to focus on the exemplar of Asian Americans because their unique history and easily identifiable features make them particularly susceptible to being seen as outsiders in America. However, individuals from any racial group who are seen as less prototypically American than Whites because of their appearance, behavior, or attitudes also have to contend with exclusion from the American in-group (see Barlow, Taylor, & Lambert, 2000, for research on African Americans and Cuban Americans). Our analysis also applies to countries other than the United States, such as France, where North Africans arrived predominantly through immigration and whose French descendants often stand out from the majority group by looks or name. Indeed, research on immigrants in other countries has found that others' perceptions of their national identity are lower than self-perceptions: Iranians in Canada (Moghaddam, Taylor, & Lalonde, 1987), Haitian and Indian women in Canada (Lalonde, Taylor, & Moghaddam,

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1992), and Moroccans and Turks in the Netherlands (Van Oudenhoven, Prins, & Buunk, 1988) all report feeling more identified with the host country than is the perception of others.

### Focusing on the Target

A headline on MSNBC's Web site during the 1998 Winter Olympics captured the phenomenon of identity denial along with the quandary of its targets. The site ran the header "American beats out Kwan" to refer to the victory of Tara Lipinski over Michelle Kwan, an American figure skater born and raised in California (Wu, 2002). Note that Kwan was not characterized as a member of any particular out-group. She was not mistakenly labeled as a foreigner, nor was she ascribed any stereotypical trait. She was simply denied her American status. For an American Olympic athlete, this would be a particularly painful rejection.

Research on discrimination against Asian Americans made its way into psychology during the first half of the 20th century and has focused largely on stereotypes (e.g., Katz & Braly, 1933; LaPiere, 1934). Whereas stereotype threat (Steele, 1997) is the fear of being seen in a negative light because of one's group membership, identity denial is the fear of not being seen as part of the in-group at all. We do not wish to deny the existence or consequence of stereotypes such as the model minority myth for Asian Americans (e.g., Cheryan & Bodenhausen, 2000; Shih, Pittinsky, & Ambady, 1999). What we do suggest is that concentrating on these stereotypes may be missing part of the picture. A crucial threat for Asian Americans is to be denied their national identity. As Wu (2002, p. 79) suggested, the question "Where are you really from?" may "define the Asian American experience" more than anything else that unites Asian Americans.

One impetus for the current research was the desire to be responsive to recent calls in social psychology for taking the perspective of minority members as active participants who have an influence on intergroup dynamics (e.g., Shelton, 2000). Although many of these exhortations have focused on the experience of African Americans and women and their corresponding negative stereotypes (Swim & Stangor, 1998), we predicted that studying Asian Americans would reveal the importance of identity denial.

### Reactions to Identity Denial

In focusing on the experience of minority members, it is important to identify how they actively react to the situation and study the strategies of belonging that they have developed. Given that less prototypical members of a group are judged more negatively (Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999; Turner, 1987; Wenzel, Mummendey, Weber, & Waldzus, 2003), we anticipated that one reaction to identity denial would be *identity assertion*, a process by which one proves to others that one belongs in the in-group. Rejecting someone from a group that is an important part of their identity is tantamount to frustrating their fundamental need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003) and could thus motivate individuals to maximize positive social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) by proving that they are part of that group (Branscombe, Ellemers, et al., 1999).

We hypothesized that Asian Americans, when threatened with identity denial, would attempt to reassert their identity and that this

would take one of two main routes. The most straightforward way would be to embrace one's in-group membership explicitly by increasing one's reported self-identification with the group. For instance, Turks in the Netherlands identified more strongly with their host identity on questionnaires administered in Dutch than in Turkish (Barreto, Spears, Ellemers, & Shahinper, 2003; see also Barreto & Ellemers, 2002). The second, more subtle way would be to change one's behavior to appear more prototypical by engaging in prototypical behavior or displaying evidence of past prototypical behavior. This could lead to changing one's speech patterns (Shepard, Giles, & Le Poire, 2001), attitudes (Branscombe, Ellemers, et al., 1999; Jetten, Branscombe, Spears, & McKimmie, 2003), and preferences (DeBono, 2000; Sherman & Gorkin, 1980; Tafarodi, Kang, & Milne, 2002) to come closer to the in-group's prototype. For instance, Chinese Canadians who were looking in a mirror (and presumably reminded of their minority status) conformed more to what they thought were European Canadian ratings of paintings (Tafarodi et al., 2002). This article explores both avenues to identity assertion.

### The Present Research

Preliminary support for our proposition came from work by Miller, Taylor, and Buck (1991), who found that the prototypical American voter is White, and other recent work by Devos and Banaji (2005), who showed, using the Implicit Association Test (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998), that the category American was associated with being White for most White respondents. Our goal was to study this association between White and American by focusing on the predicament of Asian Americans and how they responded to it. The Implicit Association Test is particularly useful when associations are not freely revealed, as in the case of negative stereotypes of African Americans—but it was not clear that an implicit approach would be necessary if the associations were freely revealed. We predicted that the norms against seeing Asian Americans as less American were weak enough that we would be able to study the association between Asian and American with more direct methods, as in the early days of prejudice research (e.g., Katz & Braly, 1933). Our research investigated the self-definitional and behavioral correlates of this association.

To study the phenomenon of identity denial, our experiments investigated whether Asian Americans were acknowledged to be American, compared with their own assertions and desires, and if not, whether they engaged in a strategy of identity assertion as outlined above. Given the relative novelty of this inquiry, it seemed necessary to take a multifaceted approach to capture the various components of the phenomenon, in an effort to understand both perceivers' and targets' perspectives and the social interactions of the two (Shelton, 2000). Therefore, the studies presented below corresponded to three major steps in our argument: (a) We started out with the perspective of White Americans, by showing that Asian Americans were indeed perceived as less American (Study 1); (b) then, we shifted our point of view to Asian Americans themselves, to see whether they were aware of this perception and whether it corresponded to their self-image (Studies 2A and 2B); (c) finally, we brought the two together by studying the everyday impact of identity denial on the social interactions of Asian Americans, first by documenting reported common misperceptions (Study 3) and then by exploring in the laboratory reac-

Table 1  
Mean Ratings for White American, African American, Hispanic American, Asian American, White Foreign, and Asian Foreign Male Faces by White Americans ( $n = 86$ ) in Study 1

Attribute	Race of person in picture					
	White American	Asian American	Hispanic American	African American	White foreign	Asian foreign
Attractive	3.24 <sub>a,c</sub>	2.22 <sub>b</sub>	3.06 <sub>c</sub>	3.48 <sub>a,d</sub>	3.65 <sub>d</sub>	2.39 <sub>b</sub>
Intelligent	3.89 <sub>a</sub>	4.96 <sub>b</sub>	3.59 <sub>c</sub>	4.64 <sub>b,d</sub>	4.39 <sub>d</sub>	4.91 <sub>b</sub>
Happy	3.83 <sub>a</sub>	3.29 <sub>b</sub>	3.84 <sub>a</sub>	4.37 <sub>c</sub>	3.48 <sub>b</sub>	3.49 <sub>b</sub>
American	5.76 <sub>a</sub>	4.20 <sub>b</sub>	4.79 <sub>c</sub>	5.42 <sub>d</sub>	3.25 <sub>e</sub>	2.41 <sub>f</sub>
Conscientious	3.79 <sub>a</sub>	4.13 <sub>b,c,d</sub>	4.09 <sub>c,d</sub>	4.48 <sub>b</sub>	3.85 <sub>a,c</sub>	4.24 <sub>b,d</sub>

Note. Numbers in the same row that do not share a subscript differ at  $p < .05$ .

tions to two instantiations of identity denial (Studies 4 and 5). Our overall hypothesis was that identity denial, which precludes Asian Americans from being seen as fully American, does exist in American culture and is recognized by Asian Americans. In addition, we postulated that reminding Asian Americans that they are not considered American would cause them to use identity assertion techniques to try to prove their American identity to those who did not recognize it.

### Study 1: Who Is Perceived as American?

Our first objective was to show that individuals with Asian features were indeed perceived as less American than others by White Americans. We presented participants with a sample of faces from various ethnicities, to be rated on several dimensions, including American. We hypothesized that White Americans would rate Asian faces as less American, and therefore less prototypical, than White faces.

### Method

**Participants.** A total of 200 Stanford University students in an Introduction to Psychology course completed a two-page survey for experimental pool credit. Eighty-nine students were excluded from the analyses because of blank or non-U.S. citizenship or not being White or Asian American,<sup>1</sup> leaving a total of 111 responses (63 female, 31 male, 17 unspecified<sup>2</sup>) to analyze. The responses of the 25 Asian Americans were analyzed separately from those of the 86 White Americans.

**Materials and procedure.** Each participant received a two-page questionnaire consisting of eight photographs of non-Stanford U.S.-born male faces taken in the Bay Area. Each face was accompanied by a fabricated name and place of birth. Faces were arranged in random order, and participants were instructed to rate each target from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*) on a series of five attributes: attractive, intelligent, happy, American, and conscientious. Participants received one of two versions of the questionnaire, each with a different set of 8 faces, resulting in a total of 16 faces: six Whites born in America, two Whites born in England, two Asians born in America, two Asians born in Taiwan, two African Americans born in America, and two Hispanic Americans born in America. The last page of the questionnaire asked for the participant's demographic information, including year born, whether he or she was born in the United States, and age moved to the United States (if applicable). Other demographic variables (e.g., ethnicity of participant) were collected at a separate session.

### Results

We created averages of each trait by race for all faces (averaging over six White American faces, two White British faces, two Asian

American faces, two Asian faces, two African American faces, and two Hispanic American faces). In line with our predictions, White American respondents rated White American faces as significantly more American ( $M = 5.76$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) than the Asian American faces ( $M = 4.20$ ,  $SD = 1.75$ ),  $F(1, 84) = 85.08$ ,  $p < .001$  (see Table 1 for means of all traits). In a  $2 \times 2$  within-subject analysis of variance (ANOVA) crossing Race of Target (Asian, White)  $\times$  Place of Birth (foreign, United States), faces specified as born abroad were rated as less American ( $M = 2.83$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ) than those specified as being born in the United States ( $M = 4.98$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ),  $F(1, 85) = 99.69$ ,  $p < .001$ , and Asian faces were rated as less American ( $M = 3.31$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ) than White faces ( $M = 4.50$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ),  $F(1, 85) = 59.46$ ,  $p < .001$ . These main effects were qualified by an interaction,  $F(1, 85) = 12.30$ ,  $p = .001$ , such that the discrepancy in ratings of American between foreign and American faces was smaller for Asian faces ( $M = 2.41$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ , vs.  $M = 4.20$ ,  $SD = 1.75$ ),  $F(1, 85) = 59.68$ ,  $p < .001$ , than for White faces ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = 1.76$ , vs.  $M = 5.76$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ),  $F(1, 85) = 108.62$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Notably, the Asian American faces were also rated as significantly less American than the African American faces ( $M = 5.42$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ),  $F(1, 84) = 67.34$ ,  $p < .001$ , and the Hispanic American faces ( $M = 4.79$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ),  $F(1, 84) = 25.06$ ,  $p < .001$ , although both groups were also considered less American than White Americans: African Americans versus White Americans,  $F(1, 84) = 7.39$ ,  $p < .01$ , and Hispanic Americans versus White Americans,  $F(1, 84) = 47.28$ ,  $p < .001$ .

How did Asian Americans themselves perceive Asian American faces? Asian American respondents also rated the Asian American faces as less American ( $M = 3.92$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ) than the White

<sup>1</sup> We defined as Asian American any participant who self-identified as "Asian/Asian American" and was a U.S. citizen. According to the Stanford registrar, the breakdown of ethnicities among Asian American undergraduates during Fall 2003 at Stanford was as follows: Chinese Americans (48.0%), South Asian Americans (11.6%), Korean Americans (6.0%), Japanese Americans (5.5%), Filipino Americans (4.1%), Vietnamese Americans (4.8%), Hawaiians (2.3%), and other (17.7%). In Study 4, we excluded South Asian Americans because both South Asian Americans and South Asian nationals are likely to speak English; therefore, the question "Do you speak English?" would not constitute an implication that one was not American.

<sup>2</sup> There were no effects associated with sex of participant in this or subsequent studies.

American faces ( $M = 5.38$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ),  $F(1, 23) = 24.37$ ,  $p < .001$ , similar to White American participants, yielding a nonsignificant interaction,  $F(1, 109) < 1$ , *ns*. Thus, Asian American respondents seemed to exhibit the same bias as White Americans against Asian features as markers of American identity.

### Discussion

This first study demonstrated that individuals with European features were perceived as significantly more American than individuals with Asian features by White Americans, even when participants were explicitly told the targets had been born in the United States. At a time when respondents are often hesitant to base judgments on group membership alone (Monin & Miller, 2001; Yzerbyt, Schadron, Leyens, & Rocher, 1994), it is noteworthy that this difference was obtained on a within-subject task. Participants apparently did not feel the need to equalize their ratings of American between Asian American and White American faces on that particular dimension.

Identity denial is not always a case of complete exclusion of certain members. Rather, the experience frequently manifests itself in a more subtle way, a type of partial exclusion in which certain members of the in-group are considered less a part of that group than others. Indeed, in our data, Asian American faces were not rated at the absolute bottom of the scale (minimum is one) on how American they appeared; they were slightly past the midpoint. However, perceivers rated the White American faces significantly higher. As predicted, Asian Americans were not necessarily ascribed an out-group identity; they were just denied a strong in-group identity. In addition, the African American and Hispanic American faces were rated significantly more American than the Asian American faces but less American than the White American faces. Therefore, this study suggests that identity denial may be an important factor for other groups, although it appears to be associated with Asian Americans to a greater extent.

Two potential limitations of this study were that the faces were all male and that place of birth was provided to participants (which is typically information not present when forming impressions of people). To address these potential shortcomings, we recruited another 48 participants using the same criteria as above, but this time, we included both male and female faces and did not provide name or place of birth. There was no interaction of Sex of Target  $\times$  Race of Target,  $F(1, 47) = 2.28$ , *ns*, and again, we found that Asian American faces were rated as significantly less American ( $M = 4.32$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ) than White American faces ( $M = 5.27$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ),  $F(1, 47) = 21.18$ ,  $p < .001$ . It is interesting to note that, regardless of race, female faces were rated as more American ( $M = 5.03$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ) than male faces ( $M = 4.56$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ),  $F(1, 47) = 18.00$ ,  $p < .001$ , perhaps because hairstyle conveys more information about one's country of origin for women than it does for men.

It may seem surprising that our sample of Asian American respondents exhibited the same bias against Asian features as White respondents. This tendency has also been found implicitly (Devos & Banaji, 2005), demonstrating that the association between White and American is deeply embedded in mainstream culture and media as well as in public discourse. Thus, minorities sometimes come to harbor majority opinions, even if those opinions (such as defining American along racial lines) are detrimental

to their group (Jost & Banaji, 1994). The real question of relevance for our purpose, however, was not how Asian Americans perceived other Asian Americans but instead how they perceived their own personal identity and how this self-perception might depart from how they expected to be perceived by White Americans. This was the issue we turned to next.

### Study 2A: Do Asian Americans See Themselves as American?

Because acceptance threat requires that the individual self-categorizes as a member of that group (Branscombe, Ellemers, et al., 1999), our first step was to see whether Asian Americans considered themselves to be American and valued that identity by comparing their responses with those provided by White Americans. Earlier work by Sidanius, Feshbach, Levin, and Pratto (1997) found no differences between Asian Americans and White Americans on measures of reported patriotism and nationalism. Devos and Banaji (2005) also found that Asian Americans did not differ from White Americans on a measure of implicit national identity, namely, how much they associated American symbols with "us." We sought to go beyond prior studies by using more specific questions regarding American identity, such as values, patriotic attitudes, and feelings of belongingness. To avoid the criticism that Asian Americans might have a different prototype of American than White Americans (Wenzel et al., 2003), we chose to give our participants a narrow reference group of Stanford students. Although we could not gauge from this study how American they felt without a reference group or with another group in mind, this data would shed light on our future studies (that these took place at Stanford).

### Method

**Participants.** One hundred fifty-five Stanford undergraduate students in an Introduction to Psychology class were administered a one-page survey as a part of a questionnaire packet for experimental pool credit. Demographic variables such as ethnicity were assessed separately from filling out the questionnaire packet. Seventy-one students indicated they were not U.S. citizens or were of an ethnicity other than Asian American or White, and they were subsequently excluded from analyses, leaving 84 participants (41 female, 43 male): 23 Asian Americans and 61 White Americans.

**Materials.** The one-page questionnaire contained a series of questions asking participants, using a 9-point scale ranging from  $-4$  (*not at all*) to  $4$  (*very*), the following: Compared to the average Stanford student, how much do you consider yourself American, how much do you consider yourself patriotic, how much do you feel you belong in America, and how much do you subscribe to American values? The questionnaire also asked about political affiliation, and two questions measured whether Asian Americans felt other Stanford students saw them as less American and patriotic.

### Results and Discussion

We conducted a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) on the four measures and found no effect of ethnicity,  $F(4, 78) < 1$ , *ns*. As predicted, Asian Americans considered themselves as American ( $M = 0.48$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ) as White Americans ( $M = 0.80$ ,  $SD = 1.79$ ),  $F(1, 81) < 1$ , *ns*, with both groups rating on average less than one unit above the midpoint. The same pattern was obtained for patriotism ( $M = -0.13$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ , vs.  $M = 0.44$ ,



$SD = 1.76$ ),  $F(1, 81) = 1.63$ ,  $ns$ ; belonging in America ( $M = 1.78$ ,  $SD = 1.83$ , vs.  $M = 2.37$ ,  $SD = 1.67$ ),  $F(1, 81) = 1.93$ ,  $ns$ ; and subscribing to American values ( $M = 0.83$ ,  $SD = 1.78$ , vs.  $M = 0.83$ ,  $SD = 1.83$ ),  $F(1, 81) < 1$ ,  $ns$ .<sup>3</sup> These results suggest that Asian American students at Stanford did in fact consider themselves as American as White American students at Stanford and believed they should be included in the American in-group. A within-subject ANOVA on the two questions about metaperceptions of Stanford students did not yield a significant difference between how much Asian Americans said they belonged and how they felt other Stanford students thought they belonged,  $F(1, 82) < 1$ ,  $ns$ , which we addressed in the next study.

### Study 2B: How Do Asian Americans Think They Are Seen by Other Americans?

Study 2A established that Asian Americans reported being American to the same degree as White Americans, suggesting that Asian Americans did not concur with the view of themselves as less American. Next, we assessed whether Asian Americans were mindful of this discrepancy between how they viewed themselves and how they were perceived by focusing on the metaperception questions from Study 2A. For this study, we changed the reference group to measure perceptions of belonging in the American in-group by Americans in general (as opposed to the smaller subset of Stanford students). Our hypothesis was that there would be no differences between Asian Americans and White Americans on the level of belongingness reported about oneself (replicating Study 2A) but that Asian Americans would believe that other Americans thought they belonged in America to a lesser extent than White Americans.

### Method

**Participants.** Three hundred fifty-five participants from three quarters of an Introduction to Psychology course filled out this questionnaire for participant pool credit. Participants who did not indicate that they were U.S. citizens or who were not Asian American or White American were excluded, leaving 167 participants (101 female, 65 male, 1 unspecified): 49 Asian Americans and 118 White Americans.

**Materials and procedure.** The questionnaire contained the two questions of interest for this study—"How much do you feel you belong in America?" and "How much do you think other Americans feel you belong in America?"—each rated on a 9-point scale from  $-4$  (*not at all*) to  $4$  (*very much*). Prior to answering these questions, participants also reported how much they engaged in American practices and had pride in America (included for pretesting purposes of Study 5). Demographic information such as race, sex, and citizenship was collected separately.

### Results and Discussion

We conducted a Question (within-subjects factor)  $\times$  Participant Race (between-subjects factor) ANOVA, which revealed a main effect of question,  $F(1, 161) = 16.15$ ,  $p < .001$ , and a main effect of participant race,  $F(1, 161) = 14.05$ ,  $p < .001$ . These main effects were qualified by a significant Question  $\times$  Participant Race interaction,  $F(1, 161) = 21.69$ ,  $p < .001$ . As predicted and mirroring Study 2A, there were no differences in the level of belongingness in America reported by Asian Americans ( $M = 2.47$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ) and White Americans ( $M = 2.88$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ),  $F(1, 161) = 2.07$ ,  $ns$ . However, when asked how other Americans felt

about their membership, Asian Americans reported significantly lower scores ( $M = 1.41$ ,  $SD = 1.95$ ) than White Americans ( $M = 2.96$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ),  $F(1, 161) = 28.46$ ,  $p < .001$  (see Figure 1). Thus, Asian Americans maintained that they belonged in America as much as White Americans but realized that other Americans might not view them this way. In contrast, White Americans did not experience this discrepancy between how they perceived themselves and how they believed others perceived them. It was possible that this discrepancy was a reflection of how much prejudice is directed against Asian Americans rather than a pure reflection of identity denial, so, in our next study, we asked directly about being misperceived as non-American in everyday interactions to locate the source of these metaperceptions.

### Study 3: Does Identity Denial Happen in Everyday Interactions?

Identity denial, as reported by Asian Americans, typically takes the form of little questions or misperceptions that occur on a regular basis. Questions such as "Where are you really from?" or "Do you speak English?" serve as constant reminders to Asian Americans that they do not look like they belong to the in-group. Although anecdotally such reports of interactions between White Americans and Asian Americans seem frequent, we did not have any systematic evidence that these encounters were prevalent and memorable to Asian Americans or of how the frequency of these encounters compared with some of the other misperceptions reported by Asian Americans and other ethnic groups in America.

### Method

**Participants.** Two hundred sixty-six students in an Introduction to Psychology course participated in this study as a part of a questionnaire packet they filled out for participant pool credit. Non-U.S. citizens, non-native English speakers, and those who selected more than one ethnicity or left that category blank were excluded from the analyses, leaving 167 participants (65 male, 102 female): 85 White Americans, 38 Asian Americans, 24 Hispanic/Latino Americans, and 20 African Americans.

**Materials.** We asked participants, "Thinking about your initial encounters with strangers over your life, in what way are you often misperceived?" Participants were provided 17 options, including descriptors such as "racist," "unfriendly," and "a criminal," and instructed to check as many as applied to their lives (see Table 2 for a full list). We also provided an "other" category with an open-ended option and an option for those who were "not aware of any misperceptions." The two descriptors of interest for the purpose of this study were "non-native English speaker" and "from another country," both of which were hypothesized to be selected more often by Asian Americans than by White Americans. Demographic variables such as ethnicity and sex were assessed at a separate session.

### Results

All participants reported a variety of misperceptions (see Table 2). We found, as predicted, that 34% of Asian Americans, but only

<sup>3</sup> We also validated the survey by comparing the non-U.S. citizens ( $n = 11$ , of whom 5 were Asian) with the U.S. citizens ( $n = 137$ ) using a MANOVA with the four self-ratings of being American as dependent variables. Non-U.S. citizens scored significantly lower (composite  $M = -1.86$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ) than the U.S. citizens (composite  $M = 0.95$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ),  $F(4, 142) = 7.06$ ,  $p < .001$ . Non-U.S. citizens reported significantly lower scores on all four questions (all  $ps < .001$ ).

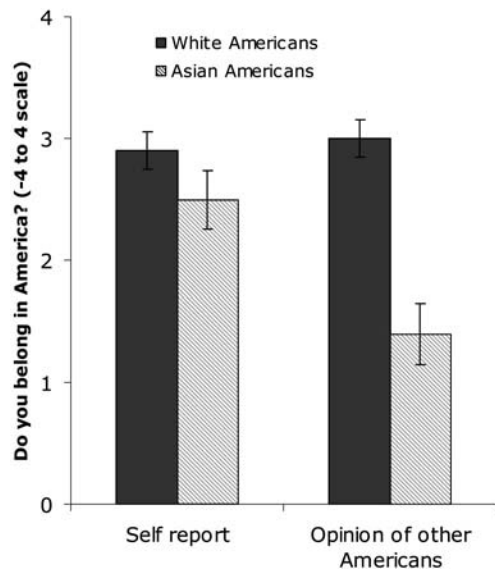


Figure 1. Mean ratings (+ SE) of belongingness and perceived belonging for Asian Americans ( $n = 49$ ) and White Americans ( $n = 118$ ) in Study 2B.

7% of White Americans, reported being often misperceived as either “from another country” or “a non-native English speaker,” or both,  $\chi^2(1, N = 123) = 14.82, p < .001$ . Asian Americans were thus nearly 5 times more likely to be mistaken as being from another country and/or a non-native English speaker than White Americans. Looking at the descriptors separately, Asian Americans reported often being

misperceived as “from another country” to a much greater extent (18%) than White Americans (6%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 123) = 4.69, p < .05$ . Similarly, 21% of Asian Americans reported being misperceived as a “non-native English speaker,” whereas 2% of White Americans reported being mislabeled in this way,  $\chi^2(1, N = 123) = 12.29, p < .001$ . Notably, one can also see the presence of the model minority stereotype in that 29% of Asian Americans reported being misperceived as being “good at math and science,” compared with 5% of White Americans,  $\chi^2(1, N = 123) = 14.41, p < .001$ .

Table 2 also sheds light on common misperceptions for other groups, particularly Hispanic Americans and African Americans. About a fifth (21%) of Hispanic Americans said they were often misperceived as being “from another country” and/or “a non-native English speaker,” which was not significantly different from the 34% of Asian Americans who reported being the victims of such misperceptions,  $\chi^2(1, N = 62) = 1.28, ns$ . Turning our focus to the 20 responses by African Americans, three (15%) reported being often misperceived as “an athlete,” four (20%) reported being often misperceived as “a criminal,” and five (25%) reported being misperceived as “dumb,” reflecting stereotypes studied by many researchers in the field (e.g., Jones, 1997; Katz & Braly, 1933; Park & Banaji, 2000; Steele & Aronson, 1995), whereas only two (10%) reported being mistaken as being “from another country” and/or “a non-native English speaker,” significantly lower than the percentage reported by Asian Americans,  $\chi^2(1, N = 58) = 4.01, p < .05$ .

### Discussion

Looking at reported misperceptions enabled us to see what past experiences Asian Americans and White Americans brought with

Table 2  
Misperceptions in Initial Encounters

Misperception	% reporting misperception			
	Asian American ( $n = 38$ )	White American ( $n = 85$ )	African American ( $n = 20$ )	Hispanic American ( $n = 24$ )
From another country and/or non-native english speaker	34.2 <sub>a</sub>	7.1 <sub>b</sub>	10.0 <sub>b,c</sub>	20.8 <sub>a,c</sub>
An athlete	2.6 <sub>a</sub>	9.4 <sub>a</sub>	15.0 <sub>a</sub>	8.3 <sub>a</sub>
From another country	18.4 <sub>a</sub>	5.9 <sub>b,c</sub>	10.0 <sub>a,c</sub>	16.7 <sub>a,c</sub>
Dumb	7.9 <sub>a</sub>	15.3 <sub>a</sub>	25.0 <sub>a,b</sub>	33.3 <sub>b</sub>
Older than I am	15.8 <sub>a</sub>	37.6 <sub>b</sub>	15.0 <sub>a,b</sub>	29.2 <sub>a,b</sub>
Gay	5.3 <sub>a</sub>	5.9 <sub>a</sub>	10.0 <sub>a</sub>	4.2 <sub>a</sub>
Unfriendly	28.9 <sub>a</sub>	31.8 <sub>a</sub>	45.0 <sub>a</sub>	41.7 <sub>a</sub>
A geek	18.4 <sub>a</sub>	10.6 <sub>a</sub>	5.0 <sub>a</sub>	12.5 <sub>a</sub>
A criminal	0.0 <sub>a</sub>	4.7 <sub>a</sub>	20.0 <sub>b,c</sub>	4.2 <sub>a,c</sub>
A musician	5.3 <sub>a</sub>	2.4 <sub>a</sub>	0.0 <sub>a</sub>	4.2 <sub>a</sub>
Bad at sports	13.2 <sub>a</sub>	7.1 <sub>a</sub>	0.0 <sub>a</sub>	12.5 <sub>a</sub>
Feminist	10.5 <sub>a</sub>	5.9 <sub>a</sub>	5.0 <sub>a</sub>	12.5 <sub>a</sub>
Reckless	2.6 <sub>a</sub>	8.2 <sub>a</sub>	5.0 <sub>a</sub>	12.5 <sub>a</sub>
Good at math and science	28.9 <sub>a</sub>	4.7 <sub>b</sub>	5.0 <sub>b</sub>	8.3 <sub>a,b</sub>
A non-native English speaker	21.1 <sub>a</sub>	2.4 <sub>b,c</sub>	5.0 <sub>a,c</sub>	12.5 <sub>a</sub>
Racist	5.3 <sub>a</sub>	4.7 <sub>a</sub>	0.0 <sub>a</sub>	0.0 <sub>a</sub>
An artist	2.6 <sub>a</sub>	4.7 <sub>a</sub>	10.0 <sub>a</sub>	4.2 <sub>a</sub>
In a fraternity or sorority	7.9 <sub>a</sub>	12.9 <sub>a</sub>	15.0 <sub>a</sub>	12.5 <sub>a</sub>
I am not aware of any misperceptions	10.5 <sub>a</sub>	16.5 <sub>a</sub>	15.0 <sub>a</sub>	16.7 <sub>a</sub>

Note. Open-ended responses (no. of responses, if more than one): Asian Americans: boring, cheerful, different ethnicity (2), elusive, passive, reserved, typical, younger (3); White Americans: celebrity, confident, mean, non-Jewish, shy, snobby, spoiled, younger; African Americans: quiet, shy, stuck up, thug, upset, younger; Hispanic Americans: always happy, different ethnicity (5), shy, wealthy, younger (2). Numbers in the same row that do not share a subscript differ at  $p < .05$ .

them when meeting someone for the first time. Asian Americans appeared to be much more likely to have been mistaken for and mislabeled as being from another country or a non-native English speaker than White Americans. In fact, over a third of Asian Americans reported this as a common misperception, compared with only 7% of White Americans. One can imagine how being repeatedly excluded in this way impacts the day-to-day behavior of Asian Americans who consider themselves part of a group whose members constantly make them feel like they do not belong. Incorrect assumptions can unjustly lead to systematic exclusion from a group that is often central to one's identity.

Fewer African Americans reported being misperceived as being from another country or a non-native English speaker than Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans, in line with the findings from Study 1 suggesting that African Americans are perceived as more American, at least on the explicit level, than Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans. Our data also informed us about how pervasive identity denial was compared with other misperceptions. The percentage of African Americans reporting being mistaken for a criminal or an athlete was lower than the percentage of Asian Americans reporting identity denial. This is not to say that identity denial for Asian Americans is more serious than the misperceptions faced by African Americans, but it does appear to be at least as pervasive in the daily lives of Asian Americans.

#### Study 4: How do Asian Americans React to Identity Denial?

The previous studies demonstrated the presence of identity denial from both the perceiver's and the target's perspectives. Next, we wanted to look at how the threat of identity denial affected the behavior of targets. One possible strategy of identity protection is to use one's identity strategically by asserting that one is a member of the relevant in-group (Barreto et al., 2003), possibly through demonstration of cultural knowledge, display of cultural symbols, and mention of cultural credentials. For Asian Americans, this identity assertion could take the form of demonstrating familiarity with American culture, especially with popular culture as it may be more indicative of actually having grown up in the United States than more formal knowledge (e.g., American presidents) that can be taught abroad and is less idiosyncratically American.

In the current study, we chose to re-create an interaction of identity denial to look at how Asian Americans and White Americans differed after having their group membership questioned. Although we did not predict that questioning group membership would threaten White Americans, we predicted that it would indeed threaten Asian Americans because it would bring to mind the discrepancy between their self-categorization as American and the perceptions of other group members. This might in turn cause them to attempt to assert themselves into the American in-group. To capture the phenomenon most accurately, we chose to take the threat manipulation directly from the experiences of Asian Americans, as had been reported in Study 3, and used the most commonly reported relevant misperception, that of being a non-native English speaker.

To provide respondents with a venue for identity assertion, we tested their knowledge of American popular culture. After asking participants "Do you speak English?" we asked them to recall TV

shows from the 1980s. Our hypothesis was that Asian Americans would spend more time generating these shows when reminded of their status as outsiders than when not reminded of their denied identity, whereas there would be no such difference for White Americans.

#### Method

**Participants.** Sixty-five participants, recruited on the Stanford campus, agreed to participate in this study in exchange for the opportunity to enter a raffle. Non-U.S. citizens and those who did not indicate their race as White or Asian American were excluded from the analyses, leaving a total of 46 participants (22 female, 24 male): 20 Asian American and 26 White American participants.

**Materials and procedure.** In the experimental condition, a White American experimenter approached the participant and asked him or her, "Do you speak English?" In the control condition, participants received no such question. All participants were asked to participate in a questionnaire study and were handed a questionnaire asking them to "List as many American TV shows from the 80s as you can remember." The experimenter unobtrusively timed participants during the TV show recall task. Timing began when participants turned the page to reveal the question and stopped when they ceased writing. After completing the questionnaires,<sup>4</sup> participants filled out demographic information and were thanked and debriefed.

#### Results

All participants who were asked "Do you speak English?" responded that they did indeed speak English. Looking directly at our hypothesis, we first conducted a MANOVA on the time spent recalling shows and number of shows generated. There was no main effect of ethnicity,  $F(2, 40) < 1$ , *ns*. We did find a marginal effect of condition,  $F(2, 40) = 2.77$ ,  $p = .075$ , but it seemed to be mostly driven by the predicted Race  $\times$  Condition interaction,  $F(2, 40) = 6.13$ ,  $p = .005$ . Looking just at time spent revealed no main effect of ethnicity,  $F(1, 41) < 1$ , *ns*, or of condition,  $F(1, 41) = 1.73$ , *ns*, but there was a significant Race  $\times$  Condition interaction,  $F(1, 41) = 11.06$ ,  $p < .005$  (see Figure 2). Asian Americans spent longer generating shows after being threatened ( $M = 3.11$  min,  $SD = 1.35$ ) than in the control condition ( $M = 1.34$  min,  $SD = 0.77$ ),  $F(1, 41) = 9.30$ ,  $p < .005$ , whereas there was no difference for White Americans between the experimental ( $M = 2.11$  min,  $SD = 0.75$ ) and control conditions ( $M = 2.88$  min,  $SD = 1.60$ ),  $F(1, 41) = 2.40$ , *ns*. In the control condition, Asian Americans ( $M = 1.34$  min,  $SD = 0.77$ ) spent less time than White Americans ( $M = 2.88$  min,  $SD = 1.60$ ) generating TV shows from the 1980s,  $F(1, 41) = 7.95$ ,  $p < .01$ . However, in the experimental condition, Asian Americans ( $M = 3.11$  min,  $SD = 1.35$ ) actually spent marginally more time generating shows than White Americans ( $M = 2.11$  min,  $SD = 0.75$ ),  $F(1, 41) = 3.50$ ,  $p = .07$ .

Turning to number of shows generated, we also observed a marginally significant interaction of Race  $\times$  Condition on number of shows generated,  $F(1, 41) = 3.51$ ,  $p = .068$  (see Figure 3). In

<sup>4</sup> Other dependent measures that were included in this study were ratings of local restaurants and the identity measure used successfully in Study 5; however, we did not observe movement on these measures, perhaps because the measures were further away in sequence from the threat manipulation.

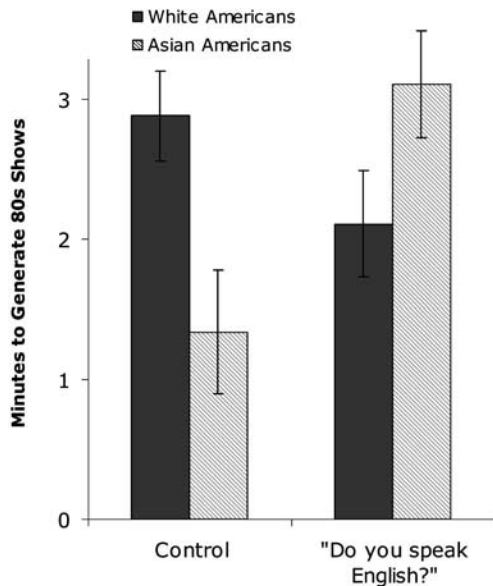


Figure 2. Mean number of minutes (+ SE) taken to generate TV shows from the 1980s for Asian Americans ( $n = 20$ ) and White Americans ( $n = 26$ ) in Study 4.

the control condition, Asian Americans generated fewer shows ( $M = 7.25$ ,  $SD = 7.42$ ) than White Americans ( $M = 13.00$ ,  $SD = 7.28$ ),  $F(1, 41) = 4.25$ ,  $p < .05$  (see Figure 3). However, there was no such difference in the experimental condition ( $M = 10.55$ ,  $SD = 4.89$ , vs.  $M = 9.00$ ,  $SD = 5.46$ ),  $F(1, 41) < 1$ ,  $ns$ . As with time, there were no significant main effects of condition,  $F(1, 41) < 1$ ,  $ns$ , or of ethnicity,  $F(1, 41) = 1.17$ ,  $ns$ .

### Discussion

Identity denial is instantiated through recurrent and seemingly innocent questions, such as being asked what language one speaks or where one is from, reminding threatened group members that they do not look like they fully belong in the group. Study 4 showed that Asian Americans were not passive in the face of such threats; instead, they tried hard to dispel this misperception and to reassert their identity as Americans by demonstrating awareness of popular American culture in the form of TV shows. Asking White Americans if they spoke English did not seem to elicit the same threat as they did not try to provide more cultural knowledge after being confronted with that question.

White Americans did not undergo a corresponding shift in behavior probably because they were positioned squarely within the group and having their status questioned was not threatening. Unexpectedly, White Americans spent more time than Asian Americans recalling shows from the 1980s when rejection from being American was not made salient. However, this pattern reversed after denying participants their American identity—Asian Americans then spent more time remembering shows from the 1980s than White Americans, supporting previous research on the phenomenon of overshooting cultural norms in an effort to participate in the mainstream (Triandis, Kashima, Shimada, & Villareal, 1986). Similarly, White Americans recalled more TV shows than

Asian Americans in the control condition, but threatening participants with identity denial eliminated this difference.

What can one make of the initial difference between Asian Americans and White Americans on the time to generate TV shows and the number remembered? It is possible that a higher proportion of our Asian American sample was not exposed to American TV shows in the 1980s either because they had not yet immigrated to America or because they watched less American TV. Another possible explanation is that TV shows in the 1980s were primarily targeted to and reflected the experiences of White Americans, which made them less enjoyable and memorable for Asian Americans, who therefore might have found recalling them to be a less enjoyable and nostalgic experience than it might have been for White Americans. The threat, however, served as a motivation for Asian Americans to expend more cognitive effort to recall those shows and had the intended results—Asian Americans generated as many shows as White Americans when they had something to prove.

### Study 5: Do Asian Americans Assert Their Identity Through Pride or Practices?

The results of Study 4 suggested that Asian Americans attempted to prove that they belonged in the American in-group when threatened by engaging in identity assertion. This took the form of spending more time demonstrating their knowledge of American culture (TV shows from the 1980s) after being asked if they spoke English. Study 5 sought to clarify the process of identity assertion by changing our dependent variable from cultural knowledge to more fine-grained measures of American identity. We included items that measured two distinct components of identity (Phinney, 1990), namely, participation in American cultural practices and pride in the United States, to see if one component would be more amenable to proving one's identity. In line with our interpretation of Study 4, we predicted that Asian Amer-

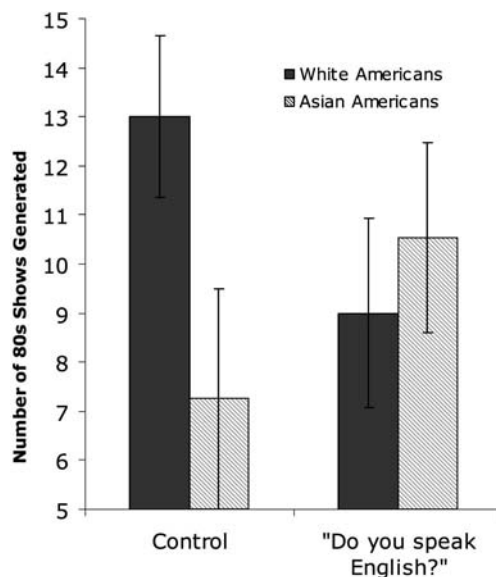


Figure 3. Mean number of 1980s TV shows generated (+ SE) by Asian Americans ( $n = 20$ ) and White Americans ( $n = 26$ ) in Study 4.



icans would react to identity denial by embracing American practices as a strategy to decrease the discrepancy between how they felt and how they were perceived.

Another reaction to identity denial may be to distance oneself from a threatening identity (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002; Schmitt & Branscombe, 2001). Distancing from the Asian identity might take the form of claiming ignorance of Asian culture, insisting that one is not a member of that group, or actively eliminating any cues that could be interpreted as signs of group membership. Although studies of non-Whites have disputed the one-dimensional nature of identity and have shown that it is possible to identify with two cultures successfully (Berry, 1989; Huo, 2003; LaFromboise et al., 1993; Tsai, Ying, & Lee, 2000), Asian Americans might recognize that embracing an Asian identity could hinder their attempt to seem American, at least in the eyes of White Americans. To test this, we included measures of Asian pride and engagement with Asian practices to test whether Asian Americans would react to identity denial by rejecting their ethnic identity.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, we used a different instantiation of identity denial in this study, one that had also been reported in Study 3 by Asian Americans as a common manifestation of identity denial—being mistaken for not being American. Not only was this a different method of denying one's identity but it also got to the heart of identity denial as an exclusion based on assumptions drawn from one's physical features. Also, in an attempt to investigate the negative emotional impact of identity denial, in this study we included measures of affect after the manipulation.

## Method

**Participants.** Forty-four U.S.-born Asian American Stanford students participated in this study. Twelve were recruited from an activities fair on campus and were paid \$6, and the remaining 32 were Introduction to Psychology students who received participant pool credit. One participant was dropped because of suspicion that the manipulation was part of the study, yielding 43 participants (22 female, 21 male) for our main analyses.

**Materials and procedure.** At least a week before participating in the study, all participants filled out 22 questions assessing various components of their American and Asian identities. For questions about practices and exposure to American culture, we adapted five questions from the General Ethnicity Questionnaire (GEQ; Tsai et al., 2000) and added two additional questions about American sports and American values. The statement "I am American" from the GEQ was included in the practices subset because past research has shown that Asian Americans define American more in terms of cultural practices than pride (Tsai, Morensen, Wong, & Hess, 2002). For questions about pride in America, we adapted five questions from the GEQ, five questions from the National Attachment Scale (Sidanius et al., 1997), and three questions from the General Social Survey (Davis, Smith, & Marsden, 2002; see Table 3 for a complete list of questions). All questions were answered on a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). After answering these 22 questions about American identity, participants turned the page and were asked to write in their primary ethnic heritage (e.g., Chinese, Japanese). They then answered the 20 practices and pride questions for this ethnic identity.

On the day of the study, participants showed up to a laboratory room in the psychology building and were met by a White American experimenter. In the experimental condition, the experimenter said to each participant upon arrival, "Actually, you have to be an American to be in this study." All participants in this condition instructed the experimenter that they were American, at which point the experimenter led them in and administered the American and Asian identity practices and pride measures, which were

Table 3  
*Scale Measuring American and Ethnic Practices and Pride in Study 5*

Scale	Item
Practices	I am familiar with (American/Asian) cultural practices and customs.
	I am exposed to (American/Asian) culture.
	I listen to (American/Asian) music.
	I play (American/Asian) sports.
	My values are (American/Asian).
Pride	My friends are (American/Asian).
	I am (American/Asian).
	I am proud of (American/Asian) culture.
	I criticize (American/Asian) culture. (reverse scored)
	I am ashamed of (American/Asian) culture. (reverse scored)
	I wish to be accepted by (Americans/Asians).
	Generally speaking, (America/Asia) is a better country than most countries.
	Every time I hear the (American/Asian) national anthem, I feel strongly moved.
	I find the sight of the (American/Asian) flag very moving.
	Compared to how much I criticize other cultures, I criticize (American/Asian) culture less.
	I have warm feelings for (America/Asia).
	I am proud to be an (American/Asian).
	In general, (Americans/Asians) are wonderful people.
	It is important to me to live in (America/Asia).
	It is important to me to respect (American/Asian) political institutions and laws.

*Note.* All questions were answered on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Participants were instructed to fill the Asian identity measures using their primary ethnic heritage.

identical to the American and Asian identity premeasures given to participants prior to the session. In the control condition, participants showed up, and the experimenter simply administered the questionnaires.<sup>6</sup> The study ended by having participants report how much they liked the study and the experimenter, as well as how angry, annoyed, offended, nervous, happy, relaxed, and motivated they felt, on scales ranging from -4 (*not at all*) to 4 (*very much*). The purpose of these affect measures was to assess whether having one's identity denied was indeed a negative emotional experience for Asian Americans. After completing the questionnaires, participants were thanked and debriefed.

<sup>5</sup> It is also important to note that if abandoning the threatened identity were an effective and common way that individuals dealt with identity denial, it would not make identity denial less problematic; if anything, such a tactic would suggest that identity denial is successful in excluding members of the group and making them feel alienated. Whereas, at the individual level, this could be an effective strategy to preserve self-esteem, obviously, at the societal level, this phenomenon is greatly problematic and leads to self-fulfilling prophecies and further structural injustices.

<sup>6</sup> The two belonging questions used in Study 2B were included after the American identity questions. (The preselection data from this study were included in the data for Study 2B.) Other dependent measures included in Study 5 were recalling TV shows from the 1990s and listing American and foreign landmarks. We did not find significant main or moderated effects of condition on these two measures, perhaps because participants had already proven their identity on the earlier American practices subscale.

## Results

**Pride and practices.** We started by creating practices and pride composite measures by averaging the relevant items for each.<sup>7</sup> To test our hypothesis that participants would assert their identity by reporting higher identification on the American practices measures, we regressed the American pride and practices subscales separately on condition (threat: 1, control: -1), controlling for premeasures of American practices and pride and premeasures of Asian practices and pride. All continuous scales were standardized before being included in the regression. As predicted, participants in the threat condition reported engaging more in American practices than those in the control condition ( $\beta = .24$ ,  $t(34) = 2.43$ ,  $p < .05$ , whereas American pride was not affected by condition ( $\beta = -.03$ ,  $t(34) < 1$ , *ns*). We tested the differential effect of threat on American pride and practices by regressing the difference between American practices and pride subscales on the same predictors as above, yielding a main effect of condition ( $\beta = .29$ ,  $t(34) = 2.37$ ,  $p < .05$ , demonstrating that, in response to identity denial, Asian Americans increased their reports of American practices more than their reports of American pride.

To examine the possibility that participants would distance themselves from their Asian identity in reaction to identity denial, we regressed both the Asian pride and practices subscales on condition (threat: 1, control: -1), controlling for premeasures of American and Asian identity (standardized). Condition impacted neither Asian practices ( $\beta = .14$ ,  $t(34) = 1.14$ , *ns*, nor Asian pride ( $\beta = -.15$ ,  $t(34) = -1.54$ , *ns*).<sup>8</sup>

**Negative affect.** Participants in the threat condition reported being more offended ( $M = -0.80$ ,  $SD = 2.73$ , vs.  $M = -2.70$ ,  $SD = 1.82$ ),  $t(32.38) = 2.64$ ,  $p < .05$ , and angrier ( $M = -2.00$ ,  $SD = 2.34$ , vs.  $M = -3.26$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ),  $t(29.54) = 2.12$ ,  $p < .05$ , and also reported liking the experimenter less ( $M = 0.75$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ , vs.  $M = 1.74$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ),  $t(41) = -2.34$ ,  $p < .05$ , than those in the control condition. We did not find any significant difference by condition in liking for the study or on any of the other affect measures.

## Discussion

Consistent with the previous study, Study 5 showed that Asian Americans, when threatened with identity denial, used identity assertion techniques in the form of claiming participation in American practices. After being confronted with a statement alleging that they were not American and could therefore not participate in the study, Asian Americans reported higher scores on how much they participated in American practices such as playing American sports, listening to American music, and having American friends. Notably, although participation in American practices increased after being threatened, pride in America was left unchanged. Why might claiming American practices be a more favorable identity assertion technique than increasing one's pride in America? First, the former requires actual knowledge of and time spent engaging with American culture, things that depend on past experiences as an in-group member, whereas the latter is a feeling and does not necessarily prove one's membership. In addition, the fact that a major component of being American for Asian Americans was participation in American customs and traditions (Tsai et al., 2002) suggests that the desire to prove oneself as American would result in increased endorsement of those items. Finally, Asian Americans may not have

increased their feelings of pride for America in the threat condition because it may have been hard to feel such pride when it was the prototypical Americans themselves who were bestowing the denial.

Study 5 also enabled us to look at how identity denial affected our participants' ethnic identity. We found that Asian Americans did not distance themselves from their Asian identity in response to having their American identity denied. One possibility is that the Asian measures came later in this study and participants might have already used the American scales to assert their identity and thus not have needed to expend more time and energy doing the same thing with different measures. Similarly, although our participants did not increase on American pride in this study, they might have chosen to do so without the presence of the American practices measure. Another explanation could be that Asian Americans recognized that being a member of one culture did not require resistance of an alternate culture (Berry, 1990; LaFromboise et al., 1993; Tsai et al., 2000). Asian Americans themselves, therefore, realized that their level of Asian identity reflected nothing about how American they were, and for them, it was possible to be both 100% Asian and 100% American (see Berry, 1989, for the integration strategy of cultural relations).

Our studies did find that the threatened group felt more offended, felt more angry, and liked the experimenter less than those in the control group, confirming the negative experiential quality and possible mental health outcome of being excluded from the majority culture (Berry, 1989). As Goffman (1959, p. 24) noted, "society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in an appropriate way." The results of this study demonstrate how troublesome it can be when that moral right, in this case, the right to be considered a part of one's in-group, is violated.

<sup>7</sup> Reliability for each subscale was satisfactory for premeasures (American practices  $\alpha = .62$ , American pride  $\alpha = .87$ , Asian practices  $\alpha = .57$ , and Asian pride  $\alpha = .81$ ), as well as for experimental measures (American practices  $\alpha = .68$ , American pride  $\alpha = .88$ , Asian practices  $\alpha = .65$ , and Asian pride  $\alpha = .78$ ). On the premeasures, participants rated themselves higher on the American practices questions ( $M = 5.70$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ) than the Asian practices questions ( $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ),  $t(39) = 8.84$ ,  $p < .001$ , and higher on the American pride questions ( $M = 4.69$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ) than on the Asian pride questions ( $M = 3.84$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ),  $t(39) = 5.02$ ,  $p < .001$ . American and ethnic practices were marginally negatively correlated,  $r(40) = -.28$ ,  $p = .08$ , whereas American and ethnic pride were marginally positively correlated,  $r(40) = .29$ ,  $p = .07$ .

<sup>8</sup> We did not feel confident including interactions in our model given the extra 26 degrees of freedom required and our modest sample size. However, for exploratory purposes, we included the 4 two-way interaction terms of Condition  $\times$  Practices and Pride Subscales. On our American practices subscale, there was a marginally significant interaction of Condition  $\times$  Asian Pride ( $\beta = -.21$ ),  $t(30) = -1.75$ ,  $p = .09$ , suggesting that the effect of the manipulation seemed stronger among those lower in Asian pride. On the American pride subscale, there were two marginally significant interactions of Condition  $\times$  Asian Practices ( $\beta = .20$ ),  $t(30) = 1.65$ ,  $p = .095$ , and Condition  $\times$  American Pride ( $\beta = .30$ ),  $t(30) = 1.86$ ,  $p = .074$ ; participants high in American pride or high in Asian practices tended to report more pride in America when under threat. The weak moderating role of these subscales makes some sense post hoc, but because we did not predict it and the effects were marginal, a more definitive answer on the moderating role of ethnic identification will have to await further studies.

### General Discussion

Where are Asian Americans really from? To Asian Americans themselves, the answer is obvious—Boston, Massachusetts; St. Louis, Missouri; Santa Monica, California; and a host of other American towns. However, our studies show that this answer was less obvious to White Americans who unwittingly denied Asian Americans their American identity. White American perceivers considered Asian American faces less American than White American faces (Study 1), and Asian Americans were aware of this perception but reported that they felt no less American than their peers (Studies 2A and 2B). Furthermore, this identity denial, or the tendency to be unrecognized as belonging to a particular in-group, was not based on blanket assumptions about all minorities but was experienced to a greater extent by particular minority groups, namely, Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans, perhaps because of physical characteristics and assumptions about their affiliations and loyalties. Identity denial was manifested in frequent encounters wherein Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans were mistaken for non-native English speakers or for being from another country (as in Study 3). Finally, threatening Asian Americans' American identity led them to engage in identity assertion by advertising an American lifestyle, such as displaying more knowledge of American popular culture in the form of 1980s TV shows (Study 4), or declaring that they engaged in American practices to a greater extent (Study 5).

This research has built on work demonstrating the implicit association between White and American (Devos & Banaji, 2005; Miller et al., 1991) but has focused on the target's perspective and behavioral responses to this situation. On a number of explicit measures, we found that (a) White American respondents reported seeing Asian American individuals as less American, (b) Asian Americans reported feeling just as American as their peers, (c) Asian Americans realized that they were being seen as less American, (d) Asian Americans reported being treated as foreigners in daily interactions, and (e) Asian Americans changed their behavior in reaction to instances of identity denial.

### *Identity Denial From the Majority Perspective*

Ironically, the people reminding Asian Americans of their outsider status through seemingly innocent questions are often well intentioned and even trying to be culturally sensitive. When people compliment an established Chinese American legal scholar on the quality of his English after he gives an elaborate talk (Wu, 2002), they are trying to be nice. And when strangers ask Asian Americans where they are really from, it is often in an effort to show cultural awareness and to respect regional differences rather than lumping all Asian Americans into one amorphous identity, as seen in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (which governs the format of this journal), which specifies describing Asian American participants by their nation of origin, for example, as Chinese Americans (American Psychological Association, 2001, pp. 62, 69). Asking about one's true origin may be intended by the questioner as respectful. However, when this question is asked every day of Asian Americans, it serves as an oppressive reminder that they are not perceived as American. It is interesting to note that the *Publication Manual* does not recommend identifying whether White American participants are predominantly of Russian, Irish, or any other origin.

Given that identity denial is something to be avoided, how does one appropriately strike a balance between appreciating and learning about another person's heritage yet not denying that person his or her American identity? The current studies demonstrate that questions such as "Where are you really from?" and "Do you speak English?" are offensive to Asian Americans. In contrast, inquiries that are careful not to pit ethnic and national identities erroneously against each other (e.g., "What is your cultural background?" or "What is your ethnic heritage?") may be more effective because they serve the same purpose yet do not exclude the individual from being considered American. When one is seen as American, talking about one's cultural heritage does not become an exercise in proving one's American identity.

### *The Kernel of Truth Issue*

Is it really incorrect to see an Asian face and assume that he or she is not American? After all, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2000, 2001), just over one fourth of the foreign-born population living in the United States was born in Asia, and nearly 41% of all Asians in the United States in the year 2000 were not U.S. citizens. However, claiming that it is logical to use base rates to defend generalizations about groups (such as using prison data to draw conclusions about individuals in the African American population) is problematic. First of all, our studies were all conducted at Stanford, and like many universities in the United States, Stanford's undergraduate population of Asian Americans consists primarily of students born and raised in the United States. According to the registrar, in 2003, only 11% (201 out of 1,855) of the Asian Stanford undergraduates were foreign students (defined by Stanford as not U.S. citizens or permanent residents). Unfortunately, the registrar does not track information on place of birth or citizenship of undergraduate students, but a sample of Asian students from three quarters of an Introduction to Psychology course revealed that 67% (44 out of 66) of them were born in the United States and 78% (49 out of 63) were U.S. citizens. Therefore, it appears the assumption that the Asian Americans undergraduates one sees walking around campus are not American is simply more likely to be false than true. Second, from a legal standpoint, the only criterion for being American is whether one possesses citizenship. Our studies have revealed, however, that when deciding who looks American, people take other elements into account, such as facial features indicating that one's ancestors come from a particular cultural heritage. This is exacerbated by a tendency for people to seek to explain the so-called deviance of nonprototypical members rather than to evaluate the behavior and attributes of prototypical members (Miller et al., 1991). Finally, whereas, from a kernel of truth point of view, focusing on features and attributes may sometimes improve people's guesses as to the recency of citizenship or the birthplace of one's grandparents, what is central to our argument is that they are poor predictors of the identification of the target as an American. Asian Americans in our samples felt as American as White Americans, but others did not see them as such. It is this discrepancy that we have chosen to focus on—that immigration may on average be more recent for Asian American families than White American families is irrelevant to our argument.

### *Discrimination Based on Identity Denial*

As we can see from America's past, groups that are considered relatively less prototypical of the superordinate category (Ameri-



can) are evaluated more negatively (Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999; Turner, 1987; Wenzel et al., 2003). Even though large waves of Chinese Americans and Irish Americans arrived around the same time, descendents of these 19th century Chinese Americans are considered far less American than their Irish American counterparts (Wu, 2002). Fear of a so-called Yellow Peril motivated policies such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the first law to ban citizens of a particular country from immigrating to the United States. With the onset of World War II, anti-Asian hysteria turned to Japanese Americans and culminated in Roosevelt's Executive Order No. 9066 internment over 100,000 Japanese Americans despite the lack of a single instance of disloyalty (Boaz, 1989). Hate crimes against Asian Americans have been perpetrated by Americans who believe that Asian Americans do not belong in America. In 1982, Vincent Chin, a young Chinese American man born in the United States (and whose father was an American World War II veteran), was beaten to death in Detroit, Michigan, by two White men who blamed him for the success of the Japanese auto industry (Clemetson, 2002). In another instance, Wen Ho Lee, a Chinese American nuclear scientist, was falsely accused of spying for China and incarcerated for several months, and he has argued that his ethnicity played a role in arousing suspicions against him (Lee, 2001). More recently, there has been a surge in hate crimes against Sikh Americans and Muslim Americans in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2002). As these examples demonstrate, not having an inclusive American in-group can create and sustain intergroup conflict (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000).

Being an integral part of a group offers a number of privileges, and systematically perceiving some members as outsiders amounts to stripping them implicitly of some of their civic rights and benefits and makes access to the advantages conferred by group membership all the more difficult. In a phone survey asking Americans to imagine voting for a candidate from different minority groups for the presidency (Yankelovich Partners, 2001), 15% reported feeling uncomfortable if he were African American, 14% if she were a woman, and 11% if he were Jewish. However, a full 23% admitted that they would be uncomfortable voting for an Asian American for president of the United States, a percentage that is significantly greater than for any other minority, for example, compared with African American, the next most common reported discomfort,  $\chi^2(1, N = 214) = 4.45, p < .05$ . Furthermore, 32% of American respondents believed that Chinese Americans would be more loyal to China than to the United States. Clearly, voting preferences impact the sharing of power in a most direct way, and this simple example underscores how identity denial renders it difficult for Asian Americans to have the voice they deserve in the American polity.

### *Other Reactions to Identity Denial*

We have suggested that one way people cope with identity denial is to prove to core group members that they belong and should be recognized as such. One such strategy used by Asian Americans is to display cultural knowledge as a means of asserting that they are American and have participated in this culture (Studies 4 and 5). These strategies of belonging seem to be essentially self-presentational ways to demonstrate group identity to those who do not identify them as part of the group. One potential next step is to see how those who are denied an identity act in private. Research by Noel, Wann, and Branscombe (1995) suggests that

out-group derogation by peripheral members of groups occurs in public but not in private. It is possible that individuals who do not think their responses will be made public will not be motivated to engage in identity assertion strategies.

We have considered in this article two identities: American—the denied identity—and Asian—the threatening identity. There remains a third identity to which Asian Americans may turn to maximize positive social identity, and that is the threatened identity, namely, the Asian American identity itself (see Roccas & Brewer, 2002, for a discussion on negotiating multiple identities). Previous studies on members of targeted groups have found that reminding participants of prejudice against their group increases their in-group identification, perhaps as a reaction against the prejudice (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Jetten, Branscombe, Schmitt, & Spears, 2001). In a study by Schmitt, Spears, and Branscombe (2003), perceived discrimination against international students correlated with degree of identification as an international student but not with degree of identification to one's home country. Furthermore, degree of identification as an international student mediated the relationship between perceived discrimination and self-esteem. Likewise, it is possible that Asian Americans fall back on their group identity as Asian Americans, a constructed identity that is arguably sustained because of perceived common discrimination (Chan & Hune, 1995). Indeed, one of the components of group entitativity, or the extent to which a group feels like a group to its members and observers (Campbell, 1958; Lickel et al., 2000), is common fate. The common predicament of identity denial may create an identity in reaction to the rejection experienced by individuals who would perhaps otherwise have been satisfied with their separate ethnic identities or their identity as Americans. Again, we go back to Wu's (2002) opening quotation defining the perpetual foreigner syndrome as possibly uniting Asian Americans more than any other experience.

### *Conclusion*

Taken together, these five studies demonstrate that in-groups are not homogeneous entities. At any time, some group members feel more accepted than others, and individuals who see themselves as full-fledged members of the group may feel excluded and perceive that their social identity as a group member is repeatedly denied. Look around the United States, and it becomes clear that Americans cut across the color spectrum. Yet, when asked to picture an American, many people immediately conjure up the image of someone White. As a consequence, Asian Americans are seen as less American, leaving each of them feeling like "a visitor at best, an intruder at worst" (Wu, 2002, p. 80). For the millions of Asian Americans raised in America, who in terms of national identity have nowhere else to go (Minoura, 1992), contending with identity denial—having the credibility of their American identity questioned on a daily basis—is tantamount to questioning their credibility as persons. Analyzing and addressing this phenomenon and the reactions to it are important steps toward a fuller theoretical understanding of group processes, as well as toward making the United States, for citizens of all origins, a more welcoming place that lets all thrive in the multiplicity of their identities.

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## Call for Nominations

The Publications and Communications (P&C) Board has opened nominations for the editorships of **Behavioral Neuroscience**, **JEP: Applied**, **JEP: General**, **Neuropsychology**, **Psychological Methods**, and **Psychology and Aging** for the years 2008–2013. John F. Disterhoft, PhD; Phillip L. Ackerman, PhD; D. Stephen Lindsay, PhD; James T. Becker, PhD; Stephen G. West, PhD; and Rose T. Zacks, PhD, respectively, are the incumbent editors.

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