CHAPTER TWO

Why do children essentialize social groups?

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Abstract
The tendency to essentialize social groups is universal, and arises early in development. This tendency is associated with negative intergroup attitudes and behaviors, and has thus encouraged the search for remedies for the emergence of essentialism. In this vein, great attention has been devoted to uncovering the cognitive foundations of essentialism. In this chapter, I suggest that attention should also be turned toward the motivational foundations of essentialism. I propose that considerations of power and group identity, but especially a “need to belong,” may encourage children’s essentialization of social groups. Namely, from a young age, children are keen to feel members of a group, and that their membership is secure and exclusive. Essentialism is the conceptual gadget that satisfies these feelings. And to the extent that groups are defined by what they do, this motivated essentialism also impels children to be adamant about the maintenance of unique group behaviors.

1. Why do children essentialize social groups?

The cognitive revolution in psychology brought about fundamental changes in how social scientists understand behavior. Revoking the behaviorist axiom that all that can be studied is what is directly observed,
cognitivists postulated that underlying all human behavior are representations of the events and objects people encounter, and sets of computations people perform—mostly unconsciously—on these representations. But cognitivism stimulated the development of a further, logically unnecessary, assumption. Namely that such representations do not simply underlie human behavior, but in fact, precede it. It incorrectly translated the Descartian proposition—“I think, therefore I am”—into a causal theory. And so it has been that in many fields of psychology—and developmental is no exception—scholars have been engaged in attempting to uncover the representations—beliefs, concepts, values—that people hold, as the key to understanding their behavior. Manipulate these representations, and you change behavior.

The field of social cognition in general, and intergroup relations in particular, is a prime example of this corollary of the cognitive revolution. A longstanding belief in the field is that if we change people’s stereotypes, concepts, or beliefs about a group, we shall bring about a change in people’s attitudes toward the group. I take this to be true. And in this chapter I will review evidence in support of this direction of causation with regard to essentialist beliefs about social groups (see chapter “Does essentialism lead to racial prejudice? It is not so Black and White” by Mandalaywala, this volume). Nevertheless, in this chapter I want to highlight the opposite possibility. Namely that rather than social essentialism being the source of people’s behaviors, attitudes, and emotions regarding groups, it may be a consequence of them; it may serve as a justification for them.

This “motivational twist” is not new in psychology. At least two clear examples come to mind, one “old” and one recent. The old one is the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962), according to which, the feeling of discomfort or anxiety that accompanies one’s behavior (e.g., working effortfuly for a meek reward), prompts a change in one’s belief about the pertinent targets of the behavior (e.g., the reward’s value substantially increases). The more recent one is the intuitionist perspective on morality (Haidt, 2001), according to which moral principles derive from—and serve to justify—people’s basic emotional responses to various situations.

One crucial consequence of this theoretical twist in the present context is that it demands a change in where we look for the origins of social essentialism. If an essentialist belief is considered primary, then its potential sources lie in the cognitive features of our minds. In turn, if social essentialism is considered secondary, then its potential sources may be linked directly to our sociality.
2. Social essentialism: A cognitive perspective

Essentialism is the belief that categories capture objective and internally homogeneous partitions of the natural world, and that consequently, category membership is inherited, causally explanatory, inductively rich, and permanent (Gelman, 2003; Medin & Ortony, 1989). Social essentialism is all that when applied to social groups (Hirschfeld, 1996; Rothbart & Taylor, 1992). By now, there is ample evidence that all or some of the above symptoms of essentialism are held by adults in a variety of cultures, in regard to a variety of social groups: caste in India (Mahalingam, 2003), race in the United States (Hirschfeld, 1996), and ethnicity in Mongolia (Gil-White, 2001), to name just a few. In fact, there is evidence that all or some of the above symptoms of essentialism are held also by young children in a variety of cultures and in regard to a variety of social groups: social class in Chile (del Río & Strasser, 2011), race in the United States (Diesendruck, Goldfein-Elbaz, Rhodes, Gelman, & Neumark, 2013; Pauker, Williams, & Steele, 2016), ethnicity in Madagascar (Astuti, Solomon, Carey, Ingold, & Miller, 2004) and Israel (Diesendruck, 2013), gender in the United States (Taylor, 1996), language in the United States (Kinzler & Dautel, 2012), and religious groups in Ireland (Smyth, Feeney, Eidson, & Coley, 2017) and the United States (Chalik, Leslie, & Rhodes, 2017) (see chapter “Contextualizing the development of social essentialism” by Pauker et al. this volume, for a thorough review). The universality and precociousness of social essentialism guided scholars in their search for the possible origins of this kind of belief.

Within a cognitive perspective on social essentialism, a number of potential features of our conceptual systems—and how they bias people’s interpretation of aspects of social input—were proposed to account for why social essentialism emerges. According to one early proposal, social essentialism is an extension of the mind’s innate disposition to essentialize natural kinds (Atran, 1990). The latter is a feature of human’s folk biological module, which is inadvertently applied not only to biological species but to human groups as well, possibly due to the perception of within-group similarities and between-group differences akin to those observed in the biological domain. A further proposal is that the extension may be due to other dimensions of similarity between social and animal kinds, namely, the endogamous and heritable character of both kinds (Gil-White, 2001). Yet another set of accounts relates social essentialism to general features...
of human cognition, such as the need for causal (Gelman, 2003) or inherent (Cimpian & Salomon, 2014) explanations for observable phenomena. A final proposal to be considered here is that social essentialism derives from the manner in which social groups are described in one’s language (see for instance, Carey, 1995; Sperber, 1996; see also chapter “Kindhood and essentialism: Evidence from language” by Ritchie and Knobe, this volume).

Two particular linguistic features have been highlighted as significantly contributing to the emergence of social essentialism: labeling and generics. Specifically, the sheer act of labeling social groups has been argued to point out to children the existence of a categorical boundary: there exist “Jews” and “Arabs,” “Blacks” and “Whites,” “men” and “women” (Waxman, 2013). This marking carries with it the implication that exemplars referred to by the same name are homogeneous and permanent—two characteristics of essentialism. And indeed, numerous studies have shown that labeling social groups—made-up (Gelman & Heyman, 1999) or conventional ones (Birnbaum, Deeb, Segal, Ben-Eliyahu, & Diesendruck, 2010)—exacerbates children’s inferences about the stability and homogeneity of the groups. Generics reify even more strongly the category, implying the existence of a common cause that explains category membership and properties (Gelman, 2003). Here too, experimental studies reveal that describing social groups—made-up or conventional ones—via generics, reinforces essentialist beliefs (Cimpian & Markman, 2011; Rhodes, Leslie, & Tworek, 2012). Importantly, recordings of naturalistic conversations about social groups between mothers and their 5-year-old children revealed positive correlations between the frequency of mothers’ use of labels and generics to denote social groups, and their children’s essentialist beliefs about the groups (Segall, Birnbaum, Deeb, & Diesendruck, 2015). The main point of this brief review is that the reason why children develop essentialist beliefs about social categories is at least partly because of certain intuitive conceptual dispositions, reinforced or driven by linguistic cues.

A further—related—prerogative of the cognitive perspective on social essentialism is that it is one of the main sources of intergroup attitudes. The general argument is that by defining groups as immutable homogeneous sets of essentially different people—with different beliefs, values, and even biological characteristics—essentialism is a springboard to stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination. And indeed, numerous studies on adults have reported such links (Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2002; Keller, 2005; Leyens et al., 2003; Morton, Postmes, Haslam, & Hornsey, 2009;
Prentice & Miller, 2007; Williams & Eberhardt, 2008; Yzerbyt, Corneille, & Estrada, 2001). In fact, both correlational (Levy, Stroessner, & Dweck, 1998; Pauker, Ambady, & Apfelbaum, 2010) and experimental studies have found such links among young children as well. In an example of the latter, Diesendruck and Menahem (2015) told Jewish Israeli children a story that either highlighted characteristics consistent with essentialist beliefs about Jews and Arabs, or not. They then asked children to draw a picture of a Jew and an Arab. Children who heard the essentialism-consistent story drew the two characters significantly farther apart than those who heard the control story. Analogously, Rhodes and colleagues found that using generics to define novel groups—a manipulation that as reviewed above has been shown to boost essentialist thinking—led children to share fewer resources with members of their outgroup, compared to when the groups were defined via nongeneric language (Rhodes, Leslie, Saunders, Dunham, & Cimpian, 2018).

I kept this review of what I called the cognitive perspective on social essentialism brief, as I am certain other chapters in this volume will cover this much more comprehensively. Nevertheless, even here it is apparent that there is a substantial amount of evidence indicating that: (a) social essentialism is linked to certain intuitive processes by which children conceptualize the world, and (b) social essentialism is related, in some cases causally, to children’s intergroup attitudes and biases. I now turn the table on this issue and consider a motivational perspective on social essentialism.

### 3. Social essentialism: A motivational perspective

Possibly one of the most effective ways for mobilizing a group toward discriminating against another group is to convince the former that they are essentially different from the latter. The presumption that the “other” consists of a set of homogeneous members, all defined by some natural, intrinsic, and immutable core that causally determines all the others’ characteristics, is a very persuasive conceptual gizmo for rationalizing intergroup bias. Among other implications, it facilitates dehumanization—the denial of humanity to the other (Haslam, 2006; Leyens et al., 2001)—and plain discrimination—if “we” and “them” are essentially different, then it is “natural” that capacities, privileges, and rights will not be distributed equally (Allport, 1954).

Throughout human history, there have been numerous instances of cynical recruitment of an essentialist rhetoric for the justification of intergroup discrimination. In fact, the ends have varied: from genocide...
(e.g., of Jews by Nazis, of Tutsis by Hutus), to enslavement (e.g., of Africans by Europeans), to sheer discrimination in rights. An example of the latter is a vivid exposition of essentialist thinking to justify racial segregation in the United States in the turn of the 19th to the 20th century. In his 1916 book, *The passing of the great race*, Madison Grant (1916/2016) writes about the unique and superior properties of “Nordic men,” all derived from their exclusive and hereditary “germ-plasm.”

But even milder ideologies or motives can endorse social essentialism for the sake of less vicious—though nonetheless discriminatory—ends. For instance, one much discussed motivation has to do with maintaining power differentials (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). In particular, groups in a position of power within a society’s hierarchy are likely candidates for recruiting essentialist thinking so as to justify their privileged standing (also Appiah, 1990; Fiske, 1993), and recent studies indicate that essentialism can indeed boost people’s adherence to hierarchical disparities in society (Mandalaywala, Amodio, & Rhodes, 2018). Feminist scholars, for one, have forcefully voiced this type of concern. For instance, Grosz (1989) notes that patriarchal systems “rationalize and neutralize the prevailing sexual division of social roles by assuming that these roles are the only, or the best, possibilities, given the confines of the nature, essence, or biology of the two sexes.” (p. 5; see also Fuss, 1989).

An interesting experimental example of arguably such motivation is presented in Mahalingam’s (2003) work on the caste system in India. In one of his studies, Mahalingam tested higher caste (Brahmin) and lower caste (Dalit) adults. Mahalingam adopted a “brain-transplant paradigm,” telling adults a story in which an adult from one caste received the brain (arguably the potential seat of one’s essence) from an adult from the other caste, and then asking participants whether the recipient’s identity and behavior would change. Mahalingam found that Dalits’ belief about the likelihood of a change in the transplant recipient’s behaviors was unaffected by the direction of the transplant; i.e., from a Dalit to a Brahmin or vice versa. In contrast, Brahmins’ beliefs were asymmetric: Whereas a Dalit’s behavior would be changed by the transplant of a Brahmin’s brain, the reverse would be less likely. In other words, Brahmin’s essence was taken to be impervious, possibly transcending the brain, thus maintaining Brahmin’s position of power as justifiably irrevocable.

The above example expounds a signature characteristic of motivated social essentialism: its deployment can be asymmetric. If social essentialism was solely a feature of cognitive mechanisms, we would expect its
application to be fairly symmetric toward its target referents. For instance, if social essentialism is an extension of biological essentialism, then we should expect it to apply equally to distinct social groups, as it does to distinct animal species. Just as we are no more likely to essentialize zebras than giraffes, so we should not be differently likely to essentialize Dalits and Brahmins. And yet, there are indeed a number of examples of such an asymmetry in the application of social essentialism, arguably deriving from various motivations, not only power differences.

One such case can be seen in regard to essentialist beliefs about religious groups. In a study conducted among orthodox and secular Jewish adults in Israel, we asked how readily they were to accept a change in a person’s religiosity (e.g., from secular to orthodox) or religion (e.g., from Jewish to Christian), following various potential alterations to one’s essence. For instance, in one scenario, we described an orthodox Jewish man who suffered amnesia after a car accident while traveling abroad, and then got “adopted” by a secular Jewish community in the foreign country. We asked participants whether the man would become as secular as his adopted community, or remain as orthodox as his original self. One of the key findings was that whereas the direction of transformation (from secular to orthodox or vice versa) did not affect secular participants’ judgments, it did affect orthodox participants’. Namely, the latter rated as more likely that an originally secular person would become orthodox after moving to an orthodox environment than the other way around. We also found that orthodox participants were altogether less likely than secular participants, to believe in the possibility of losing one’s religion (Segev, Bergman, & Diesendruck, 2012). Thus, both one’s religion and one’s orthodoxy were conceptually more safeguarded by orthodox individuals. The maintenance of one’s religion and religiosity status, so valued by orthodox individuals, seems to have shaped their deployment of essentialism. This is a somewhat unique context in which despite the absence of ostensible power differences, there are nonetheless ideologies motivating some conceptual acrobatics.

The above two examples about the asymmetry in the application of social essentialism—in the context of caste in India and the context of religion among Jews—are particularly revealing because they illustrate motivated flexibility not only in people’s tendency to deploy essentialism regarding different groups but also in the very concept of what the essence might be. As Medin and Ortony (1989) had remarked, essences are placeholder notions, which can be instantiated in various ways. The Brahmins see the essence as physical (the brain) when it goes from a Brahmin to a Dalit,
but it is metaphysical when the move is in the opposite direction. Orthodox Jews believe “orthodoxy” may lie in something endogenous to the person (the soul?) when an orthodox Jew moves to a secular environment, but an orthodox environment can ignite a secular Jew’s orthodox essence. A naturalistic conceptualization of group essences, equating them to the essence of animal species, seems to be only one—possibly convenient, and very powerful and intuitive—instantiation of this concept. When the circumstances—and especially the need—call for an alternative, people seem ready to entertain other possibilities.

A final type of motivation on which I would like to expand has to do with the importance of developing and sustaining a cohesive identity. As Social Identity Theory argues, membership in social groups has multiple influences in one’s sense of self and identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In particular, the core argument is that, as extremely social beings, people have a basic need for belongingness that drives them to search for groups to affiliate with (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Once such a group is found, the person conceives of his or her self as tied to that group. Consequently, the group’s qualities, well-being, and destiny become intimately related to the person’s. If the group is well, I am well. Arguably, this is a main driver of intergroup bias. First, just as I come to recognize the group/s to which I belong (my ingroup/s), I identify those to which I do not belong (the outgroups). Second, given that the ingroup is tied to my well-being, I have a great interest in seeing the ingroup in a more positive light than the outgroup.

A further important implication of this motivation—especially for the present argument—is that due to the above psychological benefits of belonging to a group, people want to feel “safe” in their sense of belongingness. They want to feel that their membership in a group is warranted for life, it cannot be revoked, and that others cannot easily gain access to it. Some may relate this to a general need to justify the social system as it is (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). Crucially, all these are satisfied by the adoption of essentialist beliefs about group differences. Essentialism is the conceptual glue that—at least in one’s mind—holds the group together and explains its uniqueness.

A number of studies support the above hypothesis about the relation between essentialism and group identity (e.g., Bastian & Haslam, 2006; Pehrson, Brown, & Zagefka, 2009). For instance, when given a choice as to which group to affiliate with, adults preferred a more homogeneous group over another that was diverse and less cohesive.
Further, adults with negative attitudes toward Blacks were more likely to categorically identify multiracial individuals as Black. Thus, an indirect measure of ingroup favoritism was associated with a tendency to essentialize race (Ho, Roberts, & Gelman, 2015). Notably, most of these studies have highlighted the synergistic relation between essentialism and ingroup identification among majority group members. This is so since, arguably, majorities are the ones with the most to lose from a nonessentialist construal of group differences, in which people can join and leave privileged groups.

Nevertheless, interestingly, though more problematically, essentialism may also be recruited for the interests of minority groups (see discussion in Ryazanov & Christenfeld, 2018). This may be particularly prevalent when minorities feel threatened, and thus attempt to convince others of their unique predicament. For instance, Spivak (1988) coined the term “strategic essentialism” to describe the phenomenon by which minority or marginalized groups (e.g., women) intentionally overlook within-group differences so as to create a unitary block collaborating toward a common goal (e.g., demanding particular rights). Grosz (1989) noted the “unenviable” position in which such a stand puts feminism. As she writes, on the one hand, “if we are not justified in taking women as a category, what political grounding does feminism have?” (p. 11). On the other hand, as Grosz and others note, this kind of strategy plays into the hands of the majority’s interest in maintaining power and privilege differences, and in endorsing the stratification of social hierarchies. As Fuss (1989) discusses, this “risk” of essentialism needs to be acknowledged and overcome in order to make progress in feminist theory and activism.

This conundrum is not exclusive to feminism, as there are similar strategic uses of essentialism by other “kinds” of minorities. For instance, Morton and Postmes (2009) bring evidence on how group identification boosts endorsement of essentialism regarding sexuality among gay, lesbian, and bisexual adults, especially when the group identity is denied by the majority. Verkuyten (2003) also found that immigrant adults in the Netherlands adopted an essentialist discourse when justifying their right to maintain the group’s cultural practices and values, but denied essentialism when arguing against the majority’s homogenization of their group (see also Verkuyten & Brug, 2004). Finally, in the study described earlier on the Indian caste system, Mahalingam found that even among Dalits—the untouchable and lowest caste in the system—approximately half of the participants endorsed an essentialist notion of group identity. Mahalingam raises
the possibility that this may be due to a sense of pride of the group, and a consequent desire to preserve the uniqueness of that identity, with its particular practices and values.

Setting aside the very important political implications of adopting or not an essentialist position about group differences, the above discussion of how essentialism interacts with group identity among adults belonging to both majority and minority groups, highlights two very distinct psychological functions of essentialism. The one most commonly discussed—possibly justifiably so due to its dire negative implications—is a discriminatory function. It serves to exclude the other from “us,” and justify our privileged status. Evidently it serves primarily the privileged group, i.e., the majority or the higher status group. The second is a cohesion function. It serves to define and congeal who “we” are. It provides a sense of security in one’s group belongingness and the group’s uniqueness. It may apply equally to majorities and minorities. These two functions, although being representationally similar, may have different foci and encourage radically distinct attitudes and behavioral dispositions. The former targets the outgroup and promotes stereotyping, prejudice, and negative attitudes. The latter looks toward the ingroup and impels collaboration, cultural valuation, and affiliation. In brief, the former foments outgroup hate, the latter ingroup love. This dichotomization oversimplifies the issue—for instance, there are cases in which the endorsement of essentialism by minorities is associated with negative attitudes toward their own group (e.g., Mandalaywala et al., 2018). Nevertheless, the dichotomization helps clarify the distinctiveness of these stances.

Having mapped and described these distinct motivations based on adult studies, I now turn to the “origins” question. Namely, can these motivations function as drivers of the development of social essentialism in the first place? Are young children’s essentialization of social groups subject to these motivational pulls? In order to address this question, I will first review evidence that children too manifest asymmetries in their deployment of social essentialism. As I noted above, such asymmetries are hints that factors other than sheer cognitive processes are at play. Then, I will review evidence suggesting that the above motivations—the maintenance of power differences, the strive for group identity, but especially a need to belong—may in fact be at play from very early on in development, possibly shaping young children’s social group concepts. I will end with some more speculative thoughts on how this motivated perspective on social essentialism may explain other aspects of young children’s social cognition.
4. Asymmetries in children’s social essentialism

As reviewed above, in various contexts, adults from different groups asymmetrically apply essentialist beliefs such that in certain cases, the ingroup is viewed in essentialistic terms more than the outgroup, and in other cases the trend reverses. A number of recent studies show that both such patterns are seen already early in development.

First, a number of recent studies indicate that children too manifest the characteristic extra homogenization of the outgroup. Although not typically discussed in relation to essentialism, the finding in the social psychological literature that adults typically conceive of the outgroup as constituted of similar individuals, whereas the ingroup is construed as composed of unique specimens (Judd & Park, 1988; Simon & Brown, 1987) can be viewed as an asymmetric application of the homogenization aspect of essentialism. Through essentialist lenses, the outgroup homogeneity effect implies that the outgroup’s essence, compared to the ingroup’s, has more causal force in determining the characteristics of group exemplars. “They” cannot help but be and act in the way that they do, because their essence makes them what they are, and makes them all alike. “We” have more choice, free will, individual variability, agency; we are not prisoners of our group essence, and thus we differ. A number of recent studies indicate that children too might think this way.

In one set of studies, we asked 5- and 8-year-old Jewish Israeli and Christian German children to determine whether certain features were characteristic of a whole group: either their ingroup (i.e., Jews and Germans, respectively) or their outgroup (Arabs and Turks, respectively) (Shilo, Weinsdörfer, Rakoczy, & Diesendruck, 2019). For instance, Israeli children were asked whether they think that all Jews have 12 bones in their hands. To help them make the determination, we told children that they could check either one of two samples of people belonging to the target group (e.g., 3 Jews). The critical manipulation was that the samples varied in their degree of homogeneity such that one sample was highly homogeneous (e.g., three young men) and the other heterogeneous (e.g., one young man, one old man, and one boy). We found that across ages and countries, children were more likely to select heterogeneous samples when generalizations were about biological characteristics of the ingroup than when they were about the outgroup.
A second study investigated a further implication alluded to above, of this asymmetric construal of ingroups and outgroups, namely, the notion that a group essence has more causal power over the behavior and preferences of outgroup individuals than it does over those of ingroup individuals (Essa, Weinsdoerfer, Shilo, Diesendruck, & Rakoczy, 2020). Here, we tested 5- and 8-year-old Jewish and Arab Israeli and Christian German children, asking them to explain a person’s behavior. First, children were exposed to three members of a group (either ingroup: Jewish/Arab/German, or outgroup: Arab/Jewish/Turk, respectively) exhibiting the same novel behavior (e.g., eating a food called Razo). They then saw a fourth member of the group manifesting the same behavior, and were asked why they thought the person did so. Children’s responses were coded into two main categories: explanations referring to the group (e.g., “because she is an Arab”) and explanations referring to the individual (e.g., “because she likes it”). We found that children were more likely to offer group explanations when targets were outgroup than when they were ingroup, and individual explanations when targets were ingroup than when they were outgroup.

In a final study, we investigated whether children’s sheer curiosity for information about people is subject to intergroup bias (Nasie & Diesendruck, 2020b). An experimenter showed Jewish Israeli 5- and 8-year-olds a picture facing down and told them that it depicted a child from either their ingroup (a Jewish boy named Yosi) or their outgroup (an Arab boy named Ahmad). The experimenter then informed children that she could tell them things either about the specific child (e.g., “Ahmad”) or the child’s group (e.g., “Arabs”) and asked children—four times in a row—what type of information they would like to receive. The main finding was that 8-year-olds—though not 5-year-olds—preferred to receive information about the group when targets were outgroup more so than when targets were ingroup and vice versa regarding information about the individual. Again, whereas group-level information might be the most relevant and important when thinking about outgroup members, individual-level information seems to be more crucial for understanding ingroup members.

Most of the above studies were conducted among majority group children, and thus they primarily reveal that, at least among majority children, there can be an asymmetric deployment of essentialism toward in- vs outgroups. This pattern notwithstanding, there is also evidence that, as among adults, among children too there seem to be effects of the group status on
their reliance on essentialism. Thus, in some contexts, majority children are more prone to essentialization than minority children, but in other contexts the reverse is the case.

One interesting example of the former is a study conducted among low- and high-SES 5-year-olds in Chile, regarding social status groups (i.e., “rich” and “poor”; del Río & Strasser, 2011). In one of the tasks, children were asked whether a child would grow up to be like an adult matching the child in social status or some other superficial feature, thus assessing the stability of these features. In a similar task, children were asked who the child’s parent was, thus assessing beliefs about the inheritability of various features. The finding pertinent to the present discussion is that high-SES children were more likely than low-SES children to believe in the stability and inheritability of social status. In other words, 5-year-old children in Chile reasoned about social status like adults in India reasoned about caste. The speculative implication is that like adults, children too may be sensitive to power differences, and thus the more privileged may be more intent in maintaining such differences, for instance, by adopting an essentialist construal of the relevant social category.

But as with adults, motivations other than power maintenance may influence children’s endorsement of essentialism, making minority children equally prone to essentialism as majority ones. In one study, we used a version of the adoption paradigm, to test Muslim Arab and Secular Jewish, 5-, 8-, and 12-year-olds’ belief about the inheritability of ethnicity (Diesendruck, Birnbaum, Deeb, & Segall, 2013). Children were told about a baby born to a couple from one ethnicity (e.g., Arabs), but taken care of by a couple from the other ethnicity (e.g., Jews). Children were then asked about the group identity of the baby as a grown-up. The finding pertinent to the present point is that Jewish and Arab participants, to a similar extent, were more likely to say that the baby would have the biological couple’s ethnicity when it matched the participant’s own than when it did not. In other words, both majority (Jewish) and minority (Arab) children essentialized their ethnicity to a similar extent, and more so than the contrasting ethnicity.

In fact, as adults, children too sometimes evince a flip in the typical asymmetry in terms of group status, with minority children being more prone than majority children to essentialize particular social categories. For instance, Kinzler and Dautel (2012) assessed the beliefs about the stability of race vs language among 5- to 6-year-old and 9- to 10-year-old European- and African-American children. In the task, participants had
to decide whether a child would grow up to be an adult who speaks the same language as the child but looks as being of a different race, or an adult who speaks a different language as the child but looks as belonging to the same race. The finding pertinent here is that whereas European-American 5-year-olds responded that the adult would match the child in language, African-American 5-year-olds responded that the match would be in terms of race. In other words, racial minority children essentialized race more than racial majority children (see also Mandalaywala et al., 2018; Roberts & Gelman, 2015). A similar pattern emerged among minority children in a very different cultural context. In Birnbaum et al. (2010), Muslim Arab and Secular Jewish 5-, 8-, and 12-year-olds were shown two characters, and were asked to generalize properties of one of them to a target character. In the triads of interest here, the target character shared ethnicity, but not gender, social status, or religiosity, with one of the two characters, and shared gender, social status, or religiosity, but not ethnicity, with the other character. Children were asked the properties of which character the target had. We found that Arab children were more likely to draw the inference based on ethnicity when the target character was an Arab than when he/she was a Jew. Secular Jewish children’s ethnicity-based inferences were unaffected by the target’s ethnicity. In other words, Arab children treated Arabness as more homogenous and thus inductively powerful than Jewishness, but secular Jewish children treated them both as equally homogeneous and inductively powerful. Arab children essentialized Arabness more than Jewishness, but secular Jewish children essentialized both equally.

That same paper revealed a further pattern reminiscent of adults’. Namely, irrespective of the directionality of the inferences, the group of children who most robustly drew inferences based on ethnicity were religious Jewish children (Birnbaum et al., 2010). Already among the youngest age group tested there—5-year-olds—religious Jewish children were more likely than their secular Jewish and Muslim Arab age-mates, to believe that whether someone is a Jew or an Arab has more inductive power than the person’s gender, social status, or religiosity. In other words, it would seem that by age 5, religious Jewish children might have already internalized their parents’ motivated social cognition. Indeed, children’s response pattern aligns both with theological and political ideologies of a majority of religious Jewish adults. Evidently, how such ideologies get transmitted to children already at this young age remains to be deciphered, though some clues have been uncovered. For one, there is evidence that the more Jewish children believe that social categories were created by God, the more they essentialize
social categories (Diesendruck & Haber, 2009; see also Chalik et al., 2017). More revealing of the transmission process, we found that compared to secular Jewish parents, religious Jewish parents held a more right-wing political ideology, essentialized the differences between Jews and Arabs more, and were more likely to use generics when spontaneously describing people to their 5-year-olds (Segall et al., 2015). Crucially, the more parents used generics, the more children essentialized ethnicity themselves.

A final environmental variable that affects children’s tendency to essentialize a social category is the degree of social diversity they encounter in their daily lives. Arguably, the more racially or ethnically integrated a child’s society is, the less justification children may have to discriminate between groups along these dimensions. And indeed, studies on race in the United States and on ethnicity in Israel support this contention. For instance, Pauker, Xu, Williams, and Biddle (2016) found that 4- to 11-year-old children living in racially diverse Hawaii were less likely to believe race is inheritable than their age-mates in racially homogeneous parts of Massachusetts. In Israel, 8- to 11-year-old Jewish and Arab children attending ethnically integrated schools were less essentialist about ethnicity than their age-mates attending segregated schools (Deeb, Segall, Birnbaum, Ben-Eliyahu, & Diesendruck, 2011). Further interestingly, in this latter study, there was a negative correlation between the extent to which children recalled the ethnicities of characters in a story and their ethnic essentialism. In other words, it was not the case that integration erased ethnicity, thus leading to less essentialism. To the contrary, integration highlighted ethnicity, but nevertheless hampered essentialism. This finding is consistent with the notion that integration weakened the motivation to essentialize ethnicity.

The above studies indicate that, like adults, young children too asymmetrically apply essentialism to different groups, and do so possibly for a variety of reasons. Furthermore, other studies indicate that, also like adults, children’s very concept of what the essence of a group is might vary depending on group membership. In fact, the very determination of who is human seems to suffer from intergroup bias from early on in development. In an intriguing study, McLoughlin, Tipper, and Over (2018) showed 5- and 6-year-olds’ faces derived from the morphing of real people and dolls. These ambiguous faces were then described as depicting either individuals from the participants’ own city (ingroup faces) or from a faraway city (outgroup faces). Using a scale, children were asked how human the faces were. The finding was that 6-year-olds rated outgroup faces as less human than ingroup faces, thus evincing intergroup bias in dehumanization.
The removal of humanness from outgroups begs the question of what the essence of a human group is in children’s minds. There is a growing consensus that it may be associated with psychological or deontic properties (e.g., Kalish & Lawson, 2008; Rhodes & Chalik, 2013). For instance, in one study, we told 4- to 6-year-olds about novel social categories and characterized the categories by two sets of features (e.g., a psychological belief and a physical trait). We found that children generally believed that new members of said categories would necessarily have the psychological feature of the category, even if they lacked the other features (Diesendruck & Eldror, 2011). In another study (Diesendruck & Weiss, 2015), we asked 5-year-olds to categorize exemplars of people into one of two social categories (e.g., based on race). In the critical trials, the exemplar looked like typical members of one category (e.g., was dark-skinned) but children were told that it shared the same beliefs or preferences as members of the alternative, physically distinct, category (e.g., light-skinned group). We found that children overwhelmingly determined category membership by the shared psychological properties. One prediction derived from the above studies is that, if psychological properties are proxies for group essences, and ingroups are more likely than outgroups to have typically human essences, then children should be more likely to attribute psychological properties to ingroup than to outgroup members. Indeed, a number of recent studies indicate that this is the case (see Over (2020) for a review).

In one set of studies, McLoughlin and Over (2017) showed 5- and 6-year-olds video animations of geometric figures moving and interacting. Children were told that the figures either represented members of their ingroup (e.g., they were boys, like the participant) or of the outgroup (e.g., they were girls, unlike the participant). Children were then asked to spontaneously describe what they thought was going on in the videos. The main finding was that children were more likely to use mental state terms (e.g., “want,” “know”) when the figures were described as ingroup than when they were described as outgroup. A recent study among Turkish 11-year-olds found that although they were equally likely to attribute mental states to in- and outgroup members, they were nonetheless more accurate in their inferences about in- than outgroup members (Gönültaş, Selçuk, Slaughter, Hunter, & Ruffman, 2019). A further study found that Dutch 8- to 13-year-olds were differently likely to attribute positive and negative emotions to in- vs outgroup individuals (Sierksma & Bijlstra, 2019). In one final example, we presented Jewish Israeli 3- to 6-year-olds with pictures of either an ingroup (e.g., a Jewish boy) or an outgroup (e.g., an Arab boy) individual, and simply asked children what they
would like to know about the individual (Nasie & Diesendruck, 2020a). We found that children asked more questions about the psychological properties (e.g., preferences, values) of outgroup than ingroup individuals, indicating both the void in their knowledge of that aspect of outgroups, and the relevance of that type of information for construing the group.

The studies reviewed in this section constitute a proof of concept. They show that social essentialism, from the earliest ages at which it is detected in children, and in terms of both its general application and the specifics of what might constitute group essences, is modulated by a variety of contextual factors having to do with children’s experiences with groups. There are asymmetries mapping onto power differences between groups, others that resonate with the degree of threat to one’s—typically minority—group identity, yet others associated with ideologies vowing for the preservation of the group, and finally others having to do with the diversity of one’s environment and thus the possible redrawing of group boundaries. These associations, however, are still untested, as there are no studies showing a direct link between these contended motivations and the very emergence of essentialism. For instance, we do not know whether 55-year-old Chileans from high-SES backgrounds essentialize social status more than their low-SES age-mates (del Río & Strasser, 2011) because of an awareness of the power differences and consequent privileges they enjoy. We also do not know whether Muslim Arab children living in Israel treat ethnicity as more inductively powerful than do Secular Jewish children living in Israel (Birnbaum et al., 2010) because they believe their ethnic identity is undermined by the country’s Jewish majority and thus feel pressed to reify its cohesiveness. This is a critical line of work that I believe needs to be pursued. And it is a feasible line of work to pursue given recent studies indicating that young children, and perhaps even infants, are subject to some such motivations, and that these motivations may in fact impact young children and infants’ social group reasoning and categorization.

5. Children’s motivated social group cognition

In recent years, a growing number of studies show that from a very young age, infants and children are sensitive to power differences. Infants distinguish between powerful and subordinate agents based on a variety of cues, such as size (Thomsen, Frankenhuys, Ingold-Smith, & Carey, 2011), goal attainment (Mascaro & Csibra, 2012), and group size (Pun, Birch, & Baron, 2016). With development, children manifest sensitivity to even more nuanced cues, such as physical features (posture, head tilt,
direct gaze), behaviors (decision power, granting or denying permission, setting norms, being imitated, and giving commands), and demographic characteristics (wealth, age) (Bernard et al., 2016; Brey & Shutts, 2015; Charafeddine et al., 2015, 2016; Gülöz & Gelman, 2017; Over & Carpenter, 2013). Importantly for the present discussion, these distinctions matter for children’s attitudes toward others. In particular, at the interpersonal level, children prefer (Charafeddine et al., 2016; Thomas, Thomsen, Lukowski, Abramyan, & Sarnecka, 2018) and trust (Bernard et al., 2016) dominant agents over subordinate ones. Further, at the intergroup level, children prefer high over low status social groups.

This latter point has been interestingly revealed in cross-cultural studies. In particular, studies in South Africa—where Blacks constitute the larger, but lower status, group—found that young Black children did not have more positive attitudes toward their own race, often manifesting biased attitudes in favor of Whites. This has been demonstrated in children as young as 3 years of age, and in both implicit and explicit measures of attitudes, thus indicating the early emergence and automaticity of a sensitivity to the power differences between Blacks and Whites (Newheiser, Dunham, Merrill, Hoosain, & Olson, 2014; Shutts, Kinzler, Katz, Tredoux, & Spelke, 2011). In fact, there was a positive correlation between children’s awareness of the status difference between Blacks and Whites in South Africa, and their degree of pro-White preference (Olson, Shutts, Kinzler, & Weisman, 2012). Finally, experimentally manipulating the status of novel, made-up groups (via wealth cues) rendered the same intergroup biased attitudes (Horwitz, Shutts, & Olson, 2014).

The above studies thus sustain the possibility that from a fairly young age, not only do power differences between groups affect children’s intergroup preferences and attitudes, but that furthermore, they may shape children’s group concepts. Consistent with this possibility, Nesdale and Flesser (2001) showed that the introduction of a belief in the possibility of social mobility—i.e., a counter-essentialist notion—had differential effects in the degree of perceived similarity and intergroup attitudes of children belonging to high- vs low-status groups. Turning their conclusion around, is it the case that once children become aware of their group’s power status, they strategically deploy essentialist beliefs so as to protect—or challenge—the dominance hierarchy?

A precondition to the above, however, is that children first have to recognize who their group is. In fact, as revealed by the review of adult
studies, group identity in itself functions as a major motivational factor underlying intergroup attitudes (Tajfel & Turner’s, 1979, Social Identity Theory). In brief, the claim is that due to the linkage between one’s self-esteem and the group’s standing, people are motivated to both, favor their ingroup over outgroups, and believe in the cohesiveness and exclusivity of groups. Developmental studies indicate that the former process is seen in children, both in regard to real and made-up groups (see for instance, Bigler & Liben, 2007). For instance, studies with 10- to 12-year-old Dutch children found that stronger national identification was related to less social distance toward the ingroup and to more social distance toward the outgroup (Verkuyten, 2001). Interestingly, ingroup identification seems to play a greater role in group stereotyping among minority than majority British 5- to 9-year-olds (Davis, Leman, & Barrett, 2007; see also Pauker, Apfelbaum, & Spitzer, 2015). Finally, strengthening the identification of 6- to 9-year-old Australian children to minimal groups increased their affiliation to the ingroup (Nesdale, Durkin, Maas, & Griffiths, 2005). Thus, from a certain age, ingroup identification promotes various intergroup biases.

A crucial question, nonetheless, is whether ingroup identification can function as an *initiator* of processes of intergroup attitudes and cognition. On this matter, the developmental evidence is inconclusive. In “translating” Social Identity Theory into the developmental literature, Nesdale and colleagues elaborated Social Identity Developmental Theory and distinguished four phases in the process of group identification: undifferentiated, ethnic awareness, ethnic preference, and ethnic prejudice (Nesdale, 2004; Nesdale, Maass, Durkin, & Griffiths, 2005). In their analysis, it is only by age 4- to 5-years that children become aware of their ingroup identity and manifest preferences for it, though there might be differences among children growing up in societies varying in their degree of cultural diversity. Challenging the precedence of awareness to preference, Bennett, Lyons, Sani, and Barrett (1998) found among British children ages 6 years and up, that the more strongly they identified with their national group, the more biased were their attitudes in favor of their ingroup. Crucially, however, by 5 years of age, children already manifested ingroup favoritism, but expressed very low levels of self-identification. In other words, ingroup favoritism predated ingroup identification. More recently, studies have shown that a preference for individuals from ecologically familiar groups appears already among infants (Kinzler, Dupoux, & Spelke, 2007; Pun, Ferera, Diesendruck, Kiley Hamlin, & Baron, 2018;
Xiao et al., 2018), thus arguably much earlier than a presumed capacity to identify in- and outgroups. These latter findings suggest that ingroup identification per se may not serve as a precursor to intergroup concepts.

Nevertheless, alternative, more fundamental motivations, underlying processes of group identification, may serve such a function. Evolutionary psychologists argue that in order to survive, humans required groups, as it was only via groups that humans could adaptively overcome two recurrent social challenges (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Henrich, 2017; Herrmann, Call, Hernández-Lloreda, Hare, & Tomasello, 2007; Kurzban, Tooby, & Cosmides, 2001). Namely, groups were needed in order to, on the one hand, successfully hunt large prey, gather sufficient food, and care for their kin, and on the other, protect, and perhaps even expand, one’s resources and mating possibilities. The recurrence of such challenges throughout evolution, and the fitness value of efficiently responding to such challenges, arguably led to the development of a set of adaptations coalescing into a coalitional psychology (Kurzban et al., 2001; Pietraszewski, Cosmides, & Tooby, 2014). In particular, these psychological adaptations involved processes of cue detection in individuals in one’s environment, computation of cue similarity and distinctiveness, and a consequent grouping of people according to these computations, thus discriminating between the people with whom one should vs should not affiliate (Choi & Bowles, 2007; De Dreu, 2012).

From a developmental perspective, the above argument intimates that such fundamental motivations may be present from a very young age. And indeed, recent studies indicate that a sensitivity to affiliative cues is evident already by age 18 months (Over & Carpenter, 2009), and that crucially, it affects the process of social categorization already by 14 months of age (Ferera, Baron, & Diesendruck, 2018). In Ferera et al. (2018), infants were first exposed to brief videos of either an affiliative interaction between two actresses in which they harmoniously collaborated to achieve a goal, or a conflictive interaction in which the actresses antagonistically competed over the same goal. Infants then participated in a racial categorization task, in which their looking time at an out-of-category exemplar was measured as an index of categorical discrimination. The main finding was that when targets were women, infants successfully discriminated only after an affiliative prime, whereas when targets were men, infants successfully discriminated only after a conflictive prime. In other words, “gendered” motivations affected infants’ tendency to recognize social groups. In particular, triggering infants’ need to belong made them especially attentive to
visual cues that allowed them to discriminate between groups of women, arguably the prime providers of caretaking behavior (Benenson, 2014; Taylor et al., 2000).

The broader conclusion from the above work on infants is that a “need to belong” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Over, 2016) may be the fundamental catalyst for representing social groups. Infants and young children need to find out who they can rely on for sustenance, protection, and learning. They likely do not have a priori expectations of who constitutes the group, and thus cues in their immediate environment—e.g., in terms of the racial/ethnic diversity or homogeneity of their social ecology, or implicit messages expressed in adults’ language—define those for them (see for instance, Diesendruck & Deblinger-Tangi, 2014). Once their familiar group is identified, infants and young children will also want to feel safe in their belonging to the group, and that means also in the cohesiveness of the group. As mentioned earlier, essentialism guarantees that. If a group is defined by having a particular essence, essences are nontransferable, and essences are granted by birth, then by virtue of being a member of the group, I too have the essence, and my status as a group member is irrevocable.

This conclusion renders essentialism not only as a “solution” for the need to belong but possibly also as a “quest.” Young children—as well as adults—may be keen to reinforce their essentialist construal of groups. And herein lies an implication connecting essentialism to an array of social-cognitive phenomena witnessed in children. Namely, to the extent that, as reviewed earlier, children associate essences with psychological characteristics having to do with habits, values, and roles (e.g., Foster-Hanson & Rhodes, 2019; Kalish & Lawson, 2008), then they may be especially adamant to honor group-related habits, values, and roles.

6. Children’s pursuit of essentialism

To recap the argument so far: A need to belong motivates the belief that group membership is defined by essences. Group essences—or at the least proxies for them—are defined by children as having to do with psychological characteristics and their observable manifestations: habits, values, and roles. Therefore, in order to reify group essences, children should pursue the maintenance of group habits, values, and roles. In other words, children should normativize habits, this normativization should apply even—or especially—to seemingly arbitrary behaviors, and this normativization
should be group-bound. As it happens, children indeed do all these (see Schmidt & Rakoczy, 2018).

From a fairly young age, children view object labels and functions as conventional, namely, as cultural information known to others and thus expected to be endorsed by others (Diesendruck & Markson, 2011). Moreover, they believe these habits to be a matter of force, not choice. Casler and Kelemen (2005) presented 2-year-olds a novel object and demonstrated its function. Toddlers were also shown other objects that were equally efficient for generating the demonstrated function. When asked to choose which object they wanted to perform the demonstrated function, 2-year-olds overwhelmingly selected the demonstrated one. More strikingly, they also expected others to use that same object. As Rakoczy and colleagues then demonstrated in a series of studies, young children’s expectations about how others would behave did not simply reflect imitation (Rakoczy, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2008). Rather, it derived from children’s belief that this is what should be done. Already by 2 years of age, young children actively protested if others performed an action differently from how the action was initially modeled. Furthermore, young children were found to be “promiscuously normative” such that a single observation of an intentional action sufficed for them to expect even absent agents to honor its precise structure (see also Orvell, Kross, & Gelman, 2018; Schmidt, Butler, Heinz, & Tomasello, 2016; Schmidt, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2011).

In a further intriguing manifestation of this fidelity in replicating others’ modeled actions, numerous studies have revealed children’s tendency to replicate causally futile actions. There is still a debate on what accounts for this tendency to overimitate (see Hoehl et al., 2019, for a recent review), but several lines of evidence nevertheless constrain the possibilities. First, overimitation does not seem to occur at all, or as robustly, among other animals (Clay & Tennie, 2018; Horner & Whiten, 2005). Second, it has been shown to occur even when children are alone (Lyons, Young, & Keil, 2007), in children growing up in different cultures (Nielsen, Mushin, Tomaselli, & Whiten, 2014), and more strongly when the actions are ritualistic rather than instrumental, and have been modeled by multiple agents (Herrmann, Legare, Harris, & Whitehouse, 2013). A further particularly revealing line of work for the present discussion is that young children believe overimitated actions are normative too (Kenward, 2012; Keupp, Behne, & Rakoczy, 2013). In particular, already by age 3, children protest—often using normative language—when someone else fails to perform a modeled unnecessary action.
As alluded above, there are numerous accounts of the mechanisms underlying this tendency. Many relate it to social motivations, having to do with an affiliative drive (e.g., Over & Carpenter, 2013), a general propensity to normativity (e.g., Kenward, 2012), or the importance of faithful imitation for the acquisition of culture (e.g., Legare & Nielsen, 2015). Without adjudicating among these perspectives, I add here the possibility that overimitation—as a special case of normativization—derives from the need to construe groups as cohesive, permanent, and exclusive. Everything “we” do, we do it because that is who we are. That is why children, but not other animals, care so much about how things are done, how many people do it, and that others do it just like them, perhaps especially if the action is seemingly arbitrary and noninstrumental. That also explains why children are particularly attentive to who does it.

Already in infancy, there is an expectation that people who perform similar ritualistic, causally arbitrary actions, on an object, will be more likely to affiliate (Liberman, Kinzler, & Woodward, 2018; Over & Carpenter, 2013; see also Powell & Spelke, 2013). The flip side of this is that from a young age, children are especially adamant about behaviors and norms associated with groups. First, a recent study indicates that already by 18 months of age, infants expect that arbitrary actions demonstrated as being obligatory—but not those demonstrated as idiosyncratic—will be honored by others (Schmidt, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2019). Second, by age 3, children are more likely to enforce an arbitrary norm if it was endorsed by all members of a group, than if there was disagreement in the group regarding the norm (Schmidt, Rakoczy, Mietzsch, & Tomasello, 2016; see also Chalik & Dunham, 2020). Third, after being taught certain habits of a novel group, 4- to 6-year-olds, and to a lesser extent 7- to 13-year-olds, judged a violation of that norm as wrong (Roberts, Ho, & Gelman, 2017), justifying their judgments differently for when violators were people as opposed to animals (Foster-Hanson, Roberts, Gelman, & Rhodes, 2018). Analogous findings have been reported regarding “real” groups. In particular, Srinivasan, Kaplan, and Dahl (2019) interrogated Hindu and Muslim children about the appropriateness of others’ violation of religious norms. One of their main findings was that children from both religious groups tended to endorse a certain “religious relativism”, namely, Hindu children, for instance, responded that it was wrong for a Hindu to violate a Hindu norm, but also regarded as wrong for a Muslim to violate a Muslim norm. Children nonetheless responded that it was OK for a member of either religion to violate a norm from the other religion. In other words, by 9 years of age, religious norms were taken to be group-bound.
Alongside this general expectation about the group-boundedness of norms, studies indicate that children are especially devoted to the maintenance of their own group’s habits and norms. Overimitation, for instance, is especially prominent when action models belong to the child’s group. For instance, 14-month-olds were more likely to perform the causally irrelevant actions modeled by a speaker of their language than those modeled by a speaker of a foreign language (Buttelmann, Zmyj, Daum, & Carpenter, 2013; see also Begus, Gliga, & Southgate, 2016; Howard, Henderson, Carrazza, & Woodward, 2015). Moreover, children kept a preference for imitating the actions of an ingroup over an outgroup model, even when the ingroup model acted in an antisocial fashion (Wilks, Kirby, & Nielsen, 2018). In other words, adherence to potential ingroup norms trumped children’s liking of ingroup members. In fact, recent evidence indicates that children’s preference for imitating ingroup members’ arbitrary actions is automatic (Essa, Sebanz, & Diesendruck, 2019).

Interestingly, this ingroup normativity bias indeed seems to be particularly prevalent in regard to conventional actions. For instance, after hearing about novel conventional (e.g., dress code) vs moral (e.g., fair resource allocation) norms, 9- to 13-year-olds were harsher in their judgment of an ingroup member’s violation of a conventional than of a moral norm (Killen, Rutland, Abrams, Mulvey, & Hitti, 2013), a pattern that grew stronger with development and was related to children’s feelings that group members should be loyal to their group (Abrams, Palmer, Rutland, Cameron, & Van de Vyver, 2014). In fact, this asymmetry in children’s judgments of conventional and moral violations seems to arise already at a young age. In one study (Schmidt, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2012), 3-year-olds were introduced to two puppets, who differed from each other in a number of group features such that one belonged to the same group as the child and the other to a different group. Children were then taught a new game by an experimenter, and subsequently observed the puppets performing the same game. In the critical trials, puppets violated the game’s rules; in further trials, puppets violated moral rules. The main finding was that children protested equally often when an ingroup or an outgroup puppet violated a moral rule. In contrast, children protested more when an ingroup puppet violated the game’s rule than when an outgroup puppet did so. In other words, the ingroup bias occurred precisely in the context of conventional and arbitrary norms, not in the context of arguably universal moral rules (see also Liberman, Howard, Vasquez, & Woodward, 2018). In fact, certain studies find that in the latter cases, children may manifest the
typical ingroup favoritism, thus judging more harshly an outgroup than an ingroup member who violates a moral rule (see McAuliffe & Dunham, 2016, for a review). Taken together, these studies highlight that, from a young age, what is most at stake is that which is unique about us.

Along these lines, and following anthropological work on the power of rituals to generate cohesion within groups (Henrich, 2017; Whitehouse et al., 2014), Legare and colleagues have argued that ritualistic conventional actions may be particularly effective for driving group affiliation (Watson-Jones & Legare, 2016). They have found, for instance, that participation in such actions, compared to sheer group activities, increased children’s feeling of affiliation toward the group (Wen, Herrmann, & Legare, 2016), and priming 5- to 6-year-olds with ingroup exclusion, led them to be more faithful in their imitation of conventional actions (Watson-Jones, Whitehouse, & Legare, 2016). In other words, children used adherence to ingroup norms to affirm their group membership.

In closing this section, I restate what appears to be a common thread underlying the peculiar expectations and responses children, from a young age, hold regarding the force and scope of intentional and arbitrary human actions. Namely, children expect these to be normative and group-bound, being especially pertinent to children’ own group. Various functional accounts of normativization successfully explain a variety of the components revealed in the review above (e.g., Hawkins, Goodman, & Goldstone, 2019; Schmidt & Rakoczy, 2018; Whitehouse et al., 2014). The account being proposed here adds to these by posing that an ultimate generator of this common thread is a fundamental motivation to belong to a particular group, and the consequent necessity to believe in the permanence, uniqueness, and relative insularity of the group. These are all accomplished by the adoption of an essentialist construal of groups.

Evidently, at this point this account is speculative, and requires more direct empirical evidence to substantiate its claims. Nevertheless, it generates a few testable hypotheses. For instance, is it the case that children view the arbitrary behaviors of essentialized groups as more normative than those of nonessentialized groups? Is it the case that the more essentialized children perceive their group to be, the more likely they will be to: (a) complain about group members’ violation of the norms, (b) believe the norms are permanent, and (c) disapprove of outgroup members’ imitation of their group’s arbitrary norms? Further, do threats to children’s sense of group belonging heighten their essentialist beliefs about the group and their endorsement of the normativity of group norms? And finally, are all elements of essentialism
equally engaged by a need to belong? Haslam and others have noted that essentialism is a complex notion, composed of a variety of component beliefs that do not always cohere (e.g., beliefs about the entitativity vs naturalness of groups, Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000; see also Gelman, Heyman, & Legare, 2007, for evidence on the lack of coherence). Is it the case that a need to belong motivates the adoption of all these component beliefs equally? Does normativization contribute to the strengthening of all these beliefs to a similar extent? These are some of the lines of inquiry this proposal invites future studies to undertake.

7. Final remarks

The tendency to believe that social groups are composed of fairly homogeneous sets of people, that such groups differ fundamentally, and that the differences are permanent, deriving from intrinsic, causally powerful, and possibly innate factors, emerges universally and at an early age. Both among adults and children, this tendency has been associated with a variety of negative consequences, ranging from negative attitudes, to discrimination, to genocide. Especially for the latter reasons, social and developmental psychologists have devoted substantial efforts to uncover the sources of these essentialist tendencies. The hope was that such discoveries would lead to the development of effective preventive remedies to social essentialism and its downstream destructive implications. These efforts have indeed achieved some such successes, in all respects: from uncovering potential sources of essentialism, to devising effective interventions.

In this chapter, I presented an alternative perspective on the development of social essentialism, one that encourages a shift on the focus and directionality of our investigations. This perspective searches for the sources of essentialism not in the conceptual features of children’s minds, but instead in their fundamental motivation to be part of a group. The argument is that it is this basic—and some would argue, especially human—need, which foments a desire for the group to be fully committed to me, for this commitment to be guaranteed from my sheer membership in the group, and for this commitment to be binding and exclusive. My ingroup—any member of it—will protect, feed, and teach me—not others who do not belong to the group—and will do so because that is what ingroups do. Essentialism is the belief that promises all these desired commitments.

As reviewed, this proposal accords with a range of findings in the social and developmental literature: from the fact that, like adults, there are various
and interesting asymmetries in the tendency of children from different groups to essentialize different groups, to the findings of evidence—some direct some indirect—of children’s sensitivity to various social motivations. Nevertheless, and as I noted throughout, there are numerous missing links. In particular, there are no direct and systematic developmental studies of the relation between various motivations and essentialization, and between essentialization and normativization. I see these as very promising avenues for future research.

As a final point, this motivational perspective highlighted the possibility that one of the core sources of essentialism lies not on the fear of potential foes, but on the yearning for potential friends. This is not to say that the former should be dismissed—its negative consequences are in grave need of antidotes. Rather, it emboldens the idea that a redefinition of group boundaries—perhaps especially at a young age—can yield a great impact.

References


