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The intricate influence of identity questioning on cultural identity styles and outcomes among Chinese Americans: A longitudinal study

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ABSTRACT

Bicultural individuals, such as migrants and members of ethnic minority groups, are frequently questioned about their identities. Although seemingly innocuous and well-intentioned, questions such as "Where are you *really* from?" can signal social exclusion. Identity questioning has been broadly conceptualized as a microaggression and examined as a potential stressor affecting targets' well-being. However, recent research suggests that its implications may be more complex. The present longitudinal study examined the role of identity questioning in the cognitive (i.e., bicultural identity overlap) and affective (i.e., bicultural identity affect) identity outcomes of a community sample of Chinese Americans, while exploring the mediating role of hybrid (HIS) and alternating (AIS) cultural identity styles. Data were collected over three time points at one-month intervals ($N = 491$, $M_{age} = 53.45$, $SD = 13.77$). Contrary to prior findings on perceived discrimination, we found that identity questioning led to increased use of the HIS, but not of the AIS, over time. In turn, the HIS predicted greater overlap between participants' Chinese and American identities, fully mediating the effect of identity questioning on identity overlap. Results are discussed in terms of prejudice attributions and the adaptive role of the HIS in shaping responses to identity questioning.

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Perceived discrimination has been consistently shown to be an important stressor for migrants' and ethnic minority members' psychological acculturation process, being associated with negative psychological outcomes (e.g., lower mental health, lower self-esteem, increased psychological symptoms, depression, and anxiety; Bierwiaczonek & Waldzus, 2016; de Freitas et al., 2018; Piccinelli et al., 2024). Additionally, research suggests that perceiving discrimination can play a role in how individuals develop and manage their cultural and ethnic identities, which are key determinants of psychological acculturation (Stuart et al., 2020; Ward et al., 2024). The present study draws upon the concept

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of identity questioning (Albuja et al., 2019a) to examine how ambiguous and potentially discriminatory statements such as "Where are you *really* from?" influence cultural identity-related processes and outcomes.

Individuals who live within multiple cultural and ethnic groups – such as immigrants and their descendants – develop multiple cultural identities as their ties with and sense of belonging to these groups become incorporated into their sense of self (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Cultural identities do not simply coexist separately but are constantly organized, combined, blended, integrated, fragmented, separated, or compartmentalized to form a *bicultural identity* (Benet-Martínez et al., 2005; Ward et al., 2018). For example, for Chinese immigrants and their descendants in the United States, living between the Chinese and American cultures can result in the development of a bicultural Chinese-American identity.

Asian Americans are one of the largest and fastest-growing groups in the U.S., making up 7% of the total population in 2022 (Pew Research Center, 2024a). Among these, Chinese Americans were 4.7 million, including both immigrants (60%) and Americans of Chinese descent (40%; Pew Research Center, 2024b). While a history of social exclusion and oppression has found its most recent expression in blatant acts of racism and hate crimes toward Chinese people amid the Covid-19 global pandemic (Han et al., 2023), Chinese Americans also frequently report experiencing more subtle forms of discrimination such as those associated with the "model minority" and "perpetual foreigner" stereotypes (Sue et al., 2009). Subtle discrimination has been found to be an important determinant of psychological adjustment outcomes among bicultural individuals, including Asian and Chinese Americans (Lui, 2020; Lui & Quezada, 2019; Ong et al., 2013). To date, however, the implications of this form of discrimination for bicultural identity-related outcomes are still unclear. The present study contributes to the current literature by examining how Chinese Americans who encounter ambiguous and potentially discriminatory incidents of identity questioning adaptively engage in dynamic processes of development, negotiation, and understanding of multiple cultural identities – referred to as *cultural identity styles* (Ward et al., 2018) – and how these processes influence their sense of self as bicultural Chinese-Americans.

Bicultural identities

Individuals living in contact with multiple cultures undergo a life-long, complex process of psychological change known as *psychological acculturation* (Berry, 1997). The changes related to the acculturation process entail psychological (i.e., mental health and well-being), sociocultural (i.e., culture learning processes), and identity-related outcomes (Ward et al., 2001). The latter refer to the development of multiple social identities associated with one's cultural and ethnic ingroups, that, for bicultural individuals, can encompass membership in one or more ethnic minorities and in the *mainstream* society (Huynh et al., 2011; Ward et al., 2001).

In psychology, different models and approaches have been proposed to examine how individuals develop and organize their social and cultural identities. For instance, early models conceptualized social identity complexity as the extent to which individuals cognitively appraise their membership in different groups as separate or overlapping (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). Other models proposed that social identification also includes an

affective component, defined by the extent to which individuals feel positively or negatively toward their ingroup(s) (Cameron, 2004). In sum, cultural identities can be defined as a form of social identity that encompasses a cognitive and an affective dimension, that is, a 'being' and a 'feeling' component (Ward & Szabó, 2023).

More recently, scholars have considered the specific experiences of bicultural individuals. Drawing upon the concept of social identity complexity, dual-identity models examine how individuals perceive their cultural identities as strongly separate (e.g., Chinese and American) or blended in their sense of self (e.g., Chinese American; Fleischmann & Verkuyten, 2016). For instance, cognitive-developmental models of dual identities posit that individuals move from early stages of categorization and compartmentalization (characterized by highly differentiated, isolated social identities) towards identity integration (characterized by an overlap between identities, where conflicts are reconciled and simultaneous identification is possible; Amiot et al., 2007). Likewise, the Bicultural Identity Integration framework (BII; Benet-Martínez et al., 2005; Huynh et al., 2011) conceptualizes bicultural identities according to two dimensions: (1) *cultural blendedness* (versus distance) defines the perception of cultural identities as overlapping as opposed to separated and compartmentalized, corresponding to the cognitive dimension of identity; (2) *cultural harmony* (versus conflict) refers to the affective evaluation of such identities as harmonious and compatible rather than conflictual and incompatible, corresponding to the affective dimension. These two dimensions are dynamic and subject to shifts over time (Schwartz et al., 2019), and cultural stressors such as perceived discrimination can contribute to their change (Ward et al., 2021). Drawing on these frameworks, in the present study, we broadly conceptualize cognitive identity outcomes as *identity overlap* (where a higher overlap corresponds to more blended and integrated identities) and affective identity outcomes as *identity affect* (where *negative* affect corresponds to perceiving one's identities as more conflicting and less compatible).

Subtle discrimination and identity questioning

Perceived discrimination can be generally defined by two components: i) the individual appraisal of being treated unfairly, and ii) the attribution of the unfair treatment to the enactor's prejudice towards one's membership in a socially devalued or stigmatized group (Major et al., 2002). Among bicultural individuals, perceived discrimination has been linked to stronger identity compartmentalization (Yampolsky & Amiot, 2016) and conflict (Huynh et al., 2011; Qumseya, 2018).

The extent to which individuals attribute unfair treatment to prejudice is determined by a range of factors, among which is attributional ambiguity (Major et al., 2002). Instances of *blatant discrimination* – such as overt insults, threats, and harassment – contain clear prejudice cues, making them easy to identify and attribute (Jones et al., 2016; Major et al., 2003). With the introduction of anti-discrimination laws and egalitarian norms in modern societies, these forms of discrimination have become relatively uncommon (Dovidio, 2001). Nevertheless, prejudice is also expressed through more subtle and veiled cues, which take the shape of seemingly innocuous, socially normalized acts that "fly under the radar" of social norms. *Subtle discrimination* encompasses veiled insinuations, invalidations, or avoidant behaviors that are highly ambiguous and difficult to identify as motivated by prejudice (Jones

et al., 2016; Sue, 2010). Research has consistently linked subtle discrimination to negative psychological adjustment outcomes for ethnic minority individuals, including increased psychological symptoms (e.g., depression and anxiety) and negative affect, and decreased well-being, self-esteem, and positive affect (Lui & Quezada, 2019). Among Asian Americans, subtle discrimination has been found to predict negative psychological outcomes over and above blatant discrimination (Lui, 2020) as well as over time (Ong et al., 2013).

One of the most well-established research endeavors for examining subtle perceived discrimination is guided by the microaggressions framework (Sue, 2010). Microaggressions have been defined as brief, everyday indignities that communicate hostile and derogatory messages to the target person or group (Sue, 2010). By considering the experiences of targets such as ethnic minority members as valid independent of the intentions or perspectives of enactors (Sue, 2010), this framework allows for examining how everyday micro-interactions (e.g., being treated with less courtesy than others) can be subjectively appraised as a form of discrimination. In this context, the microaggressions framework is particularly well-suited to investigate the link between two inherently subjective processes: perceiving discrimination and identifying with different cultural or ethnic groups. To date, however, the extensive body of research on the consequences of microaggressions directed at bicultural individuals has primarily focused on psychological outcomes (e.g., mental health and well-being), while identity-related outcomes have remained under-researched.

Within this research field, scholars have also been particularly interested in uncovering the underlying content of microaggressions, such as stereotypical beliefs and social representations of the target group (Piccinelli et al., 2025; Williams et al., 2021). Indeed, microaggressions have often been organized into thematic categories, developed by examining the unique experiences of diverse social groups. Among Asian American populations, one of the most commonly identified categories has been broadly termed *identity questioning* (Albuja et al., 2019a) – or *"Alien in own land"* (Sue et al., 2009) – conveying messages associated with representations of perpetual foreignness.

Experiences of identity questioning include simple questions such as "Where are you from?" These seemingly innocuous micro-interactions can underlie the covert assumption that members of racialized and ethnic minority groups are not true American citizens (Williams et al., 2021) and *do not belong* to the United States (Sue, 2010) because they do not match the prototypical American phenotype (Albuja et al., 2019a; Devos & Banaji, 2005). Research suggests that experiences of identity questioning are highly frequent among Asian Americans, bearing potential implications for their well-being (Cheryan & Monin, 2005; Ong et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2011). Indeed, the invalidation of one's social and cultural identities can be appraised as a form of identity threat and result in negative consequences for psychological outcomes (Albuja et al., 2019a, 2019b).

Given the lack of evidence on the role of microaggressions – including identity questioning – for the identity outcomes of bicultural individuals like Chinese Americans, the hypotheses presented in this study draw upon broader research on perceived discrimination (e.g., Firat & Noels, 2022; Qumseya, 2018; Ward et al., 2024; Yampolsky & Amiot, 2016). Accordingly, we hypothesize that experiences of identity questioning may act as an identity threat, inhibiting bicultural identity integration (i.e., overlap; Amiot et al., 2007), and contributing to individuals' sense of *being* Chinese and *being* American being

kept separate, while producing a conflictual sense of identity associated with negative feelings. Specifically:

H1a: Experiences of identity questioning will predict lower perceived overlap between one's Chinese and American identities.

H1b: Experiences of identity questioning will predict increased negative affect toward one's bicultural identities.

Cultural identity styles

In recent years, scholars have stressed the need to move beyond the notion of bicultural identities as a static outcome to understand the dynamic processes underlying identity development, management, negotiation, and maintenance. Ward et al. (2018) identified two strategies that are available to bicultural individuals to manage their cultural identities: a *hybrid style* (HIS), through which relevant elements of different cultural identities are blended together in a new and unique bicultural identity, and an *alternating style* (AIS), which entails shifting and switching cultural identities based on individual and contextual needs. Research has demonstrated that cultural identity styles are conceptually and operationally distinct from other dual or bicultural identity frameworks, as they go beyond the notion of identity overlap or configuration and emphasize *how* individuals strategically and adaptively manage multiple cultural identities (Szabó et al., 2020; Ward & Szabó, 2023). Building on foundational models of identity development (Berzonsky, 1992), these identity styles can be understood as adaptive strategies that individuals adopt in response to a variety of social demands and stressors, including identity threats such as perceived discrimination (Berjot & Gillet, 2011), and more specifically, identity questioning (Albuja et al., 2019b).

Previous studies have found perceived discrimination to be a consistent predictor of the AIS (Qumseya, 2018; Ward et al., 2024). Furthermore, a recent study developing a measure to assess Asian American women's identity-shifting and code-switching behaviors, which are consistent with behaviors associated with the AIS, found a positive association with gendered racial microaggressions (Gamst et al., 2021). Drawing on a stress and coping perspective (Berjot & Gillet, 2011), we hypothesize that, by experiencing identity questioning as a microaggression, and therefore as an identity threat (i.e., asking "where are you from?" is a way of saying "you do not belong here"), individuals might adopt the AIS as a protective mechanism to maximize inclusion and minimize differences that may lead to stereotypical attributions (e.g., by appearing 'less Chinese' and 'more American'), safeguarding their self-esteem (Gamst et al., 2021; Ward et al., 2021).

Since both the HIS and AIS have been framed as adaptive strategies activated in response to situational demands (Szabó & Ward, 2020), it is plausible to hypothesize that both styles could be activated to cope with identity threats. One study adopting a similar conceptualization to cultural identity styles (Firat & Noels, 2022), found that perceived discrimination led to a stronger hybrid identity orientation. Yet, others have found no significant relationship between the HIS and perceived discrimination

(Qumseya, 2018; Ward et al., 2024). Although research suggests that appraising subtle and ambiguous forms of discrimination (such as identity questioning) may activate different psychological processes than blatant discrimination (Lui, 2020; Major et al., 2002; Sue, 2010), to the best of our knowledge, the relation between subtle discrimination and the HIS has never been examined.

Considering both previous research on perceived discrimination (although not specifically subtle; Firat & Noels, 2022; Qumseya, 2018; Ward et al., 2024) and findings suggesting that cultural identity styles act as adaptive strategies (Szabó & Ward, 2020), we hypothesize that:

H2a: Identity questioning will predict an increased use of the HIS.

H2b: Identity questioning will predict an increased use of the AIS.

Cultural identity styles are associated with identity-related outcomes in distinctive ways. Within their original cultural identity styles framework, Ward et al. (2018) proposed and found that individuals adaptively engage in hybridizing and alternating styles following a desire to achieve integration. Cultural identity styles, in turn, affect their cultural identity outcomes at the cognitive and affective level, which respectively refer to the extent to which these identities are consolidated (blended vs. compartmentalized) and conflicted (vs. harmonious). Since the HIS entails managing one's cultural identities by integrating them, at the cognitive level, those who adopt this style are expected to perceive their cultural identities as increasingly blended and overlapping. Research has consistently supported this association (e.g., Ng Tseung-Wong et al., 2024; Qumseya, 2018; Ward et al., 2018). Hence, we hypothesize that:

H3a: Greater use of the HIS will predict a greater overlap between cultural identities.

Concurrently, at the affective level, individuals who manage their cultural identities by alternating between them are expected to perceive them as conflicting and incompatible. Indeed, previous studies have found that a greater use of the AIS is linked to less harmonious and more conflicting identities (e.g., Ng Tseung-Wong et al., 2024; Qumseya, 2018; Ward et al., 2018). Hence, we hypothesize that:

H3b: Greater use of the AIS will predict greater negative affect towards one's cultural identities.

Consistent with Ward et al. (2018) framework, previous studies have also found that the HIS is consistently unrelated to identity outcomes at the affective level (i.e., conflicting identities), and the AIS to be unrelated to identity outcomes at the cognitive level (i.e., overlapping identities; Schwartz et al., 2019). Hence, we do not hypothesize any relation between the HIS and identity affect, nor between the AIS and identity overlap. Additionally, HIS and AIS have been found to be either unrelated (e.g., Ward et al., 2018) or positively associated (e.g., Ward et al., 2024), suggesting that these are complementary strategies that individuals adopt based on their needs, rather than opposite or mutually exclusive strategies (Schwartz et al., 2019).

Lastly, the AIS has been found to mediate the link between perceived discrimination and identity-related outcomes. In a study with Arab youth in New Zealand, Qumseya (2018) found that perceptions of discrimination were positively associated with the AIS, which in turn predicted higher bicultural identity conflict. Drawing on the assumption that identity questioning may also lead to greater use of the HIS as an adaptive strategy, we hypothesize that:

H4a: The HIS will mediate the effect of identity questioning on bicultural identity overlap.

H4b: The AIS will mediate the effect of identity questioning on bicultural identity affect.

The present study

According to the microaggressions literature (Sue, 2010; Sue et al., 2009), identity questioning can be conceptualized as a subtle form of discrimination conveying a covert message of social exclusion. That is, being frequently questioned about one's origin or nationality can act as a subtle reminder of one's outsider status and perpetual foreignness (Albuja et al., 2019a), possibly undermining the development of a blended and harmonious bicultural identity. Drawing upon established identity frameworks (e.g., Benet-Martínez et al., 2005; Cameron, 2004; Roccas & Brewer, 2002), we distinguish between a cognitive (i.e., overlap) and affective (i.e., negative versus positive affect) component of bicultural identities to examine the outcomes of identity questioning experiences. Additionally, informed by Ward et al. (2018) original cultural identity styles framework, we explore the role of the HIS and AIS as underlying processes in the relationship between identity questioning and identity outcomes. To the best of our knowledge, cultural identity styles (Ward et al., 2018) have never been examined concurrently with subtle discrimination or identity questioning, and longitudinal research in the field is scarce. Hence, in the present study, we test two longitudinal mediation models to assess the directionality of effects between identity questioning, cultural identity styles (i.e., HIS and AIS), and bicultural identity outcomes (i.e., overlap and affect) among Chinese Americans.

Methods

Participants and procedure

Three waves of data collection were conducted between September and November 2020 using an online survey. The study was approved by the Victoria University of Wellington's Human Ethics Committee. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and informed consent was obtained prior to each wave of data collection.

Participants were a community sample of adult Chinese Americans (>18 years old) recruited via Qualtrics. They were initially screened on two questions: "To what extent do you feel Chinese?" and "To what extent do you feel American?" (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). Those who responded "not at all" to either question did not meet the definition of 'bicultural' (i.e., those who become and remain actively engaged with

both cultures; Ward & Szabó, 2023) and were therefore not eligible to participate in the research. Additionally, participants were excluded if they failed any of the attention checks placed throughout the survey. At each wave of data collection, those who successfully completed the survey were offered a small reward (e.g., points, gift cards) by Qualtrics.

The baseline sample at T1 was 690 participants. Data collection for T2 and T3 occurred at one-month intervals. This timeframe was based on previous longitudinal findings suggesting that the HIS and AIS are dynamic and exhibit moderate temporal variability (Ertanir et al., 2024; Schwartz et al., 2019; Szabó & Ward, 2020), while also balancing the need to optimize participant retention. At T2, 493 (28.6% attrition rate) participants were included upon completing the second survey. Of these, 321 (65.11%) filled in the third survey and were retained at T3, with an attrition rate of 53.49% from T1 and 34.89% from T2. Additional attrition analyses are reported in Ward et al. (2024).[1] Participants who completed two of the three waves of data collection were retained for the analyses reported in this article. Hence, the sample size for this study was 491 participants, aged between 19 and 91 years old (M = 53.45, SD = 13.77). Of these, 44% were males and 56% were females; 52% were first-generation immigrants (born outside the U.S.) and 48% were born in the U.S. Most participants held a bachelor's (49%) or a post-graduate degree (38%). Table 1 shows a full overview of the sample sociodemographic characteristics.

Measures

The measures described below are part of a larger longitudinal survey (Ward et al., 2024). All survey materials were administered in English.

Table 1. Participants' sociodemographic characteristics.

		Min.	Max.	*M*	*SD*	*N*	%
Age		19.00	91.00	53.45	13.77		
Gender	Male					215	43.79%
	Female					274	55.80%
	Other					1	0.20%
	Prefer not to answer					1	0.20%
Place of birth	U.S.					236	48.07%
	Other country					255	51.93%
Education	Completed High School					29	5.91%
	Certificate or Diploma					32	6.52%
	Bachelor's Degree					240	48.88%
	Postgraduate Degree					188	38.29%
	Prefer not to answer					2	0.41%
To what extent do you feel American?		2.00	5.00	4.01	.93		
To what extent do you feel Chinese?		2.00	5.00	3.75	.94		
English language proficiency		1.00	5.00	4.25	.84		
Chinese language proficiency		1.00	5.00	2.53	1.52		
Income	less than $20,000					31	6.3%
	$20,000–$44,999					54	11.0%
	$45,000–$139,999					231	47.0%
	$140,000–$149,000					33	6.7%
	$150,000–$199,999					45	9.2%
	$200,000+					48	9.8%
	Prefer not to say					49	10.0%

Sociodemographic variables (T1)

Participants provided information regarding their gender, age, education, income, language proficiency in English and Chinese, and place of birth. Additionally, they were asked whether their parents were born in the U.S. Foreign-born participants were also asked about their length of residence in the U.S.

Identity questioning (T1)

Identity questioning was assessed via a subscale of the Identity Denial and Questioning Experiences Scale (Albuja et al., 2019a), administered to participants only at T1. The subscale consists of two items: "When you first meet strangers, how often are you asked where you are from?" and "When you first meet strangers, how often are you asked about your nationality?". Participants rated each question on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = never to 7 = always. The items showed good reliability, with a Spearman-Brown coefficient of .87, and were averaged to obtain a composite score for this measure.

Cultural identity styles (T1 – T2)

The Multicultural Identity Styles Scale (MISS) developed by Ward et al. (2018) is composed of two seven-item subscales, one assessing the hybrid identity style (HIS), e.g., "For me being Chinese and being American are intermingled" and the other assessing the alternating style (AIS), e.g., "I am Chinese at home and American at school/work." Participants were asked to rate each item on a five-point Likert-type scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Items were then averaged to obtain a composite score for each subscale. Both subscales showed good reliability across time waves, with a Cronbach's alpha of .84–.87 (HIS) and .86–.87 (AIS), respectively.

Bicultural identity outcomes (T1 – T3)

Two pictorial measures assessed identity-related outcomes, operationalized as perceived bicultural overlap and affect. Pictorial measures have been widely used in psychology for being highly intuitive, less cognitively demanding than text-based measures, and effective in increasing respondents' motivation and attention (Sauer et al., 2021).

First, to assess the perceived bicultural identity overlap (vs. separation), participants were shown a series of circle pairs distributed on a seven-point scale. In each pair, one circle contained the word "Chinese" and the other "American". A score of *1* corresponded to two completely separate circles (i.e., bicultural identity separation), while a score of *7* was associated with two fully overlapping circles (i.e., bicultural identity overlap). Participants were asked: "Please select the circle pair that best describes the relationship between your Chinese and American identities." A similar scale has been adopted in previous studies on examining bicultural identities (Comănaru et al., 2018). Previous research (Schubert & Otten, 2002) has demonstrated the validity of pictorial measures using overlapping circles to investigate self-categorization processes such as social identities and ingroup-outgroup relations. By allowing the respondent to map their relation with different groups onto the spatial dimension, these measures can capture meaningful aspects of social and cultural identities, such as belonging, compatibility, blendedness, and similarity (Schubert & Otten, 2002).

A second item utilized a pictorial affect scale in which participants were shown a series of schematic faces distributed on a seven-point scale and asked: "Please select the face

that best describes how you feel about the relationship between your Chinese and American identities". On one end of the scale, a score of *1* corresponded to a schematic face depicting a sad/unpleasant facial expression, which was described to participants as "I don't like how my cultural identities are related to each other", that is, negative bicultural identity affect. In the middle, a score of *4* corresponded to a neutral face with a flat mouth line ("I neither like nor dislike how my cultural identities are related to each other"). At the other end of the scale, a score of *7* represented a face with a smiley/pleasant facial expression, which was described as "I like how my cultural identities are related to each other" and corresponded to positive bicultural identity affect. Similar scales have been previously adopted in psychological research due to their intuitive and language-independent nature (Sauer et al., 2021).

Analytical plan

Preliminary analyses were conducted with IBM SPSS 29, including data diagnostics and checks for assumptions. Participants from the baseline sample (N = 690) were retained if they had completed two or more waves of data collection. Hence, the amount of missing data in the final dataset (N = 491) corresponds to the attrition rate between T2 and T3 (34.89%). Missing data analyses with Little's MCAR test showed that data were missing completely at random (χ^2 = 10.575, df = 16, p = .835). We found no major concerns in the data when checking assumptions for primary analyses (e.g., univariate normality, homoscedasticity, multicollinearity).

Ward et al. (2018) seminal study and later research by Schwartz et al. (2019) have both demonstrated that the HIS is significantly related to cognitive dimensions of cultural identity, such as consolidation and blendedness, but not to affective dimensions, such as conflict and harmony, while the reverse is true for AIS. Therefore, to ensure conceptual simplicity and enhanced interpretability, the study hypotheses were tested via two focused mediation path models (Jose, 2016) using R lavaan version 0.6–21. This modeling approach accommodated the structure of the data, given that identity questioning was assessed solely at T1. In both models, identity questioning at T1 was entered as the main predictor. In model A (Figure 1), the HIS at T2 was entered as a mediator, and bicultural identity

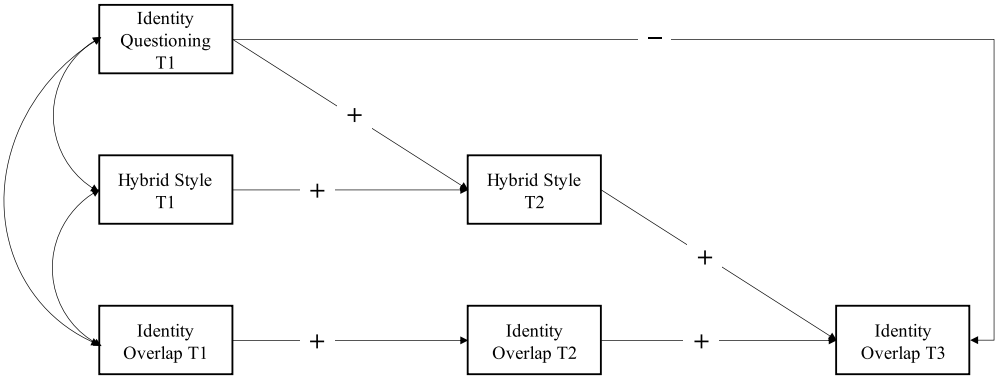


Figure 1. Model A: hypothesized focused mediation path model predicting identity overlap.

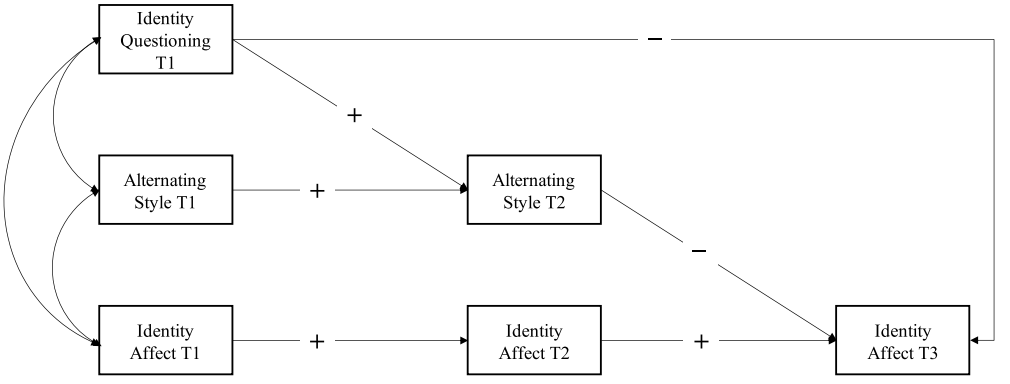


Figure 2. Model B: hypothesized focused mediation path model predicting identity affect.

overlap at T3 as the outcome. In model B (Figure 2), the AIS at T2 was the mediator and identity affect as T3 was the outcome. All variables at T2 and T3 were residualized by being regressed onto their corresponding measures from earlier waves of data collection. Model fit was assessed via a joint evaluation of goodness-of-fit-indices, including the Chi-Square test of model fit (χ^2; good fit is indicated by p-value of > .05 and by a χ^2/df ratio < 2) comparative fit index (CFI; excellent fit > .95), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI; excellent fit > .95), Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR; excellent fit <.05), and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA, excellent fit < .05 and confidence interval [CI] comprised between 0 and 0.8; Hooper et al., 2008; Hu & Bentler, 1999).

Given the large number of missing data points, Bayesian Multiple Imputation (BMI) was selected as a robust method for handling missingness (Enders, 2022). BMI draws upon observed values, available parameter estimates, and posterior predictive distributions of missing data to generate multiple sets of plausible values (Jamshidian & Mata, 2007). Since common BMI procedures assume a normal distribution of data (Enders, 2022; Patrician, 2002), upon finding evidence of mild multivariate kurtosis (kurtosis = 19.985, c.r. = 19.725) in model A, we inspected the dataset and identified 12 relevant outliers, which were consequently deleted, yielding a final sample size of 479. Then, for each model, 35 separate datasets were imputed (established following the rule of thumb m≥100×Largest Fraction of Missing Information, i.e., m≥100×.35; White et al., 2011) and estimates were combined following Rubin's rules (Rubin, 1987). All direct, indirect, and total effects were estimated using 5,000 resampled bias-corrected bootstraps (95% Confidence Intervals [CI]; Cheung, 2007; Hayes, 2009).

To ensure the robustness of our findings and further investigate the relations identified in our primary analyses, we conducted a series of post-hoc tests, including sensitivity analyses for missing data handling and multigroup comparisons. These procedures are detailed in the results section.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for the variables included in the Model.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	M	(SD)
1. Identity Questioning T1	–											3.19	1.28
2. HIS T1	.169**	–										3.85	.64
3. AIS T1	.169**	.410**	–									3.10	.83
4. Identity Overlap T1	.038	.247**	−.061	–								5.04	1.57
5. Identity Affect T1	−.053	.327**	−.019	.338**	–							5.73	1.14
6. HIS T2	.203**	.569**	.300**	.209**	.265**	–						3.79	.65
7. AIS T2	.173**	.278**	.735**	−.056	−.034	.411**	–					3.04	.82
8. Identity Overlap T2	.019	.271**	−.063	.516**	.368**	.322**	−.112*	–				5.01	1.57
9. Identity Affect T2	.010	.325**	.029	.279**	.598**	.279**	.011	.387**	–			5.69	1.18
10. Identity Overlap T3	.033	.250**	−.065	.557**	.389**	.269**	−.075	.622**	.390**	–		5.09	1.51
11. Identity Affect T3	−.036	.297**	.004	.254**	.607**	.246**	−.037	.341**	.588**	.348**	–	5.84	1.04

Note. *$p < .05$, **$p < .001$.

Results

Preliminary analyses

The means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations for all variables in the hypothesized model are reported in Table 2. Identity questioning was significantly and positively associated with the HIS and AIS both at T1 and T2. The HIS was also consistently positively correlated with the AIS and identity outcomes over time. Contrary to what was expected, however, neither identity questioning nor the AIS were associated with identity outcomes, cross-sectionally or over time.

Among sociodemographic variables, age emerged as a significant covariate of identity questioning ($r = -.131$, $p = .004$), HIS (at T1, $r = .123$, $p = .007$), bicultural identity overlap (T1: $r = .097$, $p = .032$, T2: $r = .150$, $p < .001$, T3: $r = .138$, $p = .014$) and (positive) affect (T1: $r = .198$, p < .001, T2: $r = .184$, $p < .001$, T3: $r = .185$, $p < .001$). Hence, it was included in the final model as a control variable. Independent samples t-tests further indicated that, compared with male participants ($M = 3.02$; $SD = 1.22$), female participants ($M = 3.33$; $SD = 1.36$) reported significantly more experiences of identity questioning ($F = 1.309$, $p = .253$; $t(487) = -2.618$, $p = .009$, 95% CI [−.53, −.08]). Moreover, compared to U.S.-born participants (T1: $M = 2.95$, $SD = .87$; T2: $M = 2.89$, $SD = .83$), foreign-born participants (T1: M =3.25, $SD = .76$; T2: $M = 3.19$; SD =.77) reported significantly greater use of the AIS both at T1 ($F = 3.410$, $p = .065$; $t(489) = -4.102$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−.48, −.16]) and at T2 ($F = 2.077$, $p = .150$; $t(485) = -4.152$, $p < .001$, 95%CI[−.45, −.16]). Consequently, post-hoc multigroup analyses were performed to assess between-group differences based on gender and place of birth. Bivariate correlations and independent sample t-tests did not reveal any other significant differences based on participants' sociodemographic characteristics.

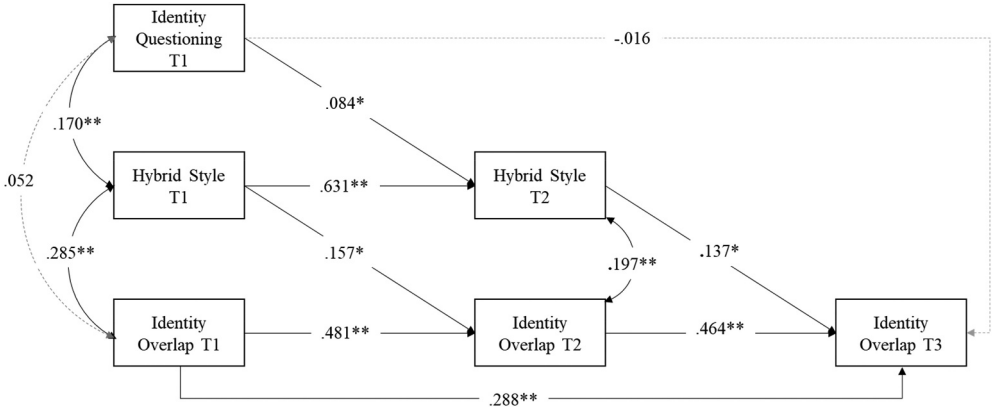


Figure 3. Model A: focused mediation path model predicting bicultural identity overlap with standardized estimates. *Note*. Solid arrows indicate statistically significant paths (**p < .001, *p < .05), while dashed arrows indicate non-significant ones.

Hypothesis testing

Bicultural identity overlap (Model A)

Goodness-of-fit indices suggested that the initially hypothesized model (Figure 1) had a poor fit to the data (model A: $\chi^2 = 55.615$, $df = 5$, $p < .001$, χ^2 / df = 11.123; CFI = .933; TLI = .626; RMSEA = .146, CI [.113; .181]). Upon inspecting modification indices, two rounds of re-specification resulted in the inclusion of theoretically relevant paths. The final model (Figure 3) yielded an excellent fit to the data: $\chi^2 = 5.253$, $df = 3$, $p = .187$ χ^2 / df = 1.751; CFI = .998; TLI = .982; RMSEA = .037 (CI [.002; .094]), SRMR = .016

All autoregressive paths in the model were positive and significant, suggesting relatively high stability of the HIS (β = .631, $p < .001$) and bicultural identity overlap (T1 to T2: β = .481, $p < .001$; T2 to T3: β = .464, $p < .001$; T1 to T3: β = .288, $p < .001$) over time. As shown in Figure 3, identity questioning did not predict identity overlap at T3, hence H1a was not supported. Identity questioning positively predicted the HIS at T2 (β = .084, $p = .019$), which in turn predicted bicultural identity overlap at T3 (β = .137, $p = .004$), supporting H2a and H3a. The indirect effect of identity questioning on bicultural identity overlap at T3 via the HIS at T2 was significant (β = .011, 95%CI [.003, .030]), providing support for H4a.

Bicultural identity affect (Model B)

Goodness-of-fit indices suggested a poor fit of the hypothesized model (Figure 2; $\chi^2 = 33.058$, $df = 5$, $p < .001$, χ^2 / df = 6.612; CFI = .955; TLI = .811; RMSEA = .135, CI [.094; .181]). Following modification indices, a new path between identity affect at T1 and T3 was included in the model. The respecified model showed a nearly perfect fit to the data: $\chi^2 = 3.719$, $df = 4$, $p = .454$, χ^2 / df = .930; CFI = 1; TLI = 1; RMSEA = .003 (CI [.000; .067]), SRMR = .016.

As shown in Figure 4, the autoregressive paths in the model suggested that the AIS (β = .742, $p < .001$) and bicultural identity affect (T1 to T2: β = .602, $p < .001$; T2 to T3: β = .438, $p < .001$; T1 to T3: β = .311, $p < .001$) tend to remain stable over time. Contrary to what was

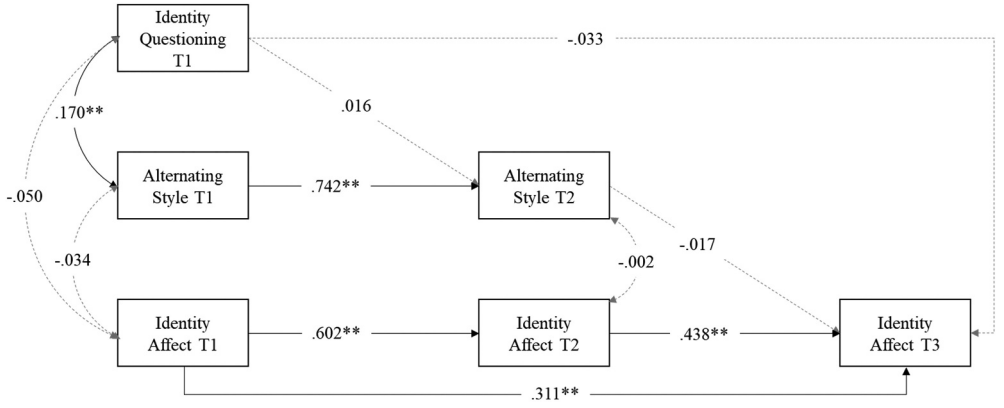


Figure 4. Model B: focused mediation path model predicting bicultural identity affect with standardized estimates. *Note*. Solid arrows indicate statistically significant paths (**p < .001, *p < .05), while dashed arrows indicate non-significant ones.

hypothesized in H1b, however, the direct effect of identity questioning on bicultural identity affect was non-significant. Likewise, identity questioning did not predict the AIS at T2, nor did AIS at T2 predict identity affect at T3, contradicting H2b and H3b. Consequently, the indirect effect of identity questioning on identity affect via the AIS was also non-significant, and H4b was not supported.

Post-hoc analyses

Sensitivity analyses

To assess whether the use of BMI substantially influenced our results, we re-tested the models using Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) estimation, including the whole baseline sample ($N = 690$), after removing outliers that significantly violated multivariate assumptions. All effects were estimated using 5,000 resampled bias-corrected bootstraps (95% Confidence Intervals [CI]; Cheung, 2007; Hayes, 2009). As shown in Tables 3 and 4, FIML estimates were consistent with BMI results.

Between group analyses

Considering the significant differences observed in preliminary analyses between U.S. and foreign-born individuals, as well as between male and female individuals, conducted a multigroup analysis to test whether the model varied between these groups. We compared the unconstrained models, where all parameters were free to vary between groups, with constrained models where all structural weights were restrained to be equal across groups. The overall models did not significantly differ for individuals based on their place of birth (model A: $\Delta\chi^2 = 9.63$, df = 9, p = .38, ΔCFI = −.001, ΔTLI = .014, ΔRMSEA = −.013; model B: $\Delta\chi^2 = 7.92$, df = 8, p = .44, ΔCFI = .000, ΔTLI = −.008, ΔRMSEA = .000) or gender (model A: $\Delta\chi^2 = 4.82$, df = 9, p = .85, ΔCFI = .000, ΔTLI = −.001, ΔRMSEA = .000; model B: $\Delta\chi^2 = 5.76$, df = 8, p = .67, ΔCFI = .000, ΔTLI = .002, ΔRMSEA = .000). To explore potential significant differences in the specific paths related to our hypotheses, we compared the unconstrained model with a series of constrained models where the

Table 3. Model A: focused mediation model estimates obtained through BMI and FIML methods.

		Bayesian Multiple Imputation (BMI) (95% CI bias-corrected bootstrapping, $N = 479$)			FIML Estimation ($N = 681$)		
		Standardized Direct Effects					
Predictor	Outcome	Estimate	SE	p	Estimate	SE	p
Identity Questioning T1	Identity Overlap T3	−.016	.047	.686	.002	.049	.957
Identity Questioning T1	HIS T2	.084	.017	.019	.087	.017	.015
HIS T2	Identity Overlap T3	.137	.118	.004	.149	.116	.002
HIS T1	Identity Overlap T2	.157	.128	.002	.159	.126	.001
HIS T1	HIS T2	.631	.035	<.001	.621	.038	<.001
Identity Overlap T1	Identity Overlap T2	.481	.047	<.001	.482	.046	<.001
Identity Overlap T2	Identity Overlap T3	.464	.052	<.001	.466	.063	<.001
Identity Overlap T1	Identity Overlap T3	.288	.050	<.001	.293	.058	<.001
Age	HIS T2	.032	.002	.378	.031	.002	.397
Age	Identity Overlap T2	.078	.005	.060	.078	.005	.066
Age	Identity Overlap T3	.025	.004	.523	.039	.004	.340
		Indirect effect (95% CI bias-corrected bootstrapping)					
		Estimate	**SE**	**CI**	**Estimate**	**SE**	**CI**
Identity Questioning T1 → HIS T2 → Identity Overlap T3		.011	.007	[.003, .030]	.013	.008	[.004, .035]
		Standardized Total Effects (95% CI bias-corrected bootstrapping)					
Predictor	**Outcome**	**Estimate**	**SE**	**CI**	**Estimate**	**SE**	**CI**
Identity Questioning T1	Identity Overlap T3	−.005	.046	[−.083, .072]	.015	.049	[−.079, .116]

Note. All reported estimates are standardized.

Table 4. Model B: focused mediation model estimates obtained through BMI and FIML methods.

		Bayesian Multiple Imputation (BMI) (95% CI bias-corrected bootstrapping, $N = 479$)			FIML Estimation ($N = 689$)		
		Standardized Direct Effects					
Predictor	**Outcome**	**Estimate**	**SE**	**p**	**Estimate**	**SE**	**p**
Identity Questioning T1	Identity Affect T3	−.033	.032	.401	−.037	.031	.345
Identity Questioning T1	AIS T2	.016	.022	.656	.037	.023	.309
AIS T2	Identity Affect T3	−.017	.051	.678	.006	.057	.889
AIS T1	AIS T2	.742	.033	<.001	.730	.033	<.001
Identity Affect T1	Identity Affect T2	.602	.039	<.001	.591	.039	<.001
Identity Affect T2	Identity Affect T3	.438	.055	<.001	.381	.067	<.001
Identity Affect T1	Identity Affect T3	.311	.058	<.001	.362	.063	<.001
Age	AIS T2	−.085	.002	.003	−.095	.002	.001
Age	Identity Affect T2	.071	.003	.057	.066	.003	.096
Age	Identity Affect T3	.062	.003	.159	.055	.003	.215
		Indirect effect (95% CI bias-corrected bootstrapping)					
		Estimate	**SE**	**CI**	**Estimate**	**SE**	**CI**
Identity Questioning T1 → AIS T2 → Identity Affect T3		0	.001	[−.004, .002]	0	.002	[−.003, .006]
		Standardized Total Effects (95% CI bias-corrected bootstrapping)					
Predictor	**Outcome**	**Estimate**	**SE**	**CI**	**Estimate**	**SE**	**CI**
Identity Questioning T1	Identity Affect T3	−.033	.032	[−.080, .025]	−.036	.031	[−.091, .031]

Note. All reported estimates are standardized.

paths between identity questioning, cultural identity styles, and identity outcomes were constrained one by one. As above, we did not encounter any significant differences between groups.

Discussion

The present longitudinal study examined the role of identity questioning experiences in the cognitive and affective outcomes related to the development of bicultural identities among Chinese Americans. Through two focused mediation models, we provide new evidence on the directionality of effects between these variables, and expand previous research in three meaningful ways: first, by examining the role of subtle and ambiguous identity threats, which have been broadly overlooked in this research field; second, by testing our predictions via a three-wave longitudinal design, whereas previous research has mostly been cross-sectional; third, by examining the mediating role of hybrid (HIS) and alternating (AIS) cultural identity styles as dynamic processes underlying the relation between identity questioning and identity outcomes.

Drawing upon the microaggressions framework (Sue, 2010), we conceptualized identity questioning as a form of subtle discrimination. Therefore, we formulated our hypotheses in line with previous research on perceived discrimination (e.g., Firat & Noels, 2022; Qumseya, 2018; Ward et al., 2024; Yampolsky & Amiot, 2016), expecting individuals who frequently encounter identity questioning to perceive their cultural identities as less overlapping and experience greater negative affect towards those identities. Contrary to our hypotheses, however, identity questioning did not significantly predict identity outcomes over time. It is possible that, due to its everyday and subtle nature, identity questioning may not represent a sufficiently salient threat to identity. Alternative perspectives, such as enactment theory (Cárdenas et al., 2021), suggest a reverse causal pathway: certain identity configurations (i.e., more overlapping identities) may elicit greater identity questioning rather than result from it. However, because in this study identity questioning was assessed only at T1, we were unable to test this directional relation.

Whereas perceived discrimination has been generally linked to greater use of the AIS (Qumseya, 2018; Ward et al., 2024), in the present study, identity questioning only positively predicted the HIS. An alternative approach to identity questioning suggests that, due to its ambiguous, seemingly well-intentioned nature, this is not always appraised as a microaggression. Instead, it can be perceived as an expression of genuine curiosity towards one's cultural identities (i.e., asking "where are you from" to show interest towards one's background; Albuja et al., 2019b). Indeed, previous research has indicated that identity questioning may be negatively associated with identity outcomes only if appraised as a form of discrimination (Albuja et al., 2019a, 2019b). In a study on the implications of identity-related discrimination for bicultural identities, Albuja et al. (2019a) did not find any significant relationship between identity questioning and identity-related variables, such as identity integration and sense of belonging. In the same study, more explicit experiences of identity denial – such as being openly told "you are not American" – were significantly associated with greater identity conflict and lower sense of belonging. Through a series of follow-up studies, these authors also found that when identity questioning was perceived as driven by a social exclusion intent, it predicted higher prejudice attributions (Albuja et al., 2019b). In contrast, when the questioning was seen as motivated by the enactor's genuine curiosity, it predicted lower attributions. Additionally, they found that when individuals attributed identity questioning to prejudice, they experienced greater concern about the acceptance of their cultural identities,

which, in turn, predicted lower well-being. If, among our sample, identity questioning was mostly appraised as a well-intentioned, genuine act of interest toward participants' identity, this could have resulted in greater openness toward both the Chinese and American cultures and, consequently, a greater use of the HIS. In fact, previous studies have found that higher motivations to integrate (MTI) is a key predictor of the HIS across diverse bicultural groups (Ward et al., 2018, 2024). Future studies are needed to examine the mediating role of MTI in the link between identity questioning and the HIS.

Research within the cultural identity styles framework (Ward et al., 2018) has shown that hybridizing is a beneficial strategy for individuals seeking identity integration (Schwartz et al., 2019). People who make greater use of the HIS have been found to have more consolidated bicultural identities, which in turn contribute to higher well-being and positive psychological outcomes (Ward et al., 2018). In line with this framework, we found that the HIS positively predicted bicultural identity overlap over time. Additionally, we found evidence for a full mediation effect of the HIS in the link between identity questioning and bicultural identity overlap. In this context, it is possible that being frequently questioned about their identities enhances individuals' awareness of their identity complexity (Roccas & Brewer, 2002), leading to a greater identity overlap through the increased use of the HIS.

Contrary to our hypothesis, the longitudinal path between identity questioning the AIS was not significant, even though bivariate correlations indicated a significant positive association between these variables. Previous studies have found that perceived discrimination is a consistent predictor of the AIS (Ward et al., 2024) and that subtle discrimination is positively associated with bicultural code-switching among Asian American women (Gamst et al., 2023). Building on research findings from Albuja et al. (2019a, 2019b), it is plausible that the association between identity questioning and the AIS emerges only for individuals who perceive such questioning as discrimination, that is, who make attributions to prejudice. This might also help explain the lack of a significant effect of identity questioning on identity outcomes. Moving forward, scholars should explore whether attributing identity questioning to prejudice predicts greater use of the AIS, along with increased cultural identity conflict.

Previous evidence has shown that a greater use of the AIS is associated with increased identity conflict (Ward et al., 2018), suggesting a maladaptive component to this strategy. However, the relationship between the AIS and bicultural identity affect was not significant in our data – even at the bivariate level. Some scholars have noted the AIS may be functional for individuals under certain circumstances: for instance, while alternating between cultural identities may be stressful for individuals who feel forced to do so by their context of reception (e.g., because of perceived discrimination), this may not be the case for those who view their distinct identities as an authentic reflection of who they are (Zhang & Noels, 2013). The extent to which this cultural identity style is strategically adopted in response to cultural stressors may also vary across groups: for instance, one longitudinal study with Hispanic college students in the U.S. found that perceived discrimination predicted a reduced use of the AIS (Ertanir et al., 2024). More research is needed to understand the diverse factors contributing to the (mal)adaptive implications of the AIS.

Lastly, our preliminary analyses showed that gender, place of birth, and age partially contributed to changes in our variables of interest. Among our sample, women reported

more experiences of identity questioning than men, and foreign-born individuals reported greater use of the alternating style than U.S.-born participants. The generational difference is also consistent with previous research (Ward et al., 2018). Starting from the assumption that foreign-born participants may more easily interpret the question "Where are you from?" as a sign of curiosity towards their nationality, while U.S.-born participants might perceive it as conveying a subtle message of social exclusion, we expected experiences of identity questioning to have a different effect on cultural identity styles and outcomes based on participants' place of birth. However, post-hoc model comparisons did not reveal any significant differences between subsamples. It is possible that, once the sample was divided in half, we did not have enough statistical power to detect between-group differences. Subsequent studies may examine whether prejudice attributions of identity questioning and their consequences vary between foreign- and U.S.-born immigrants by achieving larger sample sizes. In addition to gender and place of birth, we found age to be a consistent predictor of the AIS over time, with older Chinese Americans reporting less use of the AIS than younger ones. As younger individuals may be less aware of their cultural identities, they may find it more intuitive to use the AIS to navigate different cultural contexts (Ward et al., 2024). These results highlight the need for intersectional approaches (Spierings, 2023) that can inform an in-depth understanding of how bicultural and social identities intersect among different groups.

Limitations

The present study contributes to the current literature on identity questioning and cultural identity styles by using three waves of longitudinal data. However, it also has some limitations. First, because identity questioning was assessed only at T1, it was not possible to test a full mediation model with cross-lagged paths between our variables of interest across all time points. Thus, some of the potential effects discussed above, such as that of the AIS on identity questioning, remained unexplored. Assessing identity questioning over multiple time waves would also have allowed us to run a Random Intercept Cross-Lagged Panel Model, which better accounts for the longitudinal structure of data (where multiple observations are nested within the same individual) and allows for both capturing between-participant differences and within-participant fluctuations (Mulder & Hamaker, 2020).

Second, although we conceptualized identity questioning as a form of subtle discrimination, our study did not contain any measure of prejudice attributions, leaving some important questions unanswered. Future studies may seek to achieve an in-depth understanding of these ambiguous micro-interactions by including broader measures of subtle discrimination, such as microaggressions scales (e.g., Nadal, 2011) along with measures of prejudice attributions.

Third, while pictorial measures are considered a reliable tool to investigate identity-related outcomes (Schubert & Otten, 2002), they do not replace more complex, multidimensional text-based measures. Future studies may seek to replicate our findings by operationalizing bicultural identity overlap and affect with more established and validated scales. Additionally, while a one-month interval between data collection waves was planned to maximize retention, collecting data over a longer period of time might allow for observing greater changes in participants' bicultural identity strategies and outcomes.

Fourth, since data collection relied on convenience sampling, generalizations to the general population should be made cautiously. Furthermore, due to the high attrition rate between T1 and T3 (53.49%), to maximize statistical power, we opted for retaining all participants who had completed two of the three waves of data collection, resulting in a high percentage of missing data (35%). Despite our efforts to overcome this limitation by using BMI, it should be noted that because this method aims to preserve randomness, each imputed dataset yields slightly different estimates and standard errors, therefore influencing the reproducibility of exact results (Patrician, 2002). Additionally, the computation of composite estimates can produce inflated standard errors, causing small effect sizes to be non-significant (Enders, 2022). Nevertheless, post-hoc sensitivity analyses showed that the estimates obtained in our primary analyses were consistent with FIML estimates, providing additional support for the validity of our results.

Practical implications and conclusions

The present study examined the role of identity questioning in the cultural identity-related processes and outcomes of Chinese Americans. By identifying a novel link between identity questioning and the HIS, our findings provide insights into the complex psychological processes related to the experience of ambiguous and potentially discriminatory micro-interactions. In this context, our results also raise important questions. For instance, if identity questioning can result in positive, rather than negative, identity outcomes, is it so harmful after all? And, most importantly, are interventions aimed at raising ethnic minorities' awareness of the invisible discrimination they face every day really helping?

First, it should be noted that subtle discrimination is a complex construct, and that the present study only provides a partial perspective on its potential implications. Attributional ambiguity does not stem solely from the absence of explicit prejudice cues but is the result of diverse individual and contextual factors, such as the centrality of the targeted identity, stigma consciousness and propensity to make attributions to prejudice, the targets' motives, costs and benefits of making attributions, previous encounters with similar incidents, and the relationship with the enactor (Feldman & Swim, 1998; Major et al., 2002; Sue, 2010). When bicultural individuals are asked, "Where are you from?" all these and other factors interact to determine whether they will make an attribution to the questioner's prejudice.

Second, attributions to prejudice have been widely framed as a coping strategy (Major et al., 2002, 2003): appraising unfair treatment as determined by someone else's prejudice can be protective of individual self-esteem. On the contrary, when unfair treatment is appraised as deserved or caused by individual characteristics – rather than group membership – individuals may experience feelings of guilt and shame, which can be detrimental to their well-being (Major et al., 2002, 2003). Well-established models have further proposed that social and cultural identities play an important role in mitigating the harmful effects of perceived discrimination on well-being (Branscombe et al., 1999). In this context, the implications of attributions to prejudice for cultural identity styles and bicultural identity outcomes are less clear and deserve further investigation.

Third, our results can be informed by research from gender studies, which have shown that women who endorse beliefs related to benevolent sexism can be less or even

positively affected by encounters with subtle sexism such as body evaluation and objectification (Sáez et al., 2019). These findings, however, do not justify sexist beliefs and attitudes in society, nor diminish advocates' efforts to fight all types of gender discrimination and inequality. Similarly, in the context of ethnicity and race-related microaggressions, identity questioning may lead to positive outcomes for ethnic minority individuals who endorse or internalize mainstream society's representations of them as perpetual foreigners. Still, it remains essential to recognize and challenge the problematic and prejudiced nature of these representations.

Fourth, microaggressions scholars (Cohen & Strand, 2021) have stressed the need to go beyond the conceptualization of these subtle discrimination incidents as unpleasant micro-interactions to understand their role in social structures of power and inequality. By perpetuating stereotypes and social representations about marginalized groups in society, microaggressions contribute to the maintenance and justification of privilege and oppression systems (McClure & Rini, 2020; Piccinelli et al., 2025). For Chinese Americans, identity questioning may function as an invisible vector of perpetual foreigner stereotypes, reinforcing and validating their status as outsiders in the U.S. while remaining broadly unchallenged. Moreover, research indicates that subtle discrimination can hinder collective action attempts by causing less group-based anger than blatant discrimination (Ellemers & Barreto, 2015; Lee & Molina, 2023).

Although more research is needed to better understand the complex implications of experiencing and appraising subtle discrimination for bicultural individuals, our results can inform future practice and interventions. Mental health practitioners and programs targeting microaggressions should consider the protective role of the HIS as a dynamic strategy that contributes to individuals' resilience and well-being. Raising awareness interventions may also acknowledge the role of cultural identity styles in empowering Chinese Americans to challenge micro and macro social inequalities.

Note

1. A related article based on the same database has been previously published (Ward et al., 2024). The study tested a cross-lagged model using T1 and T2 data and examined perceived discrimination (assessed with a general measure that includes both subtle and blatant discrimination, different from the one assessed in this study) and motivations to integrate as antecedents of the HIS and AIS. The present study differs in that (a) it considers a specific form of subtle perceived discrimination, that is, identity questioning; (b) it incorporates data from T3, which have never been reported on before; (c) the HIS and AIS are analyzed as mediators rather than outcomes, and (d) it considers different constructs and outcomes, i.e., bicultural identity overlap and affect (T1–T3), operationalized with pictorial measures

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