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## Identity Questioning: Antecedents and Consequences of Prejudice Attributions

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*Many ethnic minorities in the United States hold both an ethnic minority and national American identity. Yet, they often encounter identity questioning when asked questions such as, “Where are you really from?,” which may operate as an ambiguous threat to their national identity. Because varied motivations (curiosity versus exclusion) create ambiguity, targets likely vary in their tendency to view identity questioning as prejudicial. Study 1 examined the extent to which ethnic minorities attribute identity questioning to prejudice, and the associated well-being consequences. Study 2 examined the immigration policy-oriented antecedents of identity questioning prejudice attributions. The results suggest that prejudice attributions are psychologically harmful (Study 1) and are associated with anti-immigration policies (Study 2). Because identity questioning challenges one’s ability to maintain a dual identity, it is important to better understand identity questioning. Specifically, these findings provide initial evidence of the role policy contexts may play in shaping identity questioning attributions.*

Persistent associations in the United States equating “American” and “White,” often exclude ethnic minorities from the American identity (Devos & Banaji, 2005). As a result, ethnic minorities are often asked questions such as, “Where are you really from?” (Cheryan & Monin, 2005). This is a common and potentially

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threatening experience because many ethnic minorities in the United States often adopt a dual identity that includes both an ethnic minority identity and an American national identity. Thus, such questions constitute explicit instances of *identity questioning*, wherein an important social identity is challenged by others (Albuja, Sanchez, & Gaither, 2019; Cheryan & Monin, 2005).

Given that identity questioning has been theorized to impair belonging or signal exclusion (Albuja et al., 2019; Cheryan & Monin, 2005; Guendelman, Cheryan, & Monin, 2011; Wang, Minervino, & Cheryan, 2013), it is perhaps surprising that more frequent identity questioning experiences have not been empirically linked to well-being outcomes such as depressive symptoms and stress. Although one recent study of ethnic minorities found that self-reported frequency of identity questioning experiences was unrelated to depressive symptoms and stress despite the high reported frequency (Albuja et al., 2019), we argue this may be because identity questioning is ambiguous, and people vary in the extent to which they interpret questioning as a challenge to their American identity. Numerous theories suggest that ethnic minorities may be motivated to minimize the degree to which they see themselves as targets of prejudice (Crocker & Major, 1989; Ellemers & Barreto, 2015). In fact, there is a long-standing literature examining the degree to which people interpret subtle bias or ambiguous events as prejudice (e.g., Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Operario & Fiske, 2001; Swim & Stangor, 1998). When interpreting ambiguous events, this research suggests that ethnic minorities often use cues about the context to determine whether the event was prejudiced (Major et al., 2002). Thus, the purpose of the present studies is to identify antecedents and consequences associated with attributing identity questioning to prejudice. Specifically, Study 1 examined the extent to which ethnic minorities who hold dual identities interpret identity questioning as prejudice, and the associated downstream consequences for well-being. In addition, we explore processes that might account for the association between identity questioning attributions and depressive symptoms and stress. Study 2 examined the immigration policy-oriented antecedents of identity questioning attributions, and the process through which immigration policies link to these attributions.

### *Identity Questioning*

Identity questioning describes being asked questions that indirectly imply that one is not seen as a member of a social group with which one identifies (Albuja et al., 2019; Cheryan & Monin, 2005). For example, ethnic minorities who hold dual identities may experience questioning of their national identity or their ethnic identity. Compared to White Americans, ethnic minorities are less prototypical members of the national cultural group (Devos & Banaji, 2005; Yogeeswaran & Dasgupta, 2010), and are perceived to be less loyal (Kunst, Thomsen, & Dovidio, 2018). As a result, ethnic minorities are viewed as less American by others, leading

them to feel as foreigners in the United States, regardless of their own identification as American (Cheryan & Monin, 2005; Huynh, Devos, & Smalarz, 2011; Zou & Cheryan, 2017). Therefore, identity questioning occurs because of perceptions that people who have an American national identity and a minority ethnic identity are not true Americans (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007). Previous work showed across two high-powered studies (total  $N = 864$ ) that over 90% of ethnic minority participants that identified with both an ethnic minority identity and an American national identity reported experiencing identity questioning in their lifetime (Albuja et al., 2019). This suggests that though ethnic minorities often identify themselves as American (Cheryan & Monin, 2005), this identity is questioned by others. Yet, the existing work has failed to find consistent relationships between identity questioning and well-being outcomes such as depressive symptoms and stress (Albuja et al., 2019). The association between identity questioning and well-being may be more complex, potentially because identity questioning is ambiguous and might not be attributed to prejudice. In order to clarify these relationships, the present work examines prejudice attributions made for identity questioning, a previously overlooked relevant variable.

#### *Consequences of Interpreting Identity Questioning as Prejudice*

Much research points to the benefits and costs of prejudice attributions. On the one hand, attributing ambiguous events to discrimination can be self-protective because negative outcomes can then be attributed to external rather than internal causes, protecting one's self-esteem (Berry Mendes, Major, McCoy, & Blascovich, 2008; Crocker & Major, 1989; Hoyt, Aguilar, Kaiser, Blascovich, & Lee, 2007). On the other hand, theories suggest that prejudice attributions can serve as a threat to belonging, give rise to anger, lead to inaccurate self-knowledge, and have negative social repercussions because discrimination claimants are generally disliked (Ellemers & Barreto, 2015; Good, Moss-Racusin, & Sanchez, 2012; Inzlicht & Good, 2006; Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002). Similarly, greater attributions to discrimination are associated with greater psychological distress (Chae, Lincoln, & Jackson, 2011). Moreover, in general, perceiving oneself as a frequent target of discrimination is, not surprisingly, associated with greater mental illness symptomatology, poorer mental well-being, and poorer physical health (see Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009 for a review).

Yet no research to date has examined prejudice attributions related to identity questioning, even though such attributions may clarify the association between identity questioning experiences and well-being for ethnic minorities. To address this gap in the literature, we tested the association between attributing identity questioning to prejudice, and depressive symptoms and stress. Additionally, we tested whether the association between viewing identity questioning as prejudice and psychological well-being is mediated by dual identity acceptance

concerns.<sup>1</sup> Social acceptance, or the perception that one has positive relationships with other people, is a fundamental need that is associated with several positive well-being outcomes when satisfied (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Walton & Cohen, 2011). Though the need to belong is ubiquitous, it may be especially challenging for people who hold dual identities to fill this need because they are often considered less prototypical members of each of the groups they identify with, and there are more group members who can question their specific identities (Castillo, Conoley, Brossart, & Quiros, 2007). Thus, in this article dual identity acceptance concerns describe being unsure about these social connections and whether others accept one's dual identity as ethnic minorities and Americans (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Past work has found that experiencing discrimination increases ethnic minority adolescents' concerns about being accepted by others and specifically, discrimination communicates the societal lack of value for one's targeted identity (Mallet et al., 2011). Dual identity acceptance concerns, as we conceptualize them here, are distinct from actual feelings of belonging because they are not a belief that one does not belong, but rather a concern about whether one is accepted by others because of their identity (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Therefore, greater attribution of identity questioning to prejudice may be associated with greater concerns about one's identity, which may in turn relate to depressive symptoms and stress. Thus, in Study 1 we hypothesized that participants who view identity questioning as more discriminatory would also report greater depressive symptoms and stress. Additionally, we expected that dual identity acceptance concerns would mediate this association, such that viewing questioning as more prejudicial would be associated with greater acceptance concerns, which in turn would predict greater depressive symptoms and stress.

#### *Antecedents of Interpreting Identity Questioning as Prejudice*

Though discrimination can be blatant, modern day discrimination is often subtle and indirect (Ellemers & Barreto, 2015). For example, microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007), positive stereotypes (Czopp, 2008), jokes (Douglass, Mirpuri, English, & Yip, 2016), or compliments of stereotype consistent behavior (Glick & Fiske, 1996) are not always cast as acts of discrimination by disadvantaged group members. Determining whether a behavior is prejudice can depend on perceptions

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<sup>1</sup>Albuja, Sanchez, and Gaither (2019) used the term "bicultural" to describe people who hold both a national American identity and an ethnic minority identity. Given a broad inconsistency in the use of this and similar terms (Fleischman & Verkuyten, 2016), in this article, we use the term "ethnic minorities" yet specify that participants in the present studies hold both an ethnic minority identity and a national American identity and thus hold a dual identity. Our inclusion criteria and measure of acceptance utilized the term bicultural though we limit using this term throughout the text. For this reason, we could not avoid the term entirely though we recognize that culture, and being bicultural, is broader than the present identity terminology allows.

of intent or the motivations ascribed to the perpetrator (e.g., Baron, Burgess, & Kao, 1991; Hill, 2008; McClelland & Hunter, 1992; Simon, Moss, & O'Brien, 2019; Swim, Scott, Sechrist, Campbell, & Stangor, 2003). Prior theorizing suggests that attribution theory, largely applied to behavior, can be used to understand perceptions of prejudice because prejudice is an internal state that is believed to drive behavior (Gilbert, 1998; Malle, 1999; Swim et al., 2003). Moreover, identity questioning is a behavior that ethnic minorities may feel compelled to understand. Indeed, when Asian Americans' American identity is questioned, they seek to reassert their identity, suggesting that their interpretation of such behavior informs their response (Cheryan & Monin, 2005; Guendelman et al., 2011).

Whether identity questioning is seen as prejudice may be driven by the motivations ascribed to the perpetrator. Identity questioning could be perceived as driven by curiosity and thus, an opportunity to share one's ethnocultural story. Because self-disclosure increases trust and promotes more positive social interactions (Aron, Melinat, Aron, Vallone, & Bator, 1997; Vittengl & Holt, 2000), being asked about one's background may be interpreted as friendly, positive curiosity. If ethnic minorities believe that the motivation for identity questioning is driven by positive intentions, they may not interpret questioning as prejudice. In contrast, identity questioning can be interpreted as a threat or challenge to one's American identity as evidenced by American reassertion behavior (Cheryan & Monin, 2005; Guendelman et al., 2011). Asking about one's background could be perceived as motivated by exclusion intentions (i.e., the desire to categorize them as not American). The more ethnic minorities perceive questioning as driven by the desire to categorize them as an outgroup member and exclude them from the American group, the more likely they would be to believe identity questioning is prejudice and a threat to their American identity.

Prejudicial intents are rarely announced and may therefore be ambiguous for others to discern (Malle & Knobe, 1997). Therefore, the extent to which identity questioning is perceived as prejudice may be influenced by the social context. Specifically, ethnic minorities who hold bicultural identities may use the current political climate to determine the extent to which identity questioning is a threat to their American identity. Anti-immigration policies may serve as a social cue that informs the attributions made about identity questioning, ultimately influencing the interpretation of identity questioning as prejudice and the anticipation of future identity questioning (i.e., more prejudice).

Anti-immigration policies address threats to the nation, among other purposes. For example, within the United States, anti-immigration policies arise when immigrants are believed to threaten the amount of resources available (Esses, Dovidio, Jackson, & Armstrong, 2001; Shin & Dovidio, 2018; Valentino, Brader, & Jardina, 2013) or the country's way of life (Devos, Gavin, & Quintana, 2010; Espinosa et al., 2018). Though tough anti-immigration measures are often proposed to enforce existing laws, evidence suggests that the support behind such policies

is driven by a desire to protect against symbolic threats to an Anglocentric national American identity rather than to enforce rule of law (Mukherjee, Molina, & Adams, 2013). Given that policies can be used to defend against threats to an American national identity, we propose that the salience of anti-immigrant rhetoric influences the interpretation of identity-related social encounters because they may communicate to ethnic minorities that they are not seen as full Americans (Almeida, Biello, Pedraza, Wintner, & Viruell-Fuentes, 2016). Indeed, a Pew Research report finds that half of Latin Americans surveyed reported serious concerns about their place in the United States and believe their situation has worsened since 2017 (Pew Research Center, 2018). For many, these concerns are related to current anti-immigration policy, as the majority (67%) of those surveyed claimed that the current administration's policies are harmful to Latin Americans (Pew Research Center, 2018). Thus, current anti-immigration legislation may be one cue that ethnic minorities in the United States use to discern whether being questioned about their background is a threat to their American identity.

The current U.S. administration has recently presented immigration policy that seeks to restrict immigration to the country through increased border patrolling and legislation (Pierce & Selee, 2017). For example, legislation canceling existing immigration programs for people brought to the United States as children and proposals to deny citizenship to children of immigrants seek to limit American citizenship. Because ethnic minorities are often considered less American than White Americans (Zou & Cheryan, 2017), an increase in anti-immigration policies could serve as a societal cue that identity questioning is motivated by a desire to exclude them from the American identity. However, there may be variation in the extent to which ethnic minorities are aware of such policies. Past work on social identity complexity indicates that the social context may shift the importance of various social identities (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). Similarly, identity contingencies research demonstrates that the context can signal whether certain identities are valued (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Ditlmann, & Crosby, 2008). Taken together, this work suggests that which aspects of the social context are salient can influence the way identity-related processes are perceived. Therefore, we assessed the extent to which anti-immigration policy is a noticeable societal cue through the frequency of discussions surrounding current anti-immigration policies in their social network, perceived support for these policies among Americans, and perceived likelihood that such policies will be enacted. Through these measures, we examine the role of participants' awareness of anti-immigration policy, and the salience of these policies in predicting what motivations are ascribed to identity questioning. We hypothesized that participants who report that anti-immigration policy is more salient to them would also report greater exclusion motives and lower positive curiosity motives for identity questioning. In turn, we expected that greater exclusion and lower positive curiosity motives would predict greater attribution of questioning to prejudice and greater anticipated questioning experiences.

## The Present Studies

To date, research has demonstrated that identity questioning experiences are frequent for ethnic minorities who hold dual identities (Albuja et al., 2019; Cheryan & Monin, 2005), yet prior work has not examined the extent to which identity questioning is perceived as signaling prejudice and the role that this perception may play in predicting well-being outcomes. Thus, the factors leading to, and the consequences of these attributions are currently unknown (Albuja et al., 2019). The present studies explore the outcomes associated with viewing questioning as prejudice (Study 1) and the societal contexts that may predict viewing identity questioning as prejudice (Study 2) among ethnic minority samples who identified as bicultural, selected a single racial identity, and either had at least one parent born outside of the United States or were born outside of the United States themselves. Specifically, Study 1 tested the hypotheses that viewing identity questioning as prejudice will be associated with greater stress and depressive symptoms, and that this association will be mediated by greater dual identity acceptance concerns. Depressive symptoms and stress are well-established measures of well-being in past studies examining the outcomes of discrimination (see Pascoe & Richman, 2009; Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, & Garcia, 2014), and a meta-analysis found consistent associations between discrimination and well-being across different operationalizations of well-being (Schmitt et al., 2014). Study 2 tested the hypothesis that greater anti-immigration policy salience will be associated with attributions made for identity questioning motives, and with having different perspectives on the intent, likelihood and attributions related to questioning. Scales and data for both studies are available on the Open Science Framework at <https://osf.io/3h5ge/>

### Study 1

#### *Participants and Procedure*

Participants were recruited through email list serves for a larger study on bicultural well-being (Albuja et al., 2019).<sup>2</sup> Inclusion criterion was based on that used in previous studies of those who identify as bicultural (e.g., Benet-Martínez, Lee, & Leu, 2006). Because not all immigrants or children of immigrants strongly identify with both their ethnic minority and national identities

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<sup>2</sup>Study 1 is a secondary analysis of a previously published data-set (Albuja et al., 2019). The previous study found that the association between identity denial (e.g., being explicitly told that you are not American) and questioning and stress and depressive symptoms is mediated by identity autonomy, identity conflict, and social belonging (Albuja et al., 2019). Additionally, this work reports similar associations for both biracial and bicultural people. The present study uses a subsample of this data set and examines the association between perceptions of identity questioning as prejudice and well-being rather than reported frequencies of identity denial and questioning and well-being.



(Basilio et al., 2014; Fleischmann & Verkuyten, 2016; Verkuyten, Wiley, Deaux, & Fleischmann, 2019), identification as bicultural was an important inclusion criterion to ensure that identity questioning was self-relevant. Additionally, the present analysis excluded participants who identified as White, since they are not ethnic minorities within the United States and therefore may not be excluded from the American cultural group to the same extent. The final sample included 432 participants. Because we estimated four key parameters, this sample size exceeds the recommended criterion of 15 per parameter for adequate power (Kline, 2011). The mean age was 24.14 years ( $SD = 6.90$  years), and the sample was 53% ( $n = 228$ ) female, and 76% Latin American, 22% Asian American, and 2% Black American. Approximately half of the participants (55%) were born in the United States. Participants born outside of the United States listed 32 different countries of origin, with the largest proportion coming from China (19%). The majority (74%) of participants were U.S. citizens.

### Measures

*Identity questioning as prejudice.* Participants reported the extent to which they consider identity questioning (e.g., “Being asked ‘Where are you from?’”) prejudice. Using a scale of 1 (*not at all prejudice*) to 7 (*completely prejudice*), participants evaluated two identity questioning items. The items were averaged into the measure of perceived identity questioning prejudice ( $r(325) = .85$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

*Dual identity acceptance concerns.* Participants completed a four-item measure of dual identity acceptance concerns created by the authors. This scale measures participants’ concerns about their dual identities being accepted by others. Using a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), participants responded to the following items, “I worry about whether people will accept my bicultural identity,” “I have concerns about whether others accept my bicultural identity,” “I try hard not to do things that will make other people reject my bicultural identity,” and “I think a lot about what I can do so that others accept my bicultural identity.” The items were averaged ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

*Depressive symptoms.* Participants reported their depressive symptoms through the 10-item Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977). Using a scale of 1 (*rarely or none of the time*) to 4 (*most of the time*), they reported how often they experienced symptoms such as, “I have trouble keeping my mind on what I am doing.” The items were averaged ( $\alpha = .84$ ).



**Table 1.** Correlations and Descriptive Statistics for Study 1 Key Variables

	<i>M (SD)</i>	Range	1	2	3
1. Questioning as prejudice	2.43 (1.57)	1–7	–		
2. Dual identity acceptance concerns	2.75 (1.55)	1–7	.27**	–	
3. Stress	2.88 (0.73)	1–5	.11*	.35***	–
4. Depressive symptoms	1.97 (0.60)	1–4	.12*	.35***	.76***

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

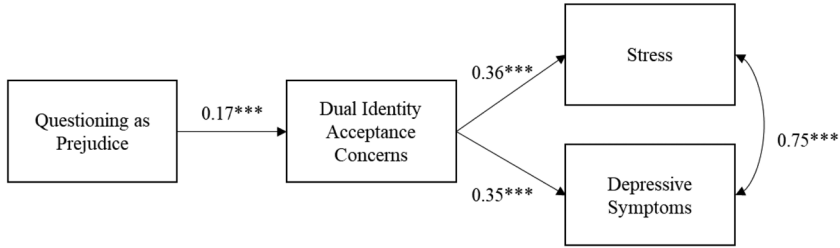
*Stress.* Participants reported their stress through the 10-item Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983; Taylor, 2015). Using a scale of 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*), participants reported how often they experienced stress through items such as, “In general, how often have you found that you cannot cope with all the things that you have to do?” The items were averaged ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

## Results

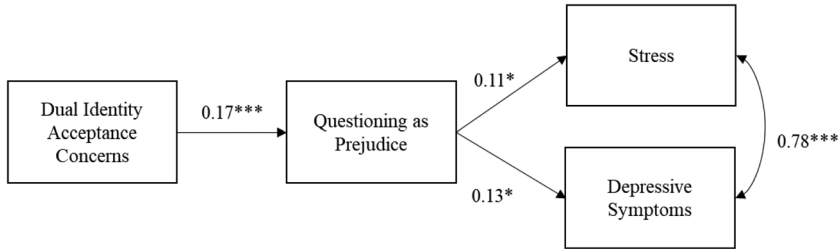
*Analytical plan.* We conducted path analysis to test the hypothesized model using Mplus 8 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). We tested for significant mediation by conducting 10,000 bootstrapped resamples of the indirect effects. We used the root mean square error approximation (RMSEA), comparative fit index (CFI), and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) to examine the model fit. Models were considered to fit well if they indicated null chi-square values, RMSEA < 0.08, CFI values > 0.95, and SRMR < 0.08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2011).

*Path analysis.* Study variable correlations and descriptive statistics are found in Table 1. The hypothesized model fit well,  $\chi^2 (2, N = 324) = 0.62$ ,  $p = .735$ , RMSEA = 0.00, 90% confidence interval (CI) = [0.00, 0.08], CFI = 1.00, SRMR = .01, AIC = 2138.64 (see Figure 1). Viewing identity questioning as more prejudicial was associated with greater dual identity acceptance concerns, which in turn was associated with greater depressive symptoms and stress. Depressive symptoms and stress were positively correlated.

*Mediation analyses.* We tested whether the association between viewing identity questioning as prejudice and stress and depressive symptoms was mediated by dual identity acceptance concerns. Dual identity acceptance concerns significantly mediated the association between viewing questioning as prejudice and depressive symptoms,  $\beta = 0.06$ , 95% CI = [0.03, 0.09], and the association between viewing questioning as prejudice and stress,  $\beta = 0.06$ , 95% CI = [0.03, 0.09].



**Fig. 1.** Standardized path coefficients for Study 1 hypothesized model.  
 \*\*\* $p < .001$ .



**Fig. 2.** Standardized path coefficients for Study 1 alternative model.  
 \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

*Alternative models.* We tested a plausible alternative model to compare to the hypothesized model. Rather than prejudice attributions predicting greater acceptance concerns, participants who are already concerned about their acceptance may also be more likely to interpret identity questioning as prejudice. Therefore, we tested an alternative model that tested whether acceptance concerns predicted viewing questioning as prejudice, which in turn predicted depressive symptoms and stress (see Figure 2). The alternative model did not fit the data well,  $\chi^2(2, N = 324) = 44.02, p < .001, RMSEA = 0.26, 90\% CI = [0.19, 0.32], CFI = 0.89, SRMR = 0.13, AIC = 2181.43$ . The AIC value was higher, and the model did not indicate good fit, suggesting that the hypothesized model was a better fit to the data than the alternative model (Burnham & Anderson, 2004).

### Discussion

The results of Study 1 highlight the negative consequences associated with attributing identity questioning experiences to prejudice. Participants who were more likely to interpret identity questioning as prejudice also reported greater dual identity acceptance concerns. Greater acceptance concerns were associated

with greater depressive symptoms and stress. Because these results indicate that viewing identity questioning as prejudice is associated with poorer well-being, it is important to understand the specific circumstances that might predict the extent to which ethnic minorities view identity questioning as prejudice.

The political climate might be one cue used by ethnic minorities to determine whether experiences of identity questioning are prejudicial. The social context, and specifically the political climate, might make salient associations between American and White that exclude ethnic minorities and thus, increase the likelihood that they would perceive exclusionary intentions behind questioning, ultimately leading to greater perceptions of identity questioning as prejudice (Devos & Banaji, 2005). Therefore, in Study 2 we tested whether people who reported a more salient anti-immigration policy context would be less likely to perceive positive curiosity motives and more likely to perceive exclusion motives for identity questioning, which would be associated with greater likelihood of attributing identity questioning to prejudice and anticipating greater identity questioning. We hypothesized that a more salient anti-immigration policy context would result in lower perceived positive curiosity intentions and greater perceived exclusion intentions. In turn, we expected positive curiosity motives to be associated with viewing questioning as less prejudicial and anticipating less questioning, while greater exclusion motives were expected to be associated with viewing questioning as more prejudicial and anticipating more questioning.

## Study 2

### *Participants and Procedure*

Using the same inclusion criteria from Study 1, adults in the United States ( $N = 204$ ) were recruited online through TurkPrime panels, which included participant demographic information for correct recruitment. The final sample included 187 participants. Because we estimated 10 key parameters, this sample size exceeds the recommended criterion of 15 per parameter for adequate power (Kline, 2011). The mean age was 33.64 years ( $SD = 13.24$  years), and the sample was 77% ( $n = 144$ ) female, and 65% ( $n = 121$ ) Latin American, 34% Asian American ( $n = 64$ ), and 1% ( $n = 2$ ) Black American. The majority of the sample (60%) was born in the United States. Participants born outside of the United States listed 24 different countries of origin, with the largest proportion coming from Mexico (18%). The majority (90%) of participants were U.S. citizens.

Participants completed a series of questionnaires online that measured the salience of current anti-immigration policies, their anticipated identity

questioning, identity questioning prejudice attributions, and identity questioning intentions, in that order.<sup>3</sup>

### *Measures*

*Policy salience.* Participants were presented with eight anti-immigration policies discussed during the 2016 presidential election (Major, Blodorn, & Major Blascovich, 2016), such as building a wall across the southern U.S. border to prevent immigration. For each policy, participants reported the extent to which they believe most Americans support the policy ( $\alpha = .78$ ), how much discussion of each policy they have heard among their social network ( $\alpha = .89$ ), and how likely they believe it is that each policy will be enacted ( $\alpha = .80$ ).

*Anticipated identity questioning.* Participants reported future identity questioning experiences ( $r(185) = .83, p < .001$ ). Using a scale of 1 (*very unlikely*) to 7 (*very likely*), participants answered questions such as, “How likely do you think it is that the following incidents will happen to you?: Being asked ‘Where are you from?’”

*Identity questioning as prejudice.* Participants reported the extent to which they consider identity questioning an indicator of prejudice using the same scale from Study 1. The items were averaged,  $r(185) = .78, p < .001$ .

*Identity questioning motivations.* Participants were asked to what extent they attributed certain motivations to people when they are asked, “Where are you from?” Participants responded using a scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). Maximum likelihood factor analysis with varimax rotation and Kaiser normalization was conducted on the nine items. After removing one item that loaded onto both factors (loading  $> .4$ ), two factors were retained, which cumulatively explained 70% of the variance (Fabrigar, Wegener, MacCallum, & Strahan, 1999; see Table 2). This number of factors was further confirmed by examining the scree plot (Henson & Roberts, 2006). The first factor represents the Positive Curiosity subscale (four items,  $\alpha = .81$ , e.g., “They are genuinely interested in learning more about me”), while the second factor represents Exclusion Motivations (four items,  $\alpha = .78$ , e.g., “They don’t consider me to be an American”).

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<sup>3</sup>Participants also completed measures of identity integration (Benet-Martínez & Hariatos, 2005; Cheng & Lee, 2009), anticipated identity denial, viewing identity denial as prejudice, and leaving United States (created by the authors). These were not included in the present model, so they are not discussed further.

**Table 2.** Factor Loadings for Factor Analysis with Varimax Rotation

	Positive curiosity	Exclusion
They want to get to know me better.	.79	-.29
They are genuinely interested in learning more about me.	.85	-.26
They are curious about cultural differences.	.83	-.09
They are trying to figure out what cultural or racial group I'm from.	.46	.29
They don't consider me to be an American.	-.26	.86
They think I'm different.	-.11	.80
They want to know how to categorize me based on my ancestry.	.28	.42
They think that I'm an outsider.	-.22	.74
They want to know what group I'm a part of. <sup>a</sup>	.47	.48

<sup>a</sup>Note. Items not retained in analysis due to double-loading.

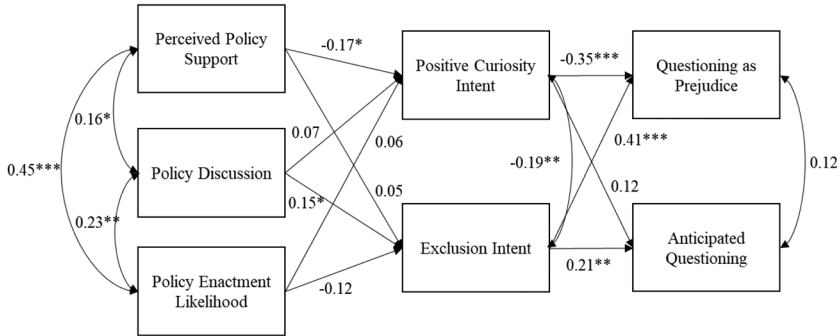
**Table 3.** Correlations and Descriptive Statistics for Study 2 Key Variables

	<i>M (SD)</i>	Range	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Policy Support	3.90 (1.04)	1-7	–					
2. Policy Discussion	4.34 (1.41)	1-7	.16*	–				
3. Policy Likelihood	3.79 (1.29)	1-7	.45***	.23**	–			
4. Positive Curiosity Intent	5.01 (1.30)	1-7	-.13	.06	-.004	–		
5. Exclusion Intent	4.21 (1.48)	1-7	.02	.14	-.06	-.18*	–	
6. Questioning as Prejudice	4.02 (1.84)	1-7	.05	.22**	.001	-.42***	.47***	–
7. Anticipated Questioning	5.35 (1.71)	1-7	-.03	.06	.001	.08	.19*	.14

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

## Results

*Path analysis.* Study 2 tested whether the current anti-immigration political climate was associated with ethnic minorities' perceptions of intent behind identity questioning, identity questioning prejudice attributions, and anticipated questioning. Study variable correlations and descriptive statistics are found in Table 3. The hypothesized model fit well,  $\chi^2(6, N = 187) = 10.47, p = .106$ , RMSEA = .063, 90% CI = [0.00, 0.13], CFI = 0.96, SRMR = .03, AIC = 4515.25 (see Figure 3). Greater perceived support for anti-immigration policies by most Americans was associated with lower perceived positive curiosity motivations, and greater discussion of anti-immigration policies among participants' social circles was associated with greater perceived exclusion motivations. Lower positive curiosity motivations and greater exclusion motivations were associated with higher likelihood to view identity questioning as prejudice. Greater exclusion motivations were also associated with more anticipated questioning. These



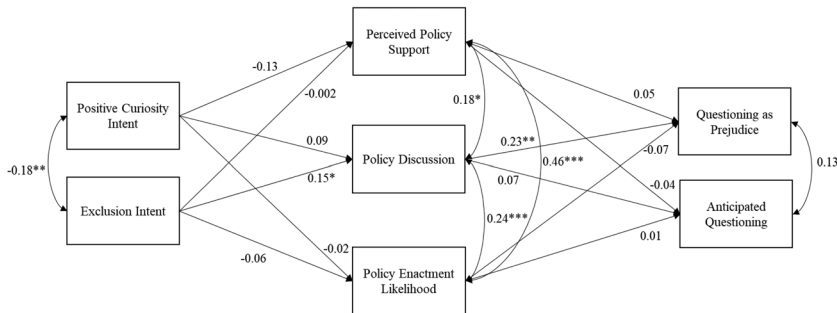
**Fig. 3.** Standardized path coefficients for Study 2 hypothesized model.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

results indicate that the political climate acts as a cue influencing the perceived motivations for identity questioning, and how identity questioning is interpreted and anticipated.

*Mediation analyses.* We tested whether the association between anti-immigration policy salience and viewing identity questioning as prejudice and anticipated experiences of identity questioning was mediated by motivations ascribed to identity questioning. There were no significant mediation paths.

*Alternative models.* We compared the hypothesized model to a plausible alternative model. Rather than using the social context to inform the motivations ascribed for identity questioning, participants who are more likely to view identity questioning as driven by higher exclusion motivation and lower positive curiosity motivation may also expect that others support and discuss anti-immigration policies and that these policies are likely to pass. This would be consistent with past work reporting that internal beliefs may influence how one's environment is perceived (Balcutis, Cole, & Sherali, 2014). Therefore, we tested an alternative model where exclusion and positive curiosity motivations predicted perceived policy support, policy discussion, and policy enactment likelihood, which then predicted viewing identity questioning as prejudice and anticipated questioning (see Figure 4). The alternative model did not fit the data well,  $\chi^2(4, N = 187) = 86.38, p < .001, RMSEA = 0.33, 90\% CI = [0.27, 0.39], CFI = 0.43, SRMR = 0.11, AIC = 4595.15$ . The AIC value was higher, and the model did not indicate good fit, suggesting that the hypothesized model was a better fit to the data than the alternative model.



**Fig. 4.** Standardized path coefficients for Study 2 alternative model.  
 \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

### General Discussion

Study 1 examined the association between viewing questioning as prejudice and depressive symptoms and stress, and whether this relationship was mediated by dual identity acceptance concerns. The results suggest that viewing identity questioning as more prejudicial was associated with greater concerns about whether ethnic minorities who identify with both an ethnic minority and the national American identity are accepted by others, which in turn was associated with greater depressive symptoms and stress. Given this evidence that viewing identity questioning as prejudice is associated with poorer psychological well-being, Study 2 tested antecedents of interpreting identity questioning as prejudice and anticipating future questioning. Specifically, we tested whether perceived support of, perceived approval of, and greater discussions of anti-immigration policies were associated with differential perceived intentions for questioning, and therefore, viewing identity questioning as more prejudicial. The results suggest that participants whose social groups discussed anti-immigration policies more were more likely to believe that they were asked, “Where are you from?” as a method of exclusion from the American group. Additionally, participants who more strongly believed most Americans support anti-immigration policies were less likely to believe that they were asked this question because of positive curiosity. In turn, greater exclusion motivations were associated with greater interpretation of questioning as prejudice and participants were more likely to see themselves as a target of prejudice in the future. Greater positive curiosity motivations were associated with a lower likelihood of attributing identity questioning to prejudice.

Though past work has found that identity questioning is a frequent experience (Albuja et al., 2019; Cheryan & Monin, 2005), extant research has not found associations between identity questioning and poor psychological well-being among ethnic minorities who identify with both an ethnic minority identity and a national American identity (Albuja et al., 2019). However, the present work suggests that



people vary in their interpretations of identity questioning as prejudice. Making a prejudice attribution was associated with negative well-being. Specifically, participants who viewed questioning as more prejudicial reported greater concerns about their identity being accepted and greater depressive symptoms and stress. These findings are consistent with past work indicating that making discrimination attributions holds negative consequences for minorities' well-being, as it reinforces the disadvantaged status of one's group and reduces feelings of belonging (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Leonardelli & Tormala, 2003; Major, Mendes, & Dovidio, 2013; Schmitt et al., 2014). Like other minority groups who experience concerns about whether they belong in certain spaces (Walton & Cohen, 2007), ethnic minorities were more concerned about whether others would accept their dual identities to the extent that they viewed identity questioning as prejudice. Viewing questioning as prejudice suggests that, perhaps accurately, ethnic minorities are threatened by questions about their background and may be unsure if they are accepted by others.

Additionally, Study 2 identified anti-immigration policy discussions among participants' social groups as an important factor in predicting viewing identity questioning as prejudice and anticipating identity questioning experiences. These contextual factors are important because the salience of anti-immigration policies is very apparent in modern society, and the present work highlights the association of these with perceptions of prejudice. Further, Study 2 tested whether this relationship is mediated by attributions made for identity questioning. Participants who heard greater discussion among their social network of anti-immigration policies such as building a wall on the southern border perceived more exclusion motivations, which then predicted viewing identity questioning as prejudice and anticipated questioning experiences. Moreover, higher perceived policy support was associated with lower perceived positive motivations. These findings are consistent with past work suggesting that when minorities encounter ambiguous events, they use contextual cues to make attributions for the event (Major et al., 2002). Moreover, the findings are consistent with attribution theory because the perceived intention or motivation behind identity questioning was associated with prejudice attributions (Swim et al., 2003). Participants may have been more aware of anti-immigration sentiments that exclude dual-identity people from the American cultural group, leading them to attribute identity questioning to prejudice more. This suggests that the anti-immigration context influenced identity questioning attributions if it was salient through personal discussions with their friends or perceived support from most Americans. However, likelihood of policy enactment did not influence participants' interpretations of individual experiences. Enactment likelihood may represent a higher-level structural factor since it is contingent on government action. Some work suggests interpreting societal discrimination against one's group involves different processes than attributing individual experiences to prejudice (Balkaya, Cheah, & Tahseen, this issue).

*Limitations and Future Directions*

Conclusions from the present studies are limited by aspects of the study designs. For example, the majority of participants in both studies (76% in Study 1 and 65% in Study 2) identified with a Latin American ethnic identity. However, other minority groups such as Asian Americans, and Muslim Americans (who hold a religious minority identity) are similarly stereotyped as foreign (Hakim, Molina, & Branscombe, 2018; Zou & Cheryan, 2017), and excluded from the American cultural identity (Devos & Ma, 2008; Theiss-Morse, 2009). Though several current anti-immigration policies, such as building a wall on the southern U.S. border and adding a citizenship question to the 2020 Census are projected to especially impact Latin Americans (Strmic-Pawl, Jackson, & Garner, 2018; Wines, 2018), future research should test contexts that could lead other ethnic minority populations to view identity questioning as prejudice. For example, policies banning immigration from majority Muslim countries might especially influence how Muslim Americans interpret identity questioning experiences and threaten their sense of belonging in the country.

Additionally, the present study did not specify whether the discussions regarding anti-immigration policies were supportive or critical of these policies. While perceived support of these policies by most Americans was not associated with viewing questioning as more prejudicial, it is possible that the perceived support of people within one's immediate social sphere is more influential than the perceived support of strangers (Bond et al., 2012). Further, people may assume that their close friends hold similar attitudes to them, yet social network analyses suggest this could be inaccurate (Goel, Mason, & Watts, 2010). Therefore, future research should examine whether the association between discussion of anti-immigration policies among one's social circle and perceiving identity questioning as prejudice depends on the valance of the discussion and the closeness of the social network. Similarly, anti-immigration policies may be salient to people in ways that were not measured in the present study, such as through media or personal experiences. Future research may examine how these various sources influence perceptions of identity questioning.

Lastly, it is important to explicitly state that the present research is specific to ethnic minorities within the United States who hold a dual identity. As noted, ethnic minorities in the United States vary in the extent to which they hold an American identity and may therefore be unaffected by identity questioning (Verkuyten et al., 2019). Further, an analysis of 31 countries indicates variation between people's national identification and anti-immigration attitudes due to differences in how national groups are defined (Pehrson, Vignoles, & Brown, 2009). In other countries, ethnic minorities are more included within the national group than in the United States. For example, majority group members in New Zealand (NZ Europeans/ Pakeha) implicitly and explicitly associated their group and the minority

indigenous group (Maori) equally with the national category of New Zealand (Sibley & Liu, 2007). Thus, within New Zealand, ethnic minorities might be less likely to interpret identity questioning as a challenge to their national identity. Further, among other countries where ethnic minorities are often excluded from the national identity, such as England, factors such as wealth, national-level diversity, and immigration policies may shape the contexts that affect individual-level experiences of questioning (Pehrson & Green, 2010). Thus, future research should explore how national contexts influence whether identity questioning is likely to be interpreted as prejudice.

### *Policy Implications*

These studies have important implications for people working with ethnic minority populations, such as clinicians, social workers, educators, and legislators. The results of these studies may be used to inform professional guidelines for clinicians, such as the American Psychological Association's "Working with immigrant-origin clients" document. Though this document currently addresses immigrants' challenges being accepted as full Americans, the results would further help clinicians understand the contexts and identity-related attributions that give rise to mental health issues among ethnic minorities. Similarly, the results will inform legislators of additional impacts the political climate has on people's identity and well-being. For example, ethnic minorities who believe most Americans support anti-immigration policies were less likely to perceive positive intent for identity questioning. Given that self-disclosure can promote positive social interactions, perceiving fewer positive motivations for questioning may undermine important social connections. Lastly, the research will advance social psychologists' understanding of identity questioning and will promote the study of underrepresented populations within psychology. Ethnic minorities will account for as much as 88% of the United States' population growth through 2065 (López, Bialik, & Radford, 2018), so it is imperative to better understand their experiences with identity questioning to promote greater belonging and inclusion.

### *Conclusion*

In sum, the present studies contribute to current understandings surrounding the consequences of identity questioning experiences for ethnic minorities who hold an ethnic minority identity and an American national identity. The results indicate that interpreting identity questioning as prejudice is an aversive experience. Because identity questioning is an ambiguous experience—a person does not know the intentions behind the question—people may use the societal context as a cue to make attributions for identity questioning and to determine whether identity questioning is meant to challenge their identity. The present studies indicate

that within the United States, individuals who hear greater discussion of anti-immigration policies are more likely to perceive negative intentions, while those who believe there is wide support for anti-immigration policies are less likely to perceive positive intentions. This interpretation holds important downstream consequences, as participants then attributed identity questioning to prejudice more and anticipated more questioning experiences. The present work highlights, for the first time, associations between anti-immigration policy and the prejudice experiences of ethnic minorities, a relationship that is especially relevant to researchers and policy makers. Given the rising ethnic minority populations, it is important to understand the full effect of policies and rhetoric on the experiences of ethnic minority Americans.

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