

What Does “Being American” Mean? A Comparison of Asian American and European American Young Adults

JEANNE L. TSAI
Stanford University

HEATHER MORTENSEN
YING WONG
DAN HESS
University of Minnesota

Two studies found that the meaning of “being American” differs for Asian Americans and European Americans. In Study 1, Hmong and European American undergraduates described what “being American” meant to them. In Study 2, Chinese American and European American undergraduates described what “American culture” meant to them. Responses were coded for references to cultural exposure, customs/traditional behavior, ethnic diversity, political ideology, and patriotism. Across both studies, Asian Americans referred to American customs and traditional behavior more than European Americans. European Americans referred to patriotism more than Hmong (in Study 1) and to ethnic diversity more than Chinese Americans (in Study 2). The authors suggest that these differences reflect the distinct statuses, concerns, and experiences of Asian Americans and European Americans.

• American identity • Chinese Americans • Hmong

“What does it mean to be American?” Although a straightforward and seemingly simple question, it raises issues of the deepest sort about the values we hold as people, the goals we should pursue, the loyalties we may legitimately cherish, and the norms of con-

duct we ought to follow. These issues are not only controversial in that Americans will disagree about the appropriate answers, they are also inherently difficult in that they are subtle, complex, and resistant to perspicuous formulation. (Gleason, 1981, p. 484)

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- *Jeanne L. Tsai, Department of Psychology, Stanford University; Heather Mortensen, Ying Wong, and Dan Hess, Department of Psychology, University of Minnesota.*

Ying Wong is now at the Department of Psychology, Stanford University.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jeanne L. Tsai, Department of Psychology, Stanford University, Building 420 Jordan Hall, Stanford, California 94305. Email: jtsai@psych.stanford.edu

As the demography and historical context of the United States changes, so do our conceptions of what it means to be American. Almost 20 years ago, historian Phillip Gleason (quoted earlier) argued that during the 20th century, political ideology (e.g., belief in freedom, self-government under law, and equality) and ethnic diversity (e.g., "melting pot") were the dominant themes of discourse about American identity (Gleason, 1981). Furthermore, he argued that during different periods in American history, one theme was more salient than the other. For instance, during the American Revolution, American identity was defined in terms of political ideology more than ethnic diversity, whereas from the 1890s to the 1920s, because of massive immigration to the United States, the reverse was true. From the 1940s to the 1960s, as a reaction to the rise of Nazism and totalitarianism in Europe, the ideological component of American identity assumed prominence once more (Gleason, 1981).

What does it mean to "be American" at the dawn of the 21st century? Given that 28.2% of the United States population is comprised of individuals of Asian, Latino, and African descent (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000), it is likely that one of many possible sources of variation in the meaning of "being American" is ethnicity. Ethnic groups in the United States have different concerns about, statuses in, and experiences with mainstream American culture; as a result, their notions of what it means to be American may vary.

Studying ethnic differences in the meaning of "being American" is important for several reasons. First, such studies will reveal whether a uniform American identity actually exists in the minds of individuals with different ethnic backgrounds and histories in the United States. Second, the term "American" is used in a wide variety of contexts, ranging from commercial advertisements to policy, to convey information to the public. If the meaning of the term American varies systematically among ethnic groups, misunderstandings and miscommu-

nication may arise. Thus, uncovering the nature of this variation may promote greater understanding among different ethnic groups. Third, although much research in psychology and anthropology has focused on acculturation (the process of adjusting to another culture; Berry, 1995; Padilla, 1990), cultural orientation (one's feelings toward and levels of engagement in different cultures; Tsai, Ying, & Lee, 2000; Ying, 1995), ethnic and racial identity (the degree to which one views oneself as a member of a particular ethnic or racial group; Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 1996; Phinney, 1990), and their relations to psychological well-being (Martinez & Dukes, 1997; Ward & Kennedy, 1994; Ying, 1995), there is a dearth of literature on what these specific racial, ethnic, and cultural groupings mean to their members (Tsai, Chentsova-Dutton, & Wong, 2002). Understanding what individuals mean when they say that they are American or when they refer to American culture may help us refine and advance current theories regarding (and methods used to study) acculturative, cultural orientation, and identity processes.

Despite their potential importance, few studies have examined how notions of being American vary across ethnic lines. Instead, scholars have focused on the meaning of other ethnic identities (e.g., for African American identity; Overby, Chatman, Malanchuk, & Vida, 2000; Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997), have described American ways of being (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler, & Tipton, 1996), or have distinguished American values, beliefs, expectations, motivations, and traditions from those of other cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The work that has been conducted on the meaning of American identity is found primarily in the political psychology and political science literatures (Merelman, Streich, & Martin, 1998). For example, several authors have found that groups that are less advantaged and less powerful (e.g., racial minorities and women) hold relatively negative views of American identity than do more advantaged

and powerful groups (e.g., European Americans/Whites and men; Jackman, 1994; McClain & Stewart, 1995). However, even this literature has not addressed the specific meanings that different ethnic groups attach to being American. Therefore, we present findings from two studies that illustrate how six aspects of being American (cultural exposure, social status, customs/traditional behavior, ethnic diversity, patriotism, and political ideology) are similar and different for distinct ethnic groups in the United States. Specifically, we compared Asian American (specifically, Hmong and Chinese American) notions of being American with those of their European American counterparts. We chose to study Asian Americans because they have been relatively underrepresented in the psychological literature (McClain & Stewart, 1995; Merelman et al., 1998), despite the fact that they currently constitute 4% of the U.S. population and are expected to constitute 11% of the population by the year 2050 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992).

What Does It Mean to Be American? Differences Between Asian Americans and European Americans

In the present article, we examined how the meaning of "being American" varied for two Asian American groups and their European American counterparts. On the basis of previous findings from the political psychology literature (McClain & Stewart, 1995), we predicted that different aspects of American culture would be salient to Asian Americans and European Americans because of their different statuses, concerns, and experiences in American society.

European American Views of "Being American"

European Americans are the majority group in the United States; their cultural traditions and customs predominate. As a result, many European Americans may view their customs and traditions as "normal" rather than

cultural (Tatum, 1997, p. 93). That is, on a daily basis, few European Americans may think consciously about their cultural heritages or what it means to "be American." Consequently, when asked what meanings they attach to "being American," many European Americans may refer to abstract themes and principles that they learned in school. Three such themes are political ideology, ethnic diversity, and patriotism.

Much of American history is based on our country's fight for freedom from the British during the American Revolution (Loewen, 1995, p. 278). In current times, the United States is the symbol of democratic government and freedom. Thus, political and ideological themes of freedom and justice are a central aspect of American identity. Another prevailing notion about the United States that is explicitly taught in American history courses is that it is a "melting pot," or a country that welcomes and that is founded on the experiences of various immigrant and refugee groups (Wilson & Gutiérrez, 1995, p. 15). A third theme of American identity is the importance of being patriotic, or expressing pride for one's country (Loewen, 1995, p. 278; Vecoli, 1996). Americans are taught that they should be proud of their country's actions and that other countries should model themselves after the United States. Although there may be other core aspects of American identity, we viewed these three as representative of the aspects of American identity that have received the greatest attention in the American education system and, therefore, as the three that would constitute European American notions of what it means to be American.

Asian American Views of "Being American"

Although many Asian Americans who were raised in the United States may also be exposed to themes of freedom, ethnic diversity, and patriotism, their notions of what it means to be American may also stem from their personal experiences as ethnic minorities in the United States. Two thirds of Asian

Americans are immigrants or refugees (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1990); after arriving in the United States, they must learn English and adjust to American cultural norms and traditions. Thus, they may view American culture in terms that relate to their daily lives, such as their exposure to and knowledge of American values, beliefs, customs, and traditions. Even American-born Asians must adjust to a society in which they are minorities, if not in their local communities, in the country as a whole. Consequently, immigrants, refugees, and American-born Asians may equate being American with the customs/traditional behavior of European Americans and with being a member of the dominant and majority cultural group.

Variation exists, of course, among Asian Americans. Specific ethnic Asian American groups differ in terms of their migration histories, the length of time they have spent in the United States as a group, and the heterogeneity of their surrounding communities. For example, whereas Chinese American migration to the United States has by and large been voluntary, Hmong migration has not. The first Chinese Americans arrived in the United States in the 1800s for economic advancement attained by working on the railroads or by searching for gold (Takaki, 1989). Subsequent generations of Chinese Americans also came to the United States for other economic and educational opportunities. In contrast, most Hmong Americans migrated to the United States involuntarily. In the 1970s, they were hired by the United States Central Intelligence Agency to fight against the Communist Vietnamese during the Vietnam War. As a result, they were driven from their homeland when the Communists overtook Laos. Because the United States promised the Hmong people that it would assume responsibility for their welfare should they lose the war, the Hmong became political refugees to the United States (Chan, 1994; Fadiman, 1997).

Within the same Asian American group, there also exist differences among individuals in their exposure to and familiarity with

American culture. This may in turn influence the meanings Asian Americans attach to "being American." For example, Phinney (1996) found that American-born Chinese endorse cultural values that were more similar to their European American counterparts than to their Hong Kong-born peers. For instance, Asian Americans who have more exposure to American culture (e.g., by having lived in the United States longer) may hold notions of American identity that are more similar to those of their European American counterparts than those who have had less exposure to American culture (e.g., by having lived in the United States for a shorter period of time).

To test these predictions, we conducted two studies in which we asked Asian Americans and their European American peers to describe what being American or what American culture meant to them. The first sample comprised Hmong and European Americans living in Minneapolis–St. Paul, Minnesota, where Hmong Americans are the largest Asian American group, constituting 0.4% of the state population (Hmong constitute 23.4% of the entire Asian American population in Minnesota), and where European Americans constitute 93.3% of the state population. The second sample comprised Chinese Americans and European Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area, California, where Chinese Americans are also the largest Asian American group, constituting 2.4% of the state population (Chinese Americans make up 26% of the entire Asian American population in California), and where European Americans constitute 43.7% of the state population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990). We chose to examine these specific Hmong and Chinese American samples because of their similarities (e.g., both are Asian American, constitute the largest Asian American group in their regions, and are minorities) as well as their differences (e.g., each group has different specific cultural traditions and migration histories and reside in communities that differ in terms of their cultural heterogeneity). Mainly, we were interested in the

extent to which our hypotheses held for different Asian American groups that shared social status and issues of cultural adjustment but that differed in important ways as well.

Hypotheses

On the basis of the above rationale, we made the following hypotheses. We hypothesized that because Asian Americans are ethnic minorities in the United States, they would refer to aspects of American identity that reflected their minority status and their need to adapt culturally to American culture (i.e., cultural exposure, social status, and customs and traditional behavior) more than their European American peers.

Our second hypothesis was that because European Americans are a majority group in the United States and do not need to adapt to American culture, they would refer more to abstract aspects of American identity that are reinforced in the American education system (i.e., political ideology, ethnic diversity, and patriotism) than their Asian American peers.

Our third hypothesis was that among Asian Americans, exposure to American culture would be related to the meanings that Asian Americans attached to being American. That is, the greater exposure to American culture Asian Americans had, the more they would refer to political ideology, ethnic diversity, and patriotism and the less they would refer to cultural exposure, minority status, and customs and traditional behavior. We predicted that these differences would hold across two different Asian American samples, one in the culturally homogeneous Midwest (Study 1) and another on the culturally heterogeneous West Coast (Study 2).

Study 1

Method

PARTICIPANTS. Forty-nine Hmong (20 male, 29 female) and 44 European American

(24 male, 20 female) college students (mean age = 20.33 years, $SD = 2.14$) from a large university in Minnesota were recruited to participate in a larger study of cultural influences on emotion¹ by means of a variety of strategies (flyers, word-of-mouth, announcements at student organizations, and newspaper advertisements). Participants received \$30 for their participation in the study. To ensure that found differences between groups were not due to age, income, or education level, we conducted one-way analyses of variance and chi-square analyses on age, income, and years in school. Analyses revealed no significant group differences in any of these variables (see Table 1).

Given their different cultural backgrounds and migration histories, we expected that Hmong Americans and European Americans would differ along a number of dimensions. As one would expect, Hmong Americans and European Americans differed in their place of birth, $\chi^2(1, N = 93) = 50.39, p < .001$; their English proficiency—speak: $F(1, 88) = 23.99, p < .001$; understand: $F(1, 87) = 22.29, p < .001$; write: $F(1, 87) = 17.31, p < .001$;—their citizen status, $\chi^2(1, N = 93) = 24.36, p < .001$; their number of years spent in the United States, $F(1, 91) = 29.62, p < .001$; and their orientation to American culture (as measured by the General Ethnicity Questionnaire [see below]; European Americans = 4.08 [$SD = 0.36$], Hmong = 3.80 [$SD = 0.38$]), $F(1, 90) = 14.66, p < .001$. Whereas only 28% of Hmong participants were born in the United States, 100% of European American participants were. Of the Hmong American participants born in the United States, all were second generation (i.e., their parents were born abroad). Hmong American participants reported being less proficient in English, were less likely to be citizens of the United States, spent less time in

¹Findings from the larger study of cultural influences on emotion are unrelated to the topic of this article and therefore are not discussed here.

TABLE 1 Study 1 Sample Demographics

Variable	Hmong (<i>n</i> = 49)	European Americans (<i>n</i> = 44)
Age (mean, <i>SD</i> , in years)	20.06 (1.93)	20.64 (2.33)
% female	59.2	45.5
Place of birth (%)		
United States	28.6	100
Laos	36.7	
Thailand	34.7	
% U.S. citizen*	57.1	100
Year in school (mean, <i>SD</i>)	2.24 (1.27)	2.75 (1.24)
Years in the United States*** (mean, <i>SD</i>)	17.52 (2.87)	20.52 (2.40)
Proficiency in English ^a (mean, <i>SD</i>)		
Speak***	4.40 (0.76)	4.98 (0.15)
Understand***	4.47 (0.75)	5.00 (0.00)
Write***	4.47 (0.75)	4.95 (0.21)
Yearly income (%)		
Under \$10,000	71.9	72.7
\$20,000–\$30,000	12.5	21.2
\$40,000–\$50,000	15.6	6.1

^aOn a 5-point scale, with 1 = *not at all proficient*, 5 = *extremely proficient*.

p* < .05. **p* < .001.

the United States, and were less oriented to American culture than were their European American counterparts.

INSTRUMENTS. Participants completed the General Ethnicity Questionnaire (GEQ) for two reasons: (a) to assess levels of cultural orientation in our sample and (b) to ensure that the groups differed in their exposure, engagement, and participation in American culture. Hmong participants completed both the Hmong (GEQ-H) and American (GEQ-A) forms of the GEQ, whereas European American participants only completed the latter form. The GEQ-A and GEQ-H are identical forms, with one exception: The GEQ-A refers to American culture, whereas the GEQ-H refers to Hmong culture. On both instruments, participants use a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = *very much* to 5 = *not at all* to rate 25 items pertaining to their social affiliation (GEQ-A: “I admire people who are American”; GEQ-H: “I admire people who are Hmong”), activities (GEQ-A: “I engage in American forms of recreation”; GEQ-H: “I engage in Hmong forms of rec-

reation”), attitudes (GEQ-A: “I am proud of American culture”; GEQ-H: “I am proud of Hmong culture”), exposure (GEQ-A: “When I was growing up, I was exposed to American culture”; GEQ-H: “When I was growing up, I was exposed to Hmong culture”), and food (GEQ-A: “At home, I eat American food”; GEQ-H: “At home, I eat Hmong food”). Participants used a similar 5-point scale ranging from 1 = *very much* to 5 = *not at all* to rate 13 items pertaining to their language use and proficiency (GEQ-A: “How much do you speak English at home?”; GEQ-H: “How much do you speak Hmong at home?”). For the Hmong sample, Cronbach’s alpha was .87 for the GEQ-H and .84 for the GEQ-A. For the European American sample, Cronbach’s alpha was .88 for the GEQ-A. For additional descriptive and psychometric information about the GEQ and a discussion of its use and relative advantages compared with other instruments, see Tsai et al. (2000) and Tsai (2000).

Participants’ responses were transcribed and coded by two coders (one European

American and one Chinese). The coding system used in this study was based on one developed by Tsai (2000) to characterize the different types of responses provided by participants. Participants' responses were divided into units. One "unit" of response was defined as a semantically complete sentence or phrase that expressed a discrete idea or thought (e.g., "It's the only culture I've been around"). For each unit of response, the category that best described the unit was coded as 1, and the remaining categories were coded as 0. The original coding system included 19 categories. In addition, for the purposes of the present study, we created another category, ethnic diversity, for references to the cultural heterogeneity of the United States (relative to other countries). Although the coders used all 19 codes to classify participants' responses, we compared the responses for the six categories for which we held explicit hypotheses (cultural exposure, social status,² customs and traditional behavior, ethnic diversity, patriotism, and political ideology).

The six categories were coded as follows: (a) *Cultural exposure* was coded when responses referred to the exposure to a specific culture (e.g., "It's the only culture I've been around" or "I guess I was just raised that way because I was here throughout my life"), (b) *social status* was coded when responses referred to the position of one's group as the minority or majority and to the unequal status among groups (e.g., "The least oppressed group of all" or "Assimilating to their culture"), (c) *customs/traditional behavior* was coded when responses referred to specific behaviors, rules, and expectations (e.g., "I don't have to do anything or be a certain person" or "Having the American lifestyle"), (d) *ethnic diversity* was coded when responses referred to the cultural heterogeneity of the American population (e.g., "The whole melting pot idea" or "It's a mix of everything"), (e) *patriotism* was coded when responses referred to pride about being American ("I feel very lucky to be an American" or "To be proud is the essence of America"), and (f) *political ideology* was

coded when responses referred to themes of equality, freedom, opportunity, and justice ("We have equal rights" or "You have freedoms where you might not have it anywhere else"). Refer to Tsai (2000) for a description of all 19 coding categories.

Coders were blind to the study hypotheses. Each coder was trained by Jeanne L. Tsai to use the coding system. Coders met 2 hr each week to ensure that they were consistent in their use of the coding system. After coders had completed coding responses from approximately 20% of the sample (20 participants), Cohen's kappa coefficient was calculated to determine the reliability between the two coders. The coders then discussed and reevaluated the unreliable categories (i.e., categories with interrater reliabilities of less than $r = .70$) and independently recoded participants' responses. Final interrater reliabilities were .85 for cultural exposure, 1.0 for social status, .85 for customs/traditional behavior, .94 for ethnic diversity, 1.0 for patriotism, and .88 for political ideology. Remaining coding discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached between the two coders. Responses that were incoherent or that did not fit into one of the categories were placed in the category titled "other" (see Tsai, 2000); in actuality, units were rarely placed in this category. For more detail about the coding system, see Tsai (2000).

PROCEDURE. On arriving at the laboratory, participants were greeted by an interviewer of the same ethnicity as the participant (e.g., Hmong participants were interviewed by a Hmong research assistant). Previous research has suggested that participants' responses are less biased when they are interviewed by someone of the same race as themselves (e.g., Bradley, Snyder, & Katahan, 1972; Murphy, Alpert, Moes, &

²This category and the patriotism categories were originally labeled "minority/majority status" and "pride," respectively, in Tsai (2000).

Somes, 1986; Waid & Orne, 1981). Participants completed consent and demographic information forms. On the demographic information forms, participants were asked to identify their cultural background. After completing the forms, participants were asked, "What does 'being American' mean to you?" With the exception of the GEQ, questions related to the larger study of culture and emotion were administered only after participants responded to questions relevant to this article. At the end of the session, participants were asked to complete the GEQ. Although the questionnaires and interview questions were administered in English, Hmong participants were interviewed by a bilingual Hmong interviewer so that if they started speaking Hmong, the interviewer would be able to respond in kind. In actuality, there were no instances when Hmong participants used Hmong. Participants' responses were then transcribed and coded using the system described earlier.

Results

To account for the possibility of experiment-wise error, we used a Bonferroni-corrected rejection level of .008 (.008 = .05/6 = original rejection level divided by number of tests conducted). Because our hypotheses were directional in nature, we used one-tailed tests of significance.

MEANINGS OF BEING AMERICAN: HMONG AMERICANS AND EUROPEAN AMERICANS. Chi-square analyses were conducted for each of the six categories: cultural exposure, social status, customs/traditional behavior, ethnic diversity, political ideology, and patriotism. Because the expected cell counts for social status and patriotism were less than five for European Americans and Hmong Americans, respectively, Fisher's exact tests were conducted for these two categories. Analyses revealed significant differences in the frequencies with which social status, customs/traditional behavior, and patriotism were used by Hmong and European American participants. Consistent with our first hypothesis, Hmong participants referred to social status and customs/traditional behavior more than did European American participants. Consistent with our second hypothesis, European American participants referred to patriotism significantly more than did Hmong participants (see Table 2). Contrary to our hypotheses, there were not significant differences in the frequency with which Hmong and European American participants referred to cultural exposure, ethnic diversity, and political ideology, although the percentages were in the predicted direction.

The following responses illustrate the differences between Hmong American and European American notions of what it means to "be American":

TABLE 2 Hmong and European American Responses to "What Does Being American Mean to You?"

Category	% of responses		$\chi^2(1)$	<i>p</i>	Odds ratio	Confidence interval	
	European Americans	Hmong Americans				Lower	Upper
Cultural exposure	18.18	24.49	0.55	.46	0.69	0.25	1.87
Social status ^a	0.00	16.33		.004			
Customs/traditional behavior	11.36	32.65	6.01	.014	0.26	0.087	0.80
Ethnic diversity	20.45	6.12	4.24	.04	3.94	0.99	15.65
Patriotism ^a	22.73	0.00		.000			
Political ideology	75.00	57.14	3.28	.07	2.25	0.93	5.46

^aFisher exact test used because of low expected cell counts.

Being American means being an individual . . . being able to do what you want to do and what's best for you . . . when I hear the word American, I think of individualistic, like how people want to just be one of their own kind [*preceding units were all coded as customs and traditional behavior*] . . . I think that I've been mostly influenced by the American part because I grew up here, I spend most of my time going to school and deal with the environment and it's American [*previous units all coded as cultural exposure*]. And you live in American society and you know you have to adjust yourself so that you can get along with others [*coded as social status*]. (Hmong participant)

It means freedom [*coded as political ideology*] . . . there's a lot of diversity here that you can't really find in other countries. Like ethnic diversity [*coded as ethnic diversity*], but economic, pretty much everything ya know, you can find it because people are free to express themselves [*coded as customs/traditional behavior*]. (European American participant)

MEANING OF "BEING AMERICAN": DIFFERENCES AMONG HMONG. To test our third hypothesis, we examined the correlations between years spent in the United States and reference to each specific category (1 = *not mentioned*, 2 = *mentioned*). Contrary to our third hypothesis, these analyses revealed that among the Hmong participants, years spent in the United States were not related to any of the categories examined.

Summary of Study 1 Findings

Hmong and European American participants differed in the meanings they attached to "being American." As predicted, Hmong participants referred to social status and customs/traditional behavior more and to patriotism less than did their European American peers. Contrary to predictions, there were no differences in references to cultural exposure, ethnic diversity, and political ideology between Hmong and European American participants. Also contrary to predictions, among the Hmong, years spent in the United States were not related to the frequency with which particular categories were used.

In the next study, we tested the same hypotheses with a sample of Chinese Americans and European Americans living in California. More specifically, we predicted that Chinese Americans would be more likely to refer to cultural exposure, social status, and customs and traditional behavior than European Americans, and that European Americans would be more likely to refer to patriotism, political ideology, and ethnic diversity than their Chinese American counterparts.

Study 2

Method

PARTICIPANTS. One hundred forty-four Chinese American (72 male, 72 female) and 170 European American (85 male, 85 female) college students (mean age = 20.49 years, $SD = 1.79$) from several universities in the San Francisco Bay Area were recruited for a larger study of cultural influences on emotion.³ Participants were given \$30 as compensation for their participation in the study. To ensure that found differences between the groups were not due to socioeconomic status, years of education, percentage female, or age, we conducted analyses of variance and chi-square analyses on these variables. There were no significant differences for the first three variables; however, there was a significant difference between the groups in age, $F(1, 312) = 9.13, p = .003$, with European Americans being older than their Chinese American counterparts (see Table 3).

Given their different cultural backgrounds and migration histories, we expected Chinese Americans and European Americans to differ along a number of dimensions. As expected, the two groups differed in their place of birth, $\chi^2(1, N = 314)$

³As with Study 1, findings from the larger study of emotion are unrelated to the topic of this article and therefore are not be discussed here.

TABLE 3 Study 2 Sample Demographics

Variable	Chinese Americans (<i>n</i> = 170)	European Americans (<i>n</i> = 144)
Age** (mean, <i>SD</i> , in years)	20.17 (1.37)	20.77 (2.04)
% female	50	50
Place of birth (%)***		
United States	38.2	100
China	4.2	
Hong Kong	16.0	
Taiwan	40.3	
Other	.7	
% U.S. citizen***	77.1	100
Years of education (mean, <i>SD</i>)	2.42 (1.10)	2.64 (1.22)
Years in the United States*** (mean, <i>SD</i>)	14.40 (5.23)	20.45 (2.02)
Proficiency in English ^a (mean, <i>SD</i>)		
Speak***	4.72 (0.52)	4.99 (0.08)
Understand***	4.81 (0.41)	4.99 (0.11)
Write***	4.65 (0.62)	4.98 (0.13)
Socioeconomic status ^b (mean, <i>SD</i>)	3.28 (0.86)	3.45 (0.81)

^aOn a 5-point scale, 1 = *not all proficient*, 5 = *very proficient*. ^bOn a 5-point scale, 1 = *lower income*, 2 = *lower middle income*, 3 = *middle income*, 4 = *upper middle income*, 5 = *upper income*.

p* < .01. *p* < .001.

= 146.63, *p* < .0001; their reported proficiency in English—speak: $F(1, 312) = 46.91$, *p* < .001; understand, $F(1, 312) = 30.60$, *p* < .001; write: $F(1, 312) = 47.59$, *p* < .001;—their citizen status, $\chi^2(1, N = 314) = 43.53$, *p* < .001; their years spent in the United States, $F(1, 311) = 193.28$, *p* < .001; and their orientation to American culture (European Americans = 4.07 [*SD* = 0.32], Chinese Americans = 3.54 [*SD* = 0.38]), $F(1, 312) = 177.95$, *p* < .001. Chinese American participants reported being moderately oriented to Chinese culture ($M = 2.95$, *SD* = 0.42). Whereas 28% of Chinese American participants were born in the United States, 100% of European American participants were. Of the Chinese American participants who were born in the United States, all were second generation (i.e., their parents were born abroad). Chinese American participants reported being less proficient in English, were less likely to be U.S. citizens, spent fewer years in the United States, and were less oriented to American culture than their European American counterparts.

INSTRUMENTS. As in Study 1, the GEQ was used to assess levels of cultural orientation

in the study sample and to ensure that the groups differed in their engagement with and participation in American culture. Chinese Americans completed the Chinese and American versions of the GEQ (GEQ-C and GEQ-A, respectively; Tsai et al., 2000), whereas European American completed the GEQ-A only. The GEQ-A was the same as in Study 1. The GEQ-C was similar to the GEQ-A and GEQ-H, with the exception that Chinese culture was the referent rather than American or Hmong culture, respectively. For the Chinese American sample, Cronbach's alpha was .90 for the GEQ-C and .90 for the GEQ-A. For the European American sample, Cronbach's alpha was .81 for the GEQ-A. The GEQ was described in detail in the Instruments section of Study 1 and therefore is not discussed further here.

Participants' responses were coded by the same two coders as in Study 1 using the same coding system as in Study 1. Interrater reliability was .80 for cultural exposure, .86 for social status, .79 for customs/traditional behavior, .88 for ethnic diversity, .96 for ethnic pride, and .79 for political ideology. As in Study 1, coding discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus

was reached between the two coders. A description of the coding system was discussed in detail in Study 1 and therefore is not repeated here.

PROCEDURE. Participants completed an array of questionnaires at home as part of a larger study on cultural influences on emotion. The questionnaires included a number of personality and social support measures to detract attention to any one questionnaire. For Chinese Americans, after completing the GEQ-C and prior to completing the GEQ-A, participants were asked, "What does American culture mean to you?" The format of the question changed from Study 1 because of the time constraints imposed by the larger study of emotion. For European Americans, participants were asked this question prior to completing the GEQ-A. Participants were given approximately one fourth of a page to write their responses. The order in which this question was administered was the same for each participant. Because these questionnaires were administered at home, participants were allowed to take as much time as needed to respond to this question. Participants returned the questionnaires and were given \$30 as compensation for their participation.

Results

As in Study 1, to account for the possibility of experimentwise error, we used a Bonferroni-corrected rejection level of .008 (.008 = .05/6 = original rejection level divided by number of tests conducted). Because our hypotheses were directional in nature, we used one-tailed tests of significance.

MEANINGS OF BEING AMERICAN: CHINESE AMERICANS AND EUROPEAN AMERICANS. Because Chinese Americans and European Americans differed in age, we examined the relationship between age and the endorsement of each of the categories (1 = *not mentioned*, 2 = *mentioned*); correlational analyses revealed that age was not significantly related to reference to any category. There-

fore, we followed the same data-analytic strategy as in Study 1. Chi-square analyses were conducted for cultural exposure, social status, customs/traditional behavior, ethnic diversity, patriotism, and political ideology. Because the expected cell count for patriotism was less than five for the Chinese Americans, a Fisher's exact test was conducted for this category. Analyses revealed significant differences in the frequency with which customs/traditional behavior and ethnic diversity were used by Chinese American and European American participants. Consistent with our first hypothesis, Chinese American participants referred to customs/traditional behavior more than did European American participants. Consistent with our second hypothesis, European American participants referred to ethnic diversity more than did Chinese American participants (see Table 4). Contrary to our hypotheses, there were no significant differences in the frequency with which Chinese American and European American participants referred to cultural exposure, social status, patriotism, or political ideology when describing the meaning of "being American," although the percentages were clearly in the hypothesized direction.

MEANING OF "BEING AMERICAN": DIFFERENCES AMONG CHINESE AMERICANS. We had hypothesized that, among Chinese Americans, those who had spent more time in the United States would be more likely to mention ethnic diversity, patriotism, and political ideology in their responses and less likely to mention cultural exposure, social status, and customs/traditional behavior. Contrary to these hypotheses, correlational analyses revealed no significant relationships between years spent in the United States and any of the categories, with the exception of customs/traditional behavior. Moreover, the direction of the relationship was in the opposite direction as predicted: The more time Chinese Americans spent in the United States, the more they mentioned customs/traditional behavior when describing what American culture was to them ($r = .24$, $p < .01$).

TABLE 4 Chinese American and European American Responses to “What Does Being American Mean to You?”

Category	% of responses		$\chi^2(1)$	<i>p</i>	Odds ratio	Confidence interval	
	European Americans	Chinese Americans				Lower	Upper
Cultural exposure	5.88	12.50	4.20	.03	0.44	0.20	0.98
Social status	5.88	10.42	2.19	.14	0.54	0.23	1.24
Customs/traditional behavior	24.71	40.28	8.71	.003	0.49	0.30	0.79
Ethnic diversity	52.94	23.61	28.07	.000	3.64	2.23	5.93
Patriotism ^a	3.53	0.69		.092			
Political ideology	36.47	30.56	1.22	.27	1.31	0.81	2.09

^aFisher exact test used because of low expected cell counts.

Summary of Study 2 Findings

Chinese Americans and European Americans differed in the meanings they attached to “being American.” As predicted, Chinese American participants referred to customs/traditional behavior more and to ethnic diversity less than did their European American peers. Contrary to predictions, there were no significant differences in references to cultural exposure, social status, patriotism, and political ideology between Chinese American and European American participants, although the percentages were in the predicted direction. Also contrary to predictions, among Chinese American participants, those who had spent more time in the United States were more likely to mention customs/traditional behavior when describing what “being American” meant to them. There were no significant differences between years spent in the United States and references to the other categories examined.

Discussion

In two studies, we found that the meaning of “being American” differed for Asian Americans and European Americans. Specifically, being American had more to do with specific customs and traditional behaviors for both Asian American groups than for Euro-

pean Americans. This difference was found across two different samples: one living in the culturally homogeneous Midwest (Minnesota) and the other living on the culturally heterogeneous West Coast (California). Moreover, these findings held for Hmong and Chinese Americans, two groups of Asian American who share status as ethnic minorities in the United States but who also have distinct reasons for migrating to the United States and different histories in the United States. As described in the introduction, we believe that these different views of American culture have to do with the different social statuses, concerns, and experiences of Asian Americans and European Americans in American society. More specifically, because Asian Americans are minorities and are more recent immigrants to the United States than European Americans, their notions of what it means to be American may be based more on the specific customs and traditional behaviors that they must learn to function effectively in mainstream American society.

Contrary to our hypotheses, across both studies, Asian Americans and European Americans did not significantly differ in their references to political ideology and cultural exposure, although the direction of the percentages was in the hypothesized direction. It is likely that across the world, the United States is viewed as a symbol of freedom, independence, and equality. As ob-

served by Lipset (1990, p. 19), "the United States is unique among developed nations in defining its *raison d'être* ideologically." That is, having a particular ideology is a significant part of American identity (Lipset, 1990). Similarly, both Asian Americans and European Americans may hold the notion that to be part of a culture, one must be exposed to it. Therefore, both Asian American and European American participants referred to such themes with similar frequencies.

Three findings, however, did not replicate across the two studies. Consistent with our hypotheses, in Study 1, Hmong participants referred to social status more and to patriotism less than did their European American counterparts in the Midwest. In Study 2, Chinese American participants also referred to social status more and to patriotism less than their European American counterparts, but these differences did not reach statistical significance. Although one might argue that the differences could be due to response format, research suggests that response format does not drastically alter research findings, as long as both formats are administered competently (Schwartz, Groves, & Schuman, 1998). It is also possible that these differences are a consequence of the slight changes in the phrasing of the question; however, we believe that the changes in phrasing did not change the essence of the question. Thus, we believe it likely that differences between the two study samples are the source of the variation in findings. Because Hmong constitute a smaller percentage of the Minnesota population than Chinese Americans do of the California population, their status as minorities may be more salient to them than it is for Chinese Americans in California. Similarly, because European Americans in Minnesota constitute a larger percentage of the state population than European Americans in California, their views of being American may be more homogeneous and in line with the American educational system. As a result, the European Americans in Minnesota may have referred to patriotism

significantly more than the Hmong, whereas the European Americans and Chinese Americans in California did not differ in this regard. If this explanation holds true, it highlights the importance of assessing for regional differences in ethnic minority and majority groups when studying the meaning of cultural identity and other psychological processes (Markus, Plaut, & Lachman, *in press*).

The third finding that did not replicate across the two studies concerned reference to ethnic diversity. Again, the differences between Asian American and European American participants were in the predicted direction for the two studies, but this difference was statistically significant in Study 2 and not in Study 1. For the reasons mentioned above, we do not think that response format or the phrasing of the question were responsible for this difference, although only future work will demonstrate whether this is the case. Instead, we think that these differences did not reach statistical significance in the first study because of its relatively small sample size. Indeed, if one compares the odds ratios for ethnic diversity in the two studies, the likelihood of European Americans referring to ethnic diversity (relative to the likelihood of Asian Americans referring to ethnic diversity) is actually larger in Study 1 than in Study 2.⁴

We had predicted that with more exposure to American culture, Asian American notions of being American would be more likely to resemble those of their European American counterparts. Contrary to our predictions, in most respects, there were no differences in the meaning of being American for Asian Americans who spent more time and those who spent less time in the United States. The one exception was in Study 2, in which we found that the more time Chinese Americans had spent in the United States,

⁴It is clear that sample size cannot explain why some differences reached statistical significance in Study 1 but not Study 2

the more they referred to customs and traditional behavior. It is possible that spending more time in the United States makes one more aware of the differences between Chinese and American customs and traditional behaviors. In addition, to preserve their connection to their native culture, Asian Americans may also emphasize or pay particular attention to differences between American customs and traditional behaviors and those of Asian cultures. Overall, however, our findings suggest that years spent in the United States may not affect the meanings attached to "being American." Future studies with more diverse samples will determine whether or not this is the case.

Study Limitations and Future Directions

The studies reported in this article have a number of limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, the two studies differed in the format that participants used to indicate their views of American culture and in the phrasing of the questions. In Study 1, participants described to an interviewer what being American meant to them. In Study 2, participants wrote what American culture meant to them. These differences were due to restraints imposed by the study to which these studies were wedded. Although research suggests that differences in response format do not affect study findings (Schwartz et al., 1998), it is possible that the findings that did not replicate across the two studies were due to these different forms of response. If this is the case, it is even more compelling that some of our findings held across different response formats. It is also possible that had we conducted more in-depth ethnographic interviews with our participants outside of the laboratory (in settings in which participants may feel more comfortable), different findings would have emerged. We were interested in the aspects of American identity that immediately came to our participants' minds; however, it is possible that while the ethnic groups may differ in the salience of particular aspects of American identity, the

core components of their notions of American identity may be the same. Future studies should explore these possibilities.

Second, like most studies of identity, the present study was cross-sectional. Much research suggests that ethnic identity changes over the course of an individual's life. Therefore, future studies should follow individuals of different cultural backgrounds over time to examine how their notions of what it means to be American change with human development, increased exposure to American culture, and various experiences in American society. Third, we focused on six aspects of American identity for which we held explicit hypotheses. Future studies should examine whether group differences emerge in aspects of American identity that were not represented here (e.g., individualism). Fourth, given previous research suggesting that language may affect cultural identification (e.g., Yang & Bond, 1980), it would be important to examine how speaking in English versus another language alters the meaning of American identity. Fifth, future studies should include members of other ethnic groups to examine whether our findings are specific to the groups we studied or whether they hold for other immigrant and ethnic minority groups that live in different regions of the United States.

Finally, the Asian American and European American groups in our studies differed along several dimensions (e.g., reported proficiency in English, citizenship status, and time spent in the United States) in addition to minority and majority status. Although these differences are central aspects of the samples studied and are not unrelated to differences in minority and majority status, future studies that include more heterogeneous samples may examine the extent to which found differences in the meaning of being American might be influenced by these factors. Similarly, future studies should examine generational effects on the meaning of American identity. In our two samples, we did not have enough statistical power to examine the effect of generational status on the meaning of "being

American.” Other scholars, however, have shown that second-generation Asian Americans are more likely to perceive discrimination than first-generation Asian Americans (McClain & Stewart, 1995). If this is the case, it is possible that Asian Americans of different generations might perceive the meaning of American identity differently.

Implications

Our findings have important implications for future discourse and research on ethnic identity and Asian Americans. First, although Gleason (1981) suggested that there is enormous debate about what the term “American” means, our findings suggest some potential sources of variance that may organize themselves along ethnic lines. That is, migration history, the process of cultural adjustment, social status, and the ethnic composition of one’s surrounding community may influence which aspects of American identity are the most salient to individuals. Moreover, our findings suggest that in some respects (cultural exposure and political ideology), different ethnic groups have similar notions of what it means to be American.

Second, our findings suggest that we must be cautious when using terms that might have different meanings for various ethnic groups. Although one individual may use the term “American” inclusively, another may be referring to a specific set of cultural customs and traditions. As a result, misunderstandings and miscommunications may emerge among members of different ethnic groups. For example, our findings suggest that whereas Asian American college students believe that there exists a consistent and homogeneous American culture that is characterized by specific cultural traditions and customs, European American college students believe that American culture is quite diverse. Thus, when European Americans refer to “American culture,” they may mean members of different cultures. Asian Americans, however, may think that they are referring to a culture that does not include

them. These different perspectives may also explain why there is disagreement about the use of ethnic labels: Some individuals prefer to use the label “American” to describe members of all ethnic and racial groupings (e.g., “Why can’t we all be Americans?”), whereas other individuals prefer hyphenated labels such as “Asian American.” Our findings suggest that these differences may stem from the different meanings of “being American.”

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