

Identity Denial

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Identity denial is a type of social identity threat that occurs when an individual is not recognized as a member of a group to which he or she belongs. In other words, acceptance as part of an important ingroup is in jeopardy in identity denial situations. Typically, individuals are denied ingroup status because they do not resemble a prototypical group member, so their common ingroup identity is called into question or unrecognized by fellow group members. Identity denial is sometimes a subtle, exclusionary experience, sometimes a blatant questioning of belonging. Within recent years, there has been a growing empirical literature in psychology on denial of American identity for visible ethnic and racial minorities (e.g., Asian Americans, African Americans, and Latino/as).

In its more subtle forms, identity denial includes what D. W. Sue et al. (2007) label racial microaggressions. For instance, Asian Americans (born and reared in the United States) may be complimented for speaking English well, or asked repeatedly where they were born. These microinvalidation experiences send the message that they do not belong or are not fully American, or what legal scholar Frank Wu has labeled a “perpetual foreigner” (Wu, 2002). Notably, although racial microaggressions, such as identity denial, may be seemingly innocuous and insignificant, Sue et al. contend that repeated exposure to microaggressions is detrimental to minority mental health because they represent a clash of racial realities between the perpetrator and target, and they create situations in which targets of microaggressions are unsure of whether or how to respond to the incident.

Identity denial may also occur in more direct or overt forms. In one of the first empirical studies to investigate perceptions of identity

denial, Barlow, Taylor, and Lambert (2000) found that African American and Cuban American women reported feeling excluded from the national “American” category by European Americans. Further, Huynh, Devos, and Smalarz (2011) found that across three studies, Asian Americans, Latino/as, and African Americans were indeed aware of being perceived as more foreign, less American than European Americans. In a series of studies more directly examining identity denial, Cheryan and Monin (2005) found that Asian Americans were aware of being denied the American identity by others despite the fact that they feel just as American as European Americans. They also identified situations of identity denial in everyday interactions for Asian Americans and Latino/as, who reported being misperceived as being from another country or as a non-native English speaker significantly more often than European Americans.

American identity denial has important implications for the wellbeing of ethnic minorities who experience it. For example, Cheryan and Monin (2005) found that identity denial impacted Asian Americans’ everyday behavior, especially when they felt that their American identity was in question. In response to identity threat, they used identity assertion techniques, such as demonstrating awareness of popular American culture and engaging more in American practices to assert their American identity. Moreover, Guendelman, Cheryan, and Monin (2011) found that identity assertion extended to food preferences and food consumption, potentially leading to worse health outcomes over one’s lifetime and across immigrant generations. In two experiments, they found that when Asian Americans experienced identity threat (e.g., being asked if they spoke English), they were three times more likely to report a prototypically American food as their favorite food, and they also ordered and ate dishes that were more American and contained significantly more calories and fat than when their American

identity was not directly challenged. In Barlow et al.'s (2000) study with African American women, feelings of exclusion from the national identity by European Americans were related to how African American women perceive their own group, such that those who felt more excluded held more pessimistic views of the economic and social position of African Americans, regardless of their actual socioeconomic status. Finally, in Huynh et al.'s (2011) studies, awareness of being stereotyped as foreign was a significant predictor of identity conflict, lower sense of belonging to American culture, and psychological wellbeing for the three ethnic minority groups in their samples. Overall, these findings point to the potentially negative impact of repeated, subtle, exclusionary experiences such as identity denial for ethnic minorities.

In sum, identity denial appears to be a common occurrence among visible ethnic and racial minorities in the United States, and has been found to predict social and personal identity, sense of belonging, psychological wellbeing, and interpersonal and health behaviors in correlational and experimental studies. The issue of identity denial is important to consider in cross-cultural psychology because it is likely a common dimension of perceived discrimination for immigrants and ethnic minorities. In addition, because of the impact of identity denial on the experiences of visible ethnic minorities, researchers interested in studying acculturation and enculturation should take this variable into consideration.

SEE ALSO: Immigrants; Prejudice – Implicit and Explicit; Racial Identity

References

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Further Reading

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