Equally American? Implicit national identity

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#1. In the United States, the law requires that people of all ethnic or cultural background ought to receive the same treatment. Every American citizen should enjoy the same political and legal rights. And, in general, individuals strongly subscribe to principles of equality.

#2. To illustrate this point, we asked a sample of undergraduate students to what extent they agree or disagree with a very explicit statement such as: “In my mind, I truly believe that I ought to treat members of different ethnic group equally”. As you can see, there is little ambiguity in their responses: the mean is close to the end-point of the scale.

#3. For these students, a commitment to equality is even a major component of the American identity. When they are asked to indicate what makes someone a “true American”, treating people of all races and background equally always emerge as one of the most important qualities. It is more important than, for example, to be patriotic or to have spent most of one’s life in this country.

The goal of this talk is to demonstrate that, despite a strong explicit commitment to egalitarian principles, in the back of our minds, some individuals are more American than others.

#4. The United States is made up of different ethnic groups. In our research, we investigate the extent to which ethnic groups are implicitly conceived of as being part of America. It is a fact that relations between ethnic groups are characterized by strong inequalities: White Americans have more power and enjoy higher status than other groups. We assume that this hierarchy creates implicit beliefs about ethnic-national association. More precisely, we hypothesized that White Americans are unconsciously or automatically viewed as being more American than ethnic minorities.

Study 1

#5. In a first study, we focused on 3 ethnic groups: White, Asian, and African Americans. Our goal was to examine the extent to which these groups are explicitly and implicitly conceived of as being part of America.

#6. To measure explicit beliefs, we asked participants to indicate the strength of the ties between each ethnic group and the American culture. As you can see, Asian Americans (the blue bar) were perceived as having weaker ties to the American culture than both White Americans and African Americans. These 2 groups were not differentiated at the explicit level. African Americans and White Americans were perceived as being strongly and equally tied to American culture. We have replicated this pattern of findings several times using a variety of explicit measures.

#7. To assess implicit beliefs, we used the Implicit Association Test. The ethnic stimuli were faces of White, Asian, and African Americans. We made clear to participants that all stimulus individuals were American.

#8. To represent the category “American”, we used symbols such as the American flag, a map of the U.S., the Capitol building, a $ 1 bill, and so on. These stimuli were matched with foreign symbols.
#9. Here is how the IAT was set up for a comparison between White and Asian Americans. In one set of trials, participants were asked to pair, as quickly as possible, American symbols with White faces, and foreign symbols with Asian faces.

#10. In another set of trials, the 2 pairs of concepts were combined in the opposite way. This time American symbols were paired with Asian faces, and foreign symbols were associated with White faces.

#11. The results indicate that participants categorized the stimuli faster when American symbols were paired with White faces (the orange bar); they were slower when they had to pair American symbols with Asian American faces (the blue bar). Shorter response latencies reveal stronger associations. Thus, this result means that Asian Americans were less strongly associated to the category “American” than Whites.

#12. When we look at the comparison between White and African Americans, we find a similar effect. It was easier for participants to pair American symbols with White faces rather than with African American faces. This suggests that African Americans were viewed as being less American than Whites.

No difference was found when African Americans were compared to Asian Americans.

#13. To compare the patterns of results at the explicit and implicit levels, we can plot the effect sizes (Cohen’s d) for each measure. These effect sizes reflect the extent to which White Americans were viewed as being more American than other groups.

#14. Asian Americans were conceived of as being less American than White Americans at the explicit AND implicit levels.

#15. In sharp contrast to the parity expressed at the explicit level, African Americans were viewed unconsciously as less American than White Americans.

In sum, implicit associations reveal knowledge that is sometimes consistent with explicit beliefs, but in some cases there is a strong discrepancy between these modes of representation.

The findings of study 1 are in line with the idea that ethnic minorities are unconsciously or automatically conceived of as being less American than Whites. However, the technique used in this study does not allow us to distinguish the extent to which a group is associated to the concept “American” or to the concept “foreign”. The IAT assess the association to one concept relative to the other.

### Study 2

#16. One could make the case that ethnic minorities are not so much viewed as being less American, but somehow they remain more closely tied to the concept “foreign”. To address this issue, we used a technique developed by Nosek and Banaji, the Go/No-go Association Task. I won’t provide details about the technique itself. For the purpose of this talk, I will simply say that the technique allows us to unpack the relative association to the concepts “American” and “foreign”. It allows an assessment of the association of say foreign with non-white in the absence of a sharply contrasting other category as in the IAT.

#17. As you can see, even with such a procedure, ethnic minorities were implicitly more associated with the concept “foreign” than White Americans.

#18. But they were also clearly less associated to the category “American”.

Thus, members of ethnic minorities are not merely viewed as foreigners; they are also excluded from the category “American”. To quote Sidanius and colleagues, one could say that Whites are regarded as owning the nation, whereas ethnic minorities are placed on the margins of the American society.

#19.
Study 3

Next, we tried to identify circumstances under which these implicit associations could be reduced or even reversed. Can we find contexts where members of ethnic minorities are viewed as being more American than Whites? In the first study, we activated a fairly official or political image of the U.S.: the Capitol building or a $1 bill evoke domains where ethnic minorities are clearly underrepresented. This representation may have produced the findings. However, there are particular domains in which these symbols may indeed be more readily associated with particular ethnic minorities. Fortuitously, this idea occurred to us prior to the 2000 Olympic games that took place in Sydney and we used this moment to test our hypothesis.

#20. During these games, we were pretty sure that events like these would occur. Indeed, track and field is a sport highly dominated by Black athletes.

#21. We wondered if the effect would be reversed in this particular domain. In other words, would Black athletes be viewed as more American than White athletes?

#22. The study was run just before and during the Olympic games. We used faces of Black and White athletes selected to represent the U.S.

#23. The “American” and “foreign” stimuli were slightly adapted to be more relevant to the sport domain.

#24. As in the first study, we also assessed people’s explicit beliefs. On this slide we plot the effect sizes for the explicit and implicit measures. If the bar goes toward the left, it shows that Black athletes are seen to be more American than White Athletes. If the bar heads right, it shows the opposite.

#25. On the explicit measures, we found that Black athletes were more strongly associated with the category “American” than were White athletes. For example, people stated that Black athletes represent to a greater extent what America is all about, or that they contribute more to the glory of the American nation.

#26. However, at the implicit level, Black athletes were less strongly associated with the category “American” than were White athletes. In other words, we found a striking dissociation between explicit and implicit beliefs.

Many factors should reinforce the idea that Black athletes are more American than White athletes. For instance, Black athletes win more gold medals and people are more familiar with Black athletes. Despite that, it remained easier to associate American symbols with White athletes than with Black athletes.

So, it seems that we cannot easily reverse these implicit associations; we cannot even wipe out the effect. Well, maybe we did not try hard enough! After all, track and field is not a very popular sport in the U.S. We hear about athletes such as Marion Jones or Maurice Greene every 4 years, but that’s about it.

Study 4

#27. Let us consider another example. Here are 3 ice-skaters. Even if you are not an ice-skating fan, you are probably fairly familiar with these names, and you know that Kristi Yamaguchi and Tara Lipinski are American citizens, whereas Katarina Witt is not (indeed, she is German). But, unconsciously, that is to say when we measure thoughts that are not consciously controllable, is Kristi Yamaguchi as American as Tara Lipinski? Even more interesting, is she American when compared to a White person such as Katarina Witt who is not American?

#28. We addressed these questions in the next study. We examined whether the effect would still emerge when people’s explicit knowledge show no difference or even a difference in the opposite direction.

#29. We pre-tested names of famous people: Asian American, White American and White European celebrities. We made sure that celebrities included in the first 2 sets were known as American citizens,
whereas the last set consist of names clearly excluded from this category. Of course, the 3 sets of names were equated in terms of fame.

#30. We focused on 2 comparisons: Asian American versus White American celebrities, and Asian American versus White European celebrities.

#31. Based on people’s explicit knowledge and given the criteria used to select the stimuli, participants should not differentiate the groups in the first case, but they should view Asian Americans as being more American than Europeans. According to our pre-testing data, this effect is so huge that it does not even fit on this slide!

#32. However, what we found at the implicit level is that not only were Asian American celebrities less American than White Americans, they were also less American than European celebrities. In other words, even though people were fully aware that someone like Hugh Grant is not American, and that Connie Chung is a U.S. citizen, it remained easier for them to pair American symbols with names of White foreigners than with names of Asian American celebrities. Once again, the data revealed a complete dissociation between explicit knowledge and implicit associations.

Study 5

#33. To address another important issue: So far, all our findings are based on responses provided by White American participants. Thus, one could easily argue that these effects merely reflect a tendency to view one’s own ethnic group as being more prototypical of the category “American” than other ethnic groups. In the last study, we looked at the influence of participants’ ethnicity on their implicit associations.

#34. Basically, we replicated the first study, but this time we included White, Asian, and African American participants. Once again, we report effect sizes. The colors differentiate participants based on their ethnicity.

#35. For White participants, results were identical to what we found in study 1: Whites were more American than Asian or African Americans, but these two groups were not significantly differentiated.

#36. More interesting is the fact that Asian American participants displayed very similar implicit associations than White Americans. Among other things, it means that they viewed their own group as being less American than Whites. In some of our data collections, this effect is weaker than what is observed for White American participants, but it is always there. Even if there are variations in the intensity of the effect, we always observe a difficulty for Asian Americans to associate their own group to the category “American”.

#37. You also notice that African American participants did not display the same pattern of associations. They viewed Asian Americans as being less American than Whites, but they perceived their own group as being equally American than Whites and more American than Asian Americans.

#38. Overall, these findings suggest 2 things.

First, members of the dominant ethnic group are not the only one to exhibit these implicit associations. At least in some cases, members of a minority group also show these effects. In particular, it seems that Asian Americans internalize implicit associations detrimental to the interest of themselves and their group. In some way, this implicit belief hurts their national identity.

At the same time, group membership clearly moderates these implicit beliefs. This is consistent with the idea that implicit associations are rooted in experiences, they bear the mark of cultural socialization, and they reflect differences between ethnic groups at these levels. It seems that African Americans do not take on the position implicitly assigned to their group by the dominant culture.
Conclusion

#39. To conclude, our research demonstrates that:

Despite a strong explicit commitment to egalitarian principles, Americans unconsciously, that is to say automatically, view ethnic minorities as being less American than White Americans.

These implicit associations are revealed even when explicit beliefs or knowledge show the contrary.

Another important point is that, at least under some circumstances, members of ethnic minorities internalize implicit associations detrimental to their national identity.

In sum, to be American is unconsciously synonymous with being White.