Do Ethnic Minorities Implicitly View Themselves as Less American than Do White Americans?

Thierry Devos Mahzarin R. Banaji
Yale University Harvard University

Introduction
We investigate the extent to which ethnic minority groups within the U.S. are implicitly associated with the category American. Previous studies indicate that White Americans unconsciously or automatically view ethnic minorities as being less American than Whites (Devos & Banaji, 2001). In the present study, we addressed two new questions.

First, we examined whether these implicit ethnic-national associations reflect (a) a tendency to view one’s own ethnic group as being more prototypical of the category American than other ethnic groups or (b) an asymmetry of power and status between ethnic groups in American society. To tackle this issue, we compared the pattern of implicit ethnic-national associations displayed by members of different ethnic groups. More precisely, our goal was to determine whether members of ethnic minorities share the implicit beliefs about exclusion that reside in the minds of the advantaged majority.

Second, we examined whether such implicit ethnic-national associations reveal (a) thoughts that are not consciously controllable or (b) automatic affective responses toward ethnic groups. Is the tendency to include White Americans in the national identity and to exclude ethnic minorities from the category American another illustration of a preference for Whites over other ethnic groups? To shed light on this issue, we compared people’s implicit ethnic-national associations and their implicit attitudes toward ethnic groups.

Method

Participants
Ninety-seven Yale undergraduate students took part in the study: 35 White Americans, 32 Asian Americans, and 30 African Americans.

Procedure
To assess participants’ implicit associations, we used the Implicit Association Test (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998).

Results

Implicit Ethnic-National Associations
Participants paired, as quickly as possible, American or foreign symbols with faces that varied in ethnicity (White, Asian, & African Americans).

Implicit Inter-Ethnic Attitudes
Participants paired, as quickly as possible, pleasant (e.g., gift, rainbow, friend) or unpleasant (e.g., death, evil, disaster) words with faces that varied in ethnicity (White, Asian, & African Americans).

White American Participants
White American participants implicitly viewed members of their group as being more American than Asian Americans (t(34) = 5.92, p < .001, d = 1.01) or African Americans (t(34) = 5.10, p < .001, d = .87), but they did not significantly differentiate between these two groups (t(34) = 1.45, ns, d = .25).

Asian American Participants
Asian American participants displayed very similar automatic associations as White American participants. They implicitly viewed White Americans as being more American than members of their group (t(31) = 5.73, p < .001, d = 1.03) or African Americans (t(31) = 4.96, p < .001, d = .89), but they did not significantly differentiate between these two groups (t(31) = -.75, ns, d = -.13).

African American Participants
African American participants did not display the same pattern of implicit associations as White or Asian American participants. They perceived Asian Americans as being less American than White Americans (t(29) = 3.33, p < .003, d = .62), but they viewed members of their group as being equally American than White Americans.
Americans ($t(29) = 1.24, ns, d = .23$) and more American than Asian Americans ($t(29) = 5.16, p < .001, d = .96$).

**Implicit Inter-Ethnic Attitudes**

Next, we analyzed to what extent the pattern of implicit ethnic-national associations was distinct from the pattern of implicit inter-ethnic attitudes displayed by members of different ethnic groups. Once again, colors differentiate participants based on their ethnicity.

**White American Participants**

White American participants did not differentiate African and Asian Americans on the American-foreign task, but they showed an implicit preference for Asian Americans over African Americans ($t(34) = -2.63, p < .02, d = -.45$).

**Asian American Participants**

Asian American participants viewed their group as being less American than White Americans, but they did not show a pro-White implicit attitude ($t(31) = -.48, ns, d = -.09$). In addition, they held a more positive implicit attitude toward their group relative to African Americans ($t(31) = 2.82, p < .009, d = .51$), but they did not differentiate these two groups on the American-foreign task.

**African American Participants**

African Americans viewed their group as being more American than Asian Americans, but they did not show an automatic preference for their group relative to Asian Americans ($t(29) = 1.00, ns, d = .19$). Moreover, they did not display an implicit preference for White Americans over Asian Americans ($t(29) = .55, ns, d = .10$), and yet they automatically associated White Americans with the category “American” to a greater extent than Asian Americans.

**Conclusion**

Overall, our findings suggest that:

- Members of the dominant ethnic group (White Americans) are not alone in their automatic association of White with American (compared with Asian or African Americans). At least under some circumstances, members of a minority group also show these effects. In particular, Asian Americans internalize implicit associations that may be detrimental to the interest of their group in showing a weaker Asian+American association.

- At the same time, group membership clearly moderates these implicit beliefs. This is consistent with the idea that implicit associations are rooted in experience, they bear the mark of cultural socialization, and they reflect differences between ethnic groups at these levels. African Americans, perhaps because of the presence of other minorities who may be seen as less American, do not internalize the belief in their weaker status as American that resides in the minds of the advantaged majority as do Asian Americans.

- The American-foreign IAT captures something clearly distinct from a preference for Whites over ethnic minorities. It reveals more of a cognitive association than an affective reaction; a belief rather than an attitude.

- On explicit measures, ingroup favoritism is often stronger among low status groups than among high status groups. At the implicit level, we observe the opposite: White Americans show an implicit preference for their group, while members of ethnic minorities do not. The only exception to this trend is when they compare themselves to another minority.

**Address for Correspondence**

Thierry Devos  
Department of Psychology  
Yale University  
P.O. Box 208205  
New Haven, CT 06520-8205  
Email: thierry.devos@yale.edu