A Nation Challenged: The Impact of Foreign Threat on America’s Tolerance for Diversity

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Three experiments investigated how perceived foreign threats to the United States can influence Americans’ endorsement of assimilation and multiculturalism as models for foreign and domestic intergroup relations. The initial study, conducted during the 6-month anniversary of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks (9/11), discovered that a diverse group of Americans preferred assimilation as a foreign policy and multiculturalism as a domestic policy. After reading that foreigners were supporting the dominant global status of the United States, however, Americans in Experiment 2 no longer expressed this preference for assimilation as a model for foreign intergroup relations. Experiment 3 discovered that Americans primed with 9/11 (i.e., a foreign threat) revealed higher levels of national identity than did those primed with the Columbine massacre (i.e., a domestic threat); moreover, level of national identity predicted support for multiculturalism as a domestic policy and assimilation as a foreign policy.

Keywords: social identity, 9/11, assimilation, multiculturalism

Our racial, ethnic, religious and class differences suddenly are less important [following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks]. The enemy does not discriminate among us; the foreigner, with rare exceptions, will not help us. The common enemy unites America.

—Richard Posner, U.S. Court of Appeals judge

Social groups are a fundamental part of human life. Race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and nationality are just a few of the social groups that help create and define an individual’s identity. And the process of social categorization ensures that for every social group there are individuals who belong (e.g., “ingroup,” “us”) and individuals who do not belong (e.g., “outgroup,” “them”). The potentially lethal consequences for those individuals who are socially categorized as the outgroup were articulated by President George W. Bush during his address to the Joint Session of Congress just 9 days after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks (9/11): “Every nation in every region now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” (Bush, 2001, § 30).

Social categorization permits an individual to develop a social identity. Tajfel (1978) defined social identity as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group together with the value and social significance attached to that membership” (p. 63). To illustrate, one’s social identity as an American (i.e., national identity) is composed of two distinct components: (a) the categorization of self in terms of that social group (e.g., “I am an American”) and (b) the personal significance of that group membership (e.g., “I am proud to be an American”). Social identity theory postulates that individuals strive for a positive social identity, which requires that ingroups be favorably differentiated from outgroups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986). This motivates individuals to create, maintain, or enhance any valued distinctiveness of the ingroup (Turner, 1999). Consequently, intergroup discrimination normally takes the form of ingroup favoritism rather than outgroup devaluation (Brewer, 1999). So discrimination can be the product of emotions such as love, admiration, sympathy, and trust being reserved solely for one’s ingroup (Brewer, 2001; Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman, & Rust, 1993; Hogg, 2001; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995). Extending social identity theory, self-categorization theory contends that as social identities become salient, self-perceptions become depersonalized; that is, people experience a shift from perception of the self as a unique person to perception of the self as an interchangeable member of a salient ingroup (Turner, 1999; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). And according to self-categorization theory, it is this cognitive redefinition of the self that determines intergroup behavior (Turner et al., 1987).

Building on the social identity perspective, the common ingroup identity model proposes that the above effects of social categorization that normally lead to intergroup discord can be redirected toward achieving intergroup harmony (Dovidio et al., 2004; Gaert-
ner, Dovidio, Nier, Ward, & Banker, 1999; Nier et al., 2001). Specifically, intergroup discord can be reduced when originally distinct group identities (i.e., ingroup and outgroup) are recategorized into one common ingroup identity. Recategorization, the model contends, should lead original subgroup members to bestow all of the cognitive and motivational benefits reserved for the ingroup on all members of the new superordinate ingroup. For example, in the context of a terrorist threat against America, Dovidio et al. (2004) found that inducing a common ingroup identity (i.e., American) among White Americans reduced prejudice toward Black Americans. Furthermore, Kessler and Mummendey (2001) confirmed that in the context of German unification, the recategorization of subgroups (i.e., East German and West German) into a common ingroup (i.e., German) reduced conflict at the original subgroup level. Kessler and Mummendey, however, also discovered that this recategorization simultaneously fostered conflict at that new superordinate ingroup level. That is, recategorization alleviated conflict between the previously distinct East German and West German subgroups but exacerbated conflict between the new common ingroup (i.e., Germans) and its corresponding outgroup (i.e., foreigners).

Threat, National Identity, and Tolerance

A central path to defending and securing the value of one’s ingroup is to strengthen one’s identification with that group. Therefore, a perceived threat or challenge from an outgroup normally elicits heightened ingroup identity (Brancombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Brewer, 2001; Li & Brewer, 2004; Maalouf, 2001). “The 9/11 attacks resulted in immediate, visibly evident increases in expressions of national identification and unity throughout the United States” (Li & Brewer, 2004, p. 728). For example, 25% of Americans were flying U.S. flags prior to 9/11, but a remarkable 65% were flying the flag shortly after the terrorist attacks (Morin & Deane, 2002). The last time flags were unfurled to that extent in the United States was after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Domestically, 9/11 seemed to encourage tolerance for diversity among Americans, which was captured by “United We Stand,” a slogan that was ubiquitous in the United States shortly after the terrorist attacks. In stark contrast, a report released in July 2002 (i.e., 10 months after 9/11) by the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations suggested that U.S. foreign policy in response to the terrorist attacks led to the United States being perceived as “arrogant, self-indulgent, hypocritical, inattentive and unwilling or unable to engage in cross-cultural dialogue” (Dao, 2002, p. A2). In the present research, we examined whether perceived foreign threats against the United States can encourage a tolerance for diversity domestically and a corresponding intolerance for diversity internationally.

Assimilation and Multiculturalism

The U.S. motto “e pluribus unum” (“from many, one”) denotes the ongoing struggle America faces in trying to strike a balance between one nation and many cultural groups (Citrin, Wong, & Duff, 2001; Devos & Banaji, 2005; Wolsko, Park, Judd, & Wittembrink, 2000). Several models depicting this struggle have been put forward during the history of American thought on intergroup relations (Fredrickson, 1999; Markus, Steele, & Steele, 2000; Plaut, 2002; Sears, 1996). This article focuses on two of those models: assimilation and multiculturalism. These two interethic ideologies are often considered to be in opposition to one another (Fredrickson, 1999; Wolsko, Park, & Judd, 2006). Policies intended to achieve assimilation require minority groups to conform to the dominant culture to achieve full citizenship (Fredrickson, 1999; Markus et al., 2000; Sidanius, Feshbach, Levin, & Pratto, 1997; Verkuyten, 2005), which may require minority group members to forfeit their cultural roots to support and maintain the dominant culture. Assimilation premises that the dominant culture’s values, principles, and practices are a model for all to emulate (Fredrickson, 1999). Contrarily, to assimilation, multiculturalism (sometimes termed cultural pluralism) celebrates intergroup differences as a valuable resource and a foundation for cultural strength (Fowers & Davidson, 2006). Accordingly, multiculturalism strives to be fully inclusive, with all cultures having a reciprocal relationship—a healthy balance of give and take (Berry, 1984, 2001; Fredrickson, 1999). Within a truly multicultural society, there is no dominant culture that takes precedence over any other (Berry, 1984; Sidanius et al., 1997).

Present Research

Research has shown that a perceived threat can lead to ethnocentrism, worldview validation, and a general lack of tolerance for diversity (e.g., Feldman & Stenner, 1997; Halloran & Kashima, 2004; Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse, & Wood, 1995; Neuberg, Smith, & Asher, 2000; Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2003; Skitka, Bauman, & Mullen, 2004). We expected our foreign policy findings to be consistent with this previous body of research; that is, we predicted that a salient foreign threat to the United States will lead Americans to endorse assimilation as a model for foreign intergroup relations. Our domestic policy findings, however, were expected to challenge this previous body of research. We predicted that a salient foreign threat will lead Americans to endorse multiculturalism as a model for domestic intergroup relations. Within the context of a foreign threat to the United States, we suspected that American minority groups will be seen as an integral part of the common ingroup American (see Dovidio et al., 2004). And within this context, White Americans who exhibit less tolerance for American minority groups may be seen as actively undermining the welfare of their own ingroup.

Conducted during the 6-month anniversary of 9/11, Experiment 1 involved Americans reading a U.S. senator’s policy document on intergroup relations. The document was framed as either a domestic or a foreign policy and advocated either an assimilation or a multicultural model for intergroup relations. During this period of perceived foreign threat, Americans were expected to endorse assimilation as a foreign policy while endorsing multiculturalism as a domestic policy. In Experiment 2, prior to reading the senator’s policy, participants were exposed to a United Nations’ (U.N.) report that depicted foreigners as either challenging or supporting America’s dominant global status. Americans who read that foreigners are supporting the dominant status of the United States were expected to no longer reveal a preference for assimilation as a foreign policy. In Experiment 3, participants read a short newspaper article about either 9/11 or the Columbine massacre and wrote about their experiences on first hearing of the tragedy. Those
who read and wrote about 9/11 (i.e., a foreign threat) were expected to reveal higher levels of national identity than were those who read and wrote about Columbine (i.e., a domestic threat); subsequently, their level of national identity was expected to predict endorsement of multiculturalism as a domestic policy and assimilation as a foreign policy. We expected this research to establish that perceived foreign threats to the United States can encourage a tolerance for diversity domestically and a corresponding intolerance for diversity internationally. To the best of our knowledge, these experiments are the first to document the relationship between perceived foreign threats, national identity, and citizens’ endorsement of models for both foreign and domestic intergroup relations.

**Experiment 1**

To naturally capture the perceived foreign threat stemming from 9/11, Experiment 1 was run during the week of the 6-month anniversary of the terrorist attacks. A poll conducted that same week documented that 92% of Americans surveyed expressed that they were "very proud" or "extremely proud" to be an American (Morin & Deane, 2002). For this study, we had White Americans and minority Americans read a U.S. senator’s policy on intergroup relations, which was printed on U.S. Senate letterhead. Unbeknownst to the participants, both the unnamed senator and the Senate letterhead were bogus. The stated policy promoted either an assimilation or a multicultural model for intergroup relations and was being proposed as either a domestic or a foreign policy. Thus, there were four separate versions of the policy document. Under the shadow of 9/11, this diverse group of Americans was expected to reveal a tolerance for diversity domestically and a corresponding intolerance for diversity internationally. That is, participants were expected to endorse multiculturalism as a domestic policy and assimilation as a foreign policy.

**Method**

**Participants and design.** Participants were 110 Americans (48 White, 62 minority, of which 18 were Hispanics or Latinos, 21 were African Americans, 22 were Asian Americans, and 1 was Native American) who were recruited in California. Selected participants indicated that they were American citizens and at least 18 years of age. Approximately equal numbers of men and women were randomly assigned to the 2 (policy: assimilation or multiculturalism) × 2 (frame: domestic or foreign) × 2 (race: White or minority) between-participants design. The dependent variable was level of endorsement for the senator’s policy on intergroup relations. Participants’ gender had no significant impact on the dependent measures in this or any of the following studies; therefore, gender is not discussed further in this article. Although it is likely that the minority groups in this study would respond differently from one another, the limited number of participants in this study did not permit a further breakdown by minority group.

**Materials.** Participants read a policy document printed on bogus U.S. Senate letterhead and allegedly written by an anonymous U.S. senator. The four versions of the document were identical except for the two manipulations: (a) the opening segment framed the document as either a domestic or a foreign policy on intergroup relations, and (b) the final segment of the document endorsed either an assimilation or a multicultural model. That final segment contained one of the following four manipulations:

- **Domestic assimilation:** “It’s our culture’s destiny to lead, and we will lead America by example. Our values, principles, and practices are a model for all Americans to follow.”
- **Foreign assimilation:** “It’s America’s destiny to lead, and we will lead the world by example. Our values, principles, and practices are a model for all to follow.”
- **Domestic multiculturalism:** “We now realize that it’s critical for cultures within America to have a reciprocal relationship—a healthy balance of give and take that embraces diversity as a source of strength.”
- **Foreign multiculturalism:** “We now realize that it’s critical for cultures that share this globe to have a reciprocal relationship—a healthy balance of give and take that embraces diversity as a source of strength.”

It should be noted that the assimilation policies are based on a speech President Clinton made at the 1997 G-7 Summit in Colorado, and the multiculturalism policies are based on a government of Canada Web site dedicated to issues of diversity. Clearly, the assimilation and multiculturalism policies were operationally defined for this research to be opposing interethnic ideologies.

**Policy endorsement.** Immediately after reading their assigned version of the policy document, all participants completed a questionnaire designed to measure their endorsement of the senator’s policy on intergroup relations. The participants were encouraged to respond candidly and were informed that their responses would be kept completely anonymous. The questionnaire contained the following five items: (a) “Do you agree with the stated policy?” (b) “How close to ideal is the stated policy?” (c) “Does the stated policy reflect your personal values?” (d) “Would you publicly support the stated policy?” and (e) “Is the stated policy insightful?” Participants responded to these five questions using 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (completely). Across all three of the present studies, these five items showed a high degree of internal consistency (α = .91); thus, participants’ level of policy endorsement is established by computing their mean score on the five policy-endorsement questions.

**Procedure.** Two experimenters (one White man, one White woman) stood beside a placard advertising the study. The placard displayed the U.S. Senate logo and indicated that the experimenters were conducting an exploratory review for a U.S. senator. It stated that everyone must be at least 18 years of age and an American citizen to participate. Individuals who were interested in participating were informed they would receive $10 for their time and effort. Participants were then told they would be randomly assigned to read 1 of 10 policy documents written by a U.S. senator and asked to fill out an opinion poll pertaining to the policy they had read. The professors 10 policy topics were displayed to the participants on a second placard: economy, health care, education, religion, technology, diversity, environment, transportation, politics, and the United Nations. The experimenter then opened a portable filing case that had 10 unmarked folders filled with questionnaires. Participants were instructed to reach into the filing
case and randomly select 1 of the 10 questionnaires. In reality, the 10 folders all contained the four conditions of the experimental manipulation intermixed: (a) domestic assimilation, (b) foreign assimilation, (c) domestic multiculturalism, and (d) foreign multiculturalism. Thus, participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions, and the experimenters were kept blind to the participants’ conditions.

Each questionnaire was four pages in length and took approximately 15 min to complete. The first page was a consent form, which enabled every questionnaire to appear identical. The second page was the actual policy document, which appeared on bogus U.S. Senate letterhead. The questions measuring the participant’s endorsement of that policy appeared on the third page. On the final page, participants were asked to supply demographic information and to answer manipulation checks to ensure that all participants realized the policy and frame to which they had been exposed. Finally, with respect to the domestic policies, it is not explicitly stated what culture is being referred to when the senator speaks of “our culture” and “our values.” The domestic-assimilation policy is advocating conformity to the dominant culture in the United States, that is, White culture (see Devos & Banaji, 2005). For purposes of authenticity and believability, however, the senator never explicitly states his or her ethnicity or cultural identity, but a check confirmed that participants assumed the senator was White. Once participants had completed the questionnaire, the experimenters probed for suspicion. All but 1 of the participants believed they were still participating in an exploratory review for a U.S. senator: That 1 minority woman was removed from the analysis.

After the probe for suspicion in all three of the present studies, participants were debriefed, thanked, and paid $10. Upon payment, the experimenters stressed the importance of not telling others the true nature of the experiment.

Results and Discussion

Endorsement for multiculturalism as a domestic policy was expected to be stronger than endorsement for assimilation as a domestic policy. The opposite pattern of results was predicted for the foreign policy; that is, participants were expected to endorse assimilation more than multiculturalism.

Policy endorsement. A 2 (policy: assimilation or multiculturalism) × 2 (frame: domestic or foreign) × 2 (race: White or minority) between-participants analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the endorsement data revealed only two significant effects: the predicted Policy × Frame interaction, $F(1, 101) = 31.10, p < .001$, and a Policy × Race interaction, $F(1, 101) = 5.87, p < .05$ (please see Figure 1).

Policy × Race interaction. Simple-effects tests revealed that endorsement for multiculturalism among minority Americans ($M = 4.73$) tended to be stronger than endorsement for multiculturalism among White Americans ($M = 4.14$), although this difference only approached significance, $F(1, 101) = 2.84, p = .098$. The pattern of endorsement for assimilation between minority Americans ($M = 4.18$) and White Americans ($M = 4.63$) was in the opposite direction but did not reach significance, $F(1, 101) = 1.92, ns$.

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**Figure 1.** Level of policy endorsement among White and minority Americans in Experiment 1.
**Policy × Frame interaction.** Simple-effects tests confirmed stronger endorsement for the assimilation model \((M = 4.92)\) than the multicultural model \((M = 3.73)\) as a foreign policy, \(F(1, 101) = 14.30, p < .001\), whereas endorsement for multiculturalism \((M = 5.06)\) was stronger than endorsement for assimilation \((M = 3.90)\) as a domestic policy, \(F(1, 101) = 16.19, p < .001\). The above key pattern of results was confirmed for both minority and White participants, which can be seen in Figure 1.

Six months after the terrorist attacks, a diverse group of Americans revealed a clear preference for multiculturalism as a model for intergroup relations within America. When the policy referred to intergroup relations outside of America’s borders, however, participants expressed a clear preference for assimilation. We believe that salient foreign threats to the United States can lead to increased tolerance for diversity domestically and a corresponding lack of tolerance for diversity internationally. The next two studies were designed to systematically test these hypotheses.

**Experiment 2**

Experiment 1 relied on a naturally occurring event (i.e., the 6-month anniversary of 9/11) to ensure that our American participants perceived a foreign threat to their nation. For Experiment 2, we wanted to experimentally manipulate the amount of foreign threat perceived by our American participants. Therefore, prior to reading the U.S. senator’s policy on intergroup relations, Experiment 2 participants were exposed to a bogus U.N. report that depicted foreigners as either challenging or supporting America’s dominant global status. Americans who read that foreigners were challenging their nation’s global status were expected to respond similarly to participants in Experiment 1; that is, they were expected to strongly endorse assimilation as a foreign policy. Those who read that foreigners were supporting their nation’s status, however, were expected to reveal less support for assimilation as a foreign policy. In other words, participants in the reduced foreign threat condition should reveal more tolerance for diversity internationally.

**Method**

**Participants and design.** Participants were 59 Americans (43 White, 16 minority, of which 4 were Hispanics or Latinos, 2 were African American, 9 were Asian American, and 1 was Native American) who were recruited in California using the procedures outlined in Experiment 1. Race had no significant impact on the dependent measures in Experiment 2; thus, the race variable is not discussed further in this study. Selected participants indicated that they were American citizens and at least 18 years of age. For pragmatic reasons, only the assimilation–domestic and the assimilation–foreign versions of the senator’s policy were used in Experiment 2—there were no corresponding multiculturalism versions. Participants were randomly assigned to the 2 (frame: domestic or foreign) × 2 (report: challenge or support) between-participants design. The dependent measure was level of endorsement for the senator’s policy.

**Materials.** Participants read one of two bogus versions of a U.N. Human Development Report ostensibly summarized by a U.S. senator and appearing on bogus U.S. Senate letterhead. The two versions of the U.N. report were identical other than the following sections:

U.N. challenge: “The United Nations just released its annual U.N. Human Development Report . . . and once again their findings are surprising—ranking the United States 11th overall. The report ranks countries in terms of education, healthcare, crime, human rights, social equality, standard of living, and general quality of life. . . . Within its first week of publication, over 1000 foreign journalists cited this year’s U.N. Human Development Report as ‘proof’ that the United States is no longer a great country. As one of those foreign journalist declared, ‘. . . the United States is not even in the top ten.’”

U.N. support: “The United Nations just released its annual U.N. Human Development Report . . . and once again their findings are not surprising—ranking the United States 1st overall. The report ranks countries in terms of education, healthcare, crime, human rights, social equality, standard of living, and general quality of life. . . . Within its first week of publication, over 1000 foreign journalists cited this year’s U.N. Human Development Report as ‘proof’ that the United States is still the greatest country on earth. As one of those foreign journalist declared, ‘. . . the United States really has no equal, and likely never will.’”

**Nation challenged manipulation check.** Immediately after reading their assigned version of the U.N. human development report, the participants completed a questionnaire designed to measure the degree of perceived challenge posed by that report. The questionnaire contained the following four items: (a) “Do you agree with the Human Development Report rankings?” (reversed), (b) “Do you find the Human Development Report results alarming?” (c) “Do you find the Human Development Report results disturbing?” and (d) “Do you find the Human Development Report results troubling?” Participants responded to these four questions using 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (completely). The four items contained in this manipulation check revealed a high degree of internal consistency \((\alpha = .78)\); thus, participants’ level of perceived challenge was established by computing their mean score on the four items. A 2 (frame: domestic or foreign) × 2 (report: challenge or support) between-participants ANOVA on the perceived challenge data revealed only the predicted main effect for report, \(F(1, 53) = 12.17, p < .01\). That is, regardless of which assimilation policy they went on to read, those participants who read that foreigners were challenging their nation’s global status perceived a greater challenge \((M = 4.31)\) than did those who read that foreigners were supporting their nation’s status \((M = 3.32)\).

**Procedure.** The procedure for Experiment 2 was identical to that used in Experiment 1, except participants in the current study were told that they would be randomly assigned to read 2 of 10 policy documents written by a U.S. senator and asked to fill out a questionnaire pertaining to each of the documents they selected. The experimenter then opened a portable filing case that had dozens of folders filled with questionnaires. Participants were told that each file contained a random pairing of two policies drawn from the pool of 10 policies. Participants were then instructed to
reach into the filing case and randomly select one of the question-naire packets. In reality, the folders all contained the four condi-tions of the experimental manipulation intermixed: (a) domestic challenge, (b) foreign challenge, (c) domestic support, and (d) foreign support. Thus, participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions, and the experimenters were kept blind to the participant’s condition.

Each questionnaire packet was six pages in length and took approximately 20 min to complete. The cover page was a consent form, which enabled every questionnaire to appear identical on the surface. The second page was the bogus U.N. Human Development Report ostensibly summarized by the senator, which was printed on bogus U.S. Senate letterhead. The questionnaire de-signed to measure the degree of perceived challenge posed by that report (i.e., the manipulation check) appeared on the third page. The fourth page was the senator’s policy document, which also appeared on bogus U.S. Senate letterhead. The questions measur-ing the participant’s endorsement of that policy appeared on the fifth page. The final page contained demographic questions and manipulation checks to ensure that all participants realized the frame and report to which they had been exposed. The manipula-tion checks also confirmed that participants assumed the senator was White (please see Experiment 1 for complete details).

Once participants had completed the questionnaire packet, the experimenters probed for suspicion. Two people in the challenge condition questioned the validity of the U.N. Human Development Report rankings; thus, they were removed from the analysis.

Results and Discussion

Americans who read that foreigners were challenging their nation’s status were expected to reveal more support for the assimilation model than for the multicultural model as a foreign policy; that is, they were expected to replicate the findings from Experiment 1. It was predicted that this preference for assimilation as a foreign policy, however, would be eliminated among participants who read that foreigners were supporting their nation’s global status.

Policy endorsement. A 2 (frame: domestic or foreign) × 2 (report: challenge or support) between-participants ANOVA on the endorsement data revealed a main effect for report, $F(1, 53) = 5.47, p < .05$, but this main effect was qualified by a two-way interaction, $F(1, 53) = 4.70, p < .05$. Replicating our results from Experiment 1, simple-effects tests confirmed that assimilation was endorsed more strongly as a foreign policy ($M = 4.89$) than a domestic policy ($M = 3.99$) by those participants who read that America’s status was being challenged by foreigners, $F(1, 53) = 3.95, p < .05$. As predicted, however, those participants who read that America’s status was being supported by foreigners expressed no preference for assimilation as a foreign policy ($M = 3.44$) over a domestic policy ($M = 3.92$), $F = 1$.

Experiment 2 confirmed that Americans’ preference for assimilation as a foreign policy is eliminated as soon as the perceived threat from foreigners is eliminated. These findings suggest that when the international climate is less threatening, Americans may support foreign policies that are more responsive to the issues surrounding diversity. Without a measure of national identity, however, Experiment 2 leaves some important questions unanswered. Experiment 3 was designed to help clarify the relationship between perceived foreign threat, national identity, and tolerance for both foreign and domestic diversity.

Experiment 3

For Experiment 3, we decided to manipulate the salience of actual threats to the United States. Prior to reading an article promoting either an assimilation or a multicultural model for intergroup relations, American participants in Experiment 3 read a newspaper article summarizing either the 9/11 terrorist attacks or the Columbine massacre. The Columbine massacre was chosen as a control condition because the participants’ reaction to this tragedy on American soil can control for numerous potential confounds (e.g., anger, fear, mortality salience). Of course, we are not suggesting that Columbine is similar in scale to 9/11, but no event on American soil has been since Pearl Harbor. For the purposes of this study, the key difference between 9/11 and Columbine is the source of the threat: 9/11 was a foreign threat (i.e., an external threat) whereas Columbine was a domestic threat (i.e., an internal threat). The 9/11 terrorist attacks were an external threat in which an outgroup directly challenged the value of ingroup membership (i.e., attacking the nation and its values), and a primary way to defend and secure the value of one’s ingroup when confronted by an external threat is to strengthen one’s identification with the ingroup (Branscombe et al., 1999; Brewer, 2001; Li & Brewer, 2004; Maalouf, 2001). In contrast, the Columbine massacre was an internal threat, an attack on an American high school by American students; it was not an attack on the nation or on what it means to be an American. Thus, 9/11 salience should heighten national identity among American participants whereas Columbine salience should not. In Experiment 3, we manipulated the salience of these different threats to clarify the relationship between foreign threat, national identity, and citizens’ endorsement of models for both foreign and domestic intergroup relations. Specifically, we expected our American participants who were primed with 9/11, as compared with those primed with Columbine, to reveal heightened levels of national identity, and level of national identity should subsequently predict a preference for multiculturalism as a model for domestic intergroup relations and a preference for assimilation as a model for foreign intergroup relations.

Method

Participants and design. Our 130 participants (56 White, 74 minority, of which 18 were Hispanic or Latino, 5 were African American, 49 were Asian American, 1 was Pacific Islander, and 1 self-identified as other) were recruited in California using the procedures outlined in Experiment 1. Three participants had to be removed from the analysis because they indicated on the demographics page that they were not American citizens, leaving us with 127 American participants. The participants were randomly assigned to the 2 (article: 9/11 or Columbine) × 2 (frame: domestic or foreign) × 2 (policy: assimilation or multiculturalism) between-participants design.

Materials and procedures. Using procedures borrowed from our previous two studies, we randomly assigned participants a questionnaire packet to read. But rather than telling participants we were conducting an exploratory review for a U.S. senator, we simply told participants we were investigating how the media’s...
coverage of issues can influence attitudes. Each packet was nine
pages in length and took approximately 20 min to complete. The
first two pages were a consent form, which enabled every ques-
tionnaire to appear identical on the surface. The third page was a
brief newspaper article from the Associated Press, which suma-
rized either 9/11 or the Columbine massacre. On the fourth page,
participants were asked to write a short paragraph concerning
the moment when they first learned of the tragedy. The fifth page had
participants complete a national identity questionnaire, which is
described below. The sixth page had the participants read a brief
newspaper article on intergroup relations written by the fictitious
Bruce McGregor. This second newspaper article contained the
identical manipulations used in Experiment 1; that is, the four
versions of the article were the same other than the opening
segment framing the article as either a domestic or a foreign policy
on intergroup relations and the final segment of the article endors-
ing either an assimilation or a multicultural model for intergroup
relations (please see Experiment 1 for complete details). The
seventh page had participants complete the same policy endorse-
ment questionnaire used in the previous two studies. The eighth
page was a demographic questionnaire. And the final page con-
tained our manipulation checks to ensure that all participants
realized the frame and article to which they had been exposed and
assumed Bruce McGregor was White (see Experiment 1). Once
participants had completed the questionnaire packet, the experi-
menter probed for suspicion.

National identity measure. Participants completed a national
identity questionnaire, which contained the following four items:
(a) “Do you identify with being an American?” (b) “Is being an
American important to you?” (c) “Are you proud to be an Amer-
ican?” and (d) “Do you think of yourself as an American?”
Participants responded to these four questions using 7-point
Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (completely). These four items revealed a high degree of internal consistency
($\alpha = .91$), so participants’ level of national identity was estab-
lished by computing a mean across the four items.

Results and Discussion

It was hypothesized that Americans who read about 9/11 would
report higher levels of national identity and that level of national
identity, when controlling for the effect of article type (9/11 vs.
Columbine), would predict stronger endorsement of assimilation
as a foreign policy and stronger endorsement of multiculturalism
as a domestic policy. It should be noted that similar to our findings
in Experiment 1, minority Americans, as compared with White
Americans, revealed a tendency to endorse multiculturalism more
($M = 5.34$ vs. $M = 4.68$) and assimilation less ($M = 4.18$ vs. $M =
4.35$), but no race effects reached significance in Experiment 3.
When entered alongside article, frame, and policy in a between-
participants ANOVA predicting to endorsement data, the race
variable $p$ values ranged from .13 to .76. And when entered
alongside those same three variables predicting to national identi-
ity, the race variable $p$ values ranged from .24 to .83. Conse-
quently, the race variable is not discussed further in this study.

Policy endorsement. A 2 (article: 9/11 or Columbine) $\times$ 2
(frame: domestic or foreign) $\times$ 2 (policy: assimilation or mul-
ticulturalism) between-participants ANOVA on the endorsement
data revealed a significant main effect for policy, $F(1, 119) =
7.92, p < .01$, indicating that participants in general preferred the
multiculturalism policy ($M = 5.09$) over the assimilation policy
($M = 4.30$). This main effect, however, was qualified by a signif-
ificant three-way interaction, $F(1, 119) = 8.02, p < .01$, with no
other effects approaching significance (please see Figure 2). The
article-type manipulation (9/11 vs. Columbine) was predicted to
influence the relationship between frame and policy; thus, we
broke down the above triple interaction by article and separately
analyzed the data for our 9/11 and Columbine participants.

9/11 participants’ Frame $\times$ Policy interaction. For those par-
ticipants who read and wrote about 9/11, a 2 (frame: domestic or
foreign) $\times$ 2 (policy: assimilation or multiculturalism) between-
participants ANOVA on the endorsement data revealed only the
predicted two-way interaction, $F(1, 119) = 8.14, p < .01$, with no
other effects reaching significance. Simple-effects tests confirmed
that multiculturalism as a domestic policy ($M = 5.61$) was
endorsed more strongly than assimilation as a domestic policy ($M =
3.88$), $F(1, 119) = 9.11, p < .01$. In contrast, when framed as a
foreign policy, the pattern of means reversed, with participants
revealing a tendency to prefer assimilation ($M = 5.12$) over
multiculturalism ($M = 4.58$), although this difference did not reach
significance, $F < 2$. Those participants who read and wrote about
9/11 clearly preferred multiculturalism as a domestic policy rather
than as a foreign policy ($p < .05$) and assimilation as a foreign
policy rather than as a domestic policy ($p < .05$). This pattern of
results replicates our findings in Experiment 1 and confirms that
foreign threats to the United States can encourage tolerance for
diversity domestically and a corresponding intolerance for diver-
sity internationally.

Columbine participants’ Frame $\times$ Policy interaction. For those
participants who read and wrote about the Columbine mas-
sacre, a 2 (frame: domestic or foreign) $\times$ 2 (policy: assimilation or
multiculturalism) between-participants ANOVA on the endorse-
ment data revealed only a main effect for policy, $F(1, 119) = 6.17,
$p < .05$, with no other effects approaching significance. In stark
contrast to the 9/11 participants, Columbine participants endorsed
multiculturalism ($M = 5.09$) over assimilation ($M = 4.09$) regard-
less of whether the model for intergroup relations was framed as
a domestic or foreign policy (please see Figure 2). These findings
suggest that when the international climate is less threatening,
Americans support models for both foreign and domestic inter-
group relations that are more responsive to the issues surrounding
diversity.

National identity. Participants filled out the national identity
measure after being exposed to their assigned 9/11 or Columbine
materials (i.e., article) but prior to being exposed to any of the
policy endorsement materials (i.e., frame or policy). So when
completing the national identity measure, the participants had no
idea that they were about to read an article framed as either a
domestic or a foreign policy that endorsed either an assimilation or
a multicultural model for intergroup relations. As a result, we only
predicted a main effect for article type, with those participants in
the four conditions that read and wrote about 9/11 reporting higher
levels of national identity than those participants in the four
conditions that read and wrote about Columbine.

A 2 (article: 9/11 or Columbine) $\times$ 2 (frame: domestic or
foreign) $\times$ 2 (policy: assimilation or multiculturalism) between-
participants ANOVA on the national identity data revealed only
the predicted main effect for article, $F(1, 119) = 7.06, p < .01,$
Domestic versus foreign threat, national identity, and preference for multiculturalism or assimilation. We proposed that perceived foreign threats to the United States can elicit heightened national identity among Americans, which in turn can encourage tolerance for diversity domestically and a corresponding intolerance for diversity internationally. To facilitate directly testing this proposed relationship, we reverse scored our multiculturalism data (i.e., multiculturalism coded as the reverse of assimilation), which enabled us to collapse across our endorsement data within the domestic and foreign policy frames. Considering that these two interethnic ideologies (i.e., multiculturalism and assimilation) were operationally defined for this research as opposing one another, collapsing the data in this manner is appropriate. Moreover, Figures 1 and 2 show the disparity between endorsement for multiculturalism and assimilation within the present research, and past research has confirmed that endorsement for assimilation and multiculturalism are indeed negatively correlated with one another (see Fredrickson, 1999; Wolsko et al., 2006). With the data collapsed, higher numbers indicate more support for assimilation than for multiculturalism. Regression analyses confirmed that level of national identity, when controlling for the effect of the article type (9/11 or Columbine), predicted stronger endorsement of assimilation than multiculturalism as a foreign policy, $\beta = .35$, $t(60) = 2.95$, $p < .01$, and, in stark contrast, stronger endorsement of multiculturalism than assimilation as a domestic policy, $\beta = -.28$, $t(61) = -2.23$, $p < .05$. In other words, heightened national identity among our American participants encouraged tolerance for diversity domestically and a corresponding intolerance for diversity internationally.

To enable us to conduct an overall mediational test to determine whether the level of national identity reported by our participants actually mediated the effect of article type (9/11 vs. Columbine) on policy endorsement, we reverse scored the above domestic data to create a single policy endorsement variable (i.e., collapsing across the above foreign and domestic policy endorsement data). First, we established that article type (9/11 vs. Columbine) predicted policy endorsement, $\beta = .20$, $t(125) = 2.31$, $p < .05$. Second, we conducted an analysis to determine if article type predicted level of national identity, $\beta = .24$, $t(125) = 2.72$, $p < .01$. Third, we examined whether level of national identity actually mediated the effect of article type on policy endorsement. When level of national identity was controlled for in the analysis, the effect of article type on policy endorsement dropped from $\beta = .20$, $t(125) = 2.31$, $p < .05$, to $\beta = .13$, $t(124) = 1.55$, $ns$. A Sobel test verified that this degree of mediation is indeed significant, $Z = 2.11$, $p < .05$. These analyses confirmed that level of national identity mediated the effect of article type (9/11 vs. Columbine) on policy endorsement (see Baron & Kenny, 1986).

Experiment 3 demonstrated the impact that a foreign threat to a nation can have on its citizens’ tolerance for diversity and that the relationship between threat and tolerance was mediated by level of

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Figure 2. Level of policy endorsement among 9/11 and Columbine participants in Experiment 3.
People strive for a positive social identity, which requires that they favorably differentiate their ingroups from their outgroups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986). And if an outgroup challenges the value of that ingroup membership (i.e., social identity threat), individuals will defend their ingroup membership by means of heightened ingroup identity (Branscombe et al., 1999; Brewer, 2001; Li & Brewer, 2004; Maalouf, 2001). This heightened ingroup identity was seen in the outpouring of American patriotism following 9/11. It is interesting to note that the surge in national identity following the terrorist attacks appears to have encouraged ingroup harmony within the United States while exacerbating ingroup discord outside U.S. borders. Immediately after 9/11, there was an outpouring of international support and compassion for the United States, which has since subsided. For example, on September 12, 2001, the most prestigious daily newspaper in France (i.e., _Le Monde_) proclaimed “We Are All Americans” (as quoted in Thomas, 2003, ¶ 1). But on the second anniversary of 9/11, _Le Monde_ declared,

> Two years later, the standing of the United States is at an all-time low. Compasion has given way to fear that ill-thought actions will only aggravate the problems and that the struggle against terrorism is nothing but a pretext for the extension of American hegemony. (as quoted in Thomas, 2003, ¶ 1)

How did foreign relations with an important ally degenerate from “We are all Americans now” to the U.S. House of Representatives officially naming French fries and French toast, freedom fries and freedom toast? We believe part of the answer can be found in the present research.

In three studies, we investigated how the nation being challenged can impact Americans’ endorsement of assimilation and multiculturalism as models for domestic and foreign intergroup relations. In Experiment 1, which was conducted during the week of the 6-month anniversary of 9/11, Americans read a U.S. senator’s policy on intergroup relations. With their nation challenged, Americans endorsed multiculturalism more as a domestic policy and assimilation more as a foreign policy. Prior to reading the senator’s policy in Experiment 2, American participants were exposed to a U.N. report that depicted foreigners as either challenging or supporting U.S. global status. Americans who read that foreigners were challenging the predominant status of the United States once again revealed a strong preference for assimilation as a foreign policy, but Americans who read that foreigners were supporting the dominant status of the United States no longer revealed this preference. In Experiment 3, we discovered that participants who read and wrote about 9/11 revealed higher levels of national identity than did those who read and wrote about the Columbine massacre and that level of national identity subsequently predicted endorsement of multiculturalism as a model for domestic intergroup relations and endorsement of assimilation as a foreign policy. In other words, a perceived foreign threat to the United States elicited heightened national identity among Americans, which in turn encouraged tolerance for diversity domestically and a corresponding intolerance for diversity internationally.

Considering all of the anger, fear, mortality salience, and so on caused by 9/11, it would have been reasonable to expect White Americans to endorse assimilation as a model for domestic intergroup relations. But it is important to remember that intolerance for outgroups is normally a response to factors that threaten ingroup functioning; therefore, those outgroups who are seen as undermining the reciprocity, trust, values, and welfare of the ingroup are the outgroups who are stigmatized (see Neuberg et al., 2000). Contrary to this recipe for intolerance, the social climate immediately after 9/11 was one of unprecedented solidarity among the subgroups that make up the United States. Evidently, 9/11 was a foreign threat against the United States that demanded solidarity among all Americans to defeat a common enemy. But one question left unanswered by the present research is the exact relationship between ethnic identity, national identity, and policy endorsement. Sidanius et al. (1997) found that ethnic identity is positively related to national identity for White Americans but that the relationship is negative for Asian, Hispanic, and African Americans. In the present research, minority Americans revealed a tendency to endorse multiculturalism more and assimilation less than White Americans, but those minority participants revealed the same level of national identity as the White participants. In the face of an external threat to one’s nation, would ethnic identity and national identity respond in opposite directions? Or can ethnic identity and national identity rise and fall independently of one another? Clearly, the relationship between threat, ethnic identity, national identity, and tolerance for diversity needs to be further explored.

The terrorist attacks on 9/11 constituted both a symbolic and a real threat to America. The terrorists targeted buildings that epitomized America—the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and the White House—deliberately attacking what the nation values most. Realistic group conflict theory (Campbell, 1965; Sherif, 1966) proposes that hostilities between groups can arise from conflict over valued resources (Brewer, 2000; Grant, 1992). According to this perspective, cooperative interdependence gives rise to ingroup formation, whereas competitive interdependence gives rise to outgroup derogation and intergroup conflict. In short, group relations reflect group interests. As compared with realistic group conflict theory, the social identity perspective reverses the direction of this causal relationship between group formation and group conflict (Brewer, 2000). Any attempt to explain America’s attitude toward the Taliban or al Qaeda would have to take into account both social identity theory and realistic group conflict theory; indeed, the two theories often interact and complement one another (Brown, 2000; Brown & Capozza, 2000). In the present research, however, we did not ask Americans about intergroup relations with the Taliban or al Qaeda; in fact, the 9/11 conditions in Experiment 3 were the only conditions in all three studies to make any reference to the terrorist attacks or anything else related to that tragic day. Americans in the present research were simply asked about their endorsement of models for intergroup relations with fellow Americans or with foreigners in general.

During a period of national challenge, embracing one’s national identity can be highly adaptive. “In the wrenching aftermath of September 11, the American flag became a security blanket to warm a wounded nation” (Alter, 2003, ¶ 3). The healing power of embracing one’s national identity was obvious among the 78% of
Americans who indicated that 9/11 and its aftermath has changed America for the better (Morin & Deane, 2002). Perhaps the greatest tragedy of all is that calmness can unite people in a way that shared humanity cannot.

References


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