5.3

Essentialism

The Development of a Simple, But Potentially Dangerous, Idea

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W e hate them. Not always, not all of us, not all of them. But the ease with which people—mature, educated, generally well-intending—can develop negative attitudes toward a different group of people is remarkable. Pick a group of people who know each other, call half of them “the blues” and the other half “the reds,” and let them go on with their regular activities. Come back a few days later. Chances are “the blues” and “the reds” are bunching up together, telling stories about the other, favoring their own, and hindering the other. This would be quite harmless if it were only an intriguing social psychological game. These processes, however, have parallels in real life with appalling consequences.

For centuries, European empires extracted Africans from their native lands and took them across the ocean in inhumane conditions to live as slaves. In the space of a few years in the 1940s, Nazi Germany advocated and carried out the extermination of millions of Jews. In the space of 3 months in 1994, Rwandan Hutu extremists killed close to a million Rwandan Tutsis. In these latter two cases, as in many other examples of ethnic cleansing, individuals performed these atrocities on their neighbors, coworkers, patients, clients, pupils, and teachers. How could this have been? What were the psychological processes that allowed a human being to subjugate or exterminate another? What justified picking up a machete and executing an acquaintance? There are numerous attempts at answering this question. In this chapter I will discuss only one: the perpetrators’ belief that the natural order of the world made their acts legitimate. Specifically, the belief that perpetrators and victims were intrinsically, fundamentally, and incommensurably different from each other. In jargon, the belief that we and them are essentially different kinds of people.

ESSENCES AS EXCUSES

The Nazis were notorious for exploiting the potential of “essentialization” for encouraging Germans to persecute Jews. Goebbels’s Propaganda Ministry produced films in which Jews were portrayed as having extremely negative characteristics, and this belief was supported by “scientific evidence” for them being inherently and inevitably inferior beings. Jews were a different species—a most malignant and contaminating species—and as such it was justified to annihilate them.

Modern social psychological studies demonstrate that Goebbels’s strategy is indeed effective. Correlational and experimental studies reveal that social essentialism is linked to people’s difficulty with switching frames of mind (Chao, Cher, Roisman, & Hong, 2007), stereotypes (Bastian & Haslam, 2006; Levy, Stroessner, & Dweck, 1998), prejudice (Prentice & Miller, 2007), dehumanization (Leyens et al., 2003), disinterest in intergroup interaction (Williams & Eberhardt, 2008), and justifications for social stratification (Yzerbyt, Corneille, & Estrada, 2001). In fact, simply telling people that certain group differences (e.g., between men and women) are grounded on intrinsic, biologically based, facts led them to endorse discriminatory practices (Morton, Postmes, Haslam, & Hornsey, 2009; see also Keller, 2005). In short, if “they” are essentially different from “us,” then inequality is permissible, prejudice acceptable, and intergroup interaction pointless. In a sense, in the minds of its holders, essentialism provides a convincing explanation for social differences.

 Crucially, it seems that people do not need propaganda films to develop essentialist beliefs (Rothbart & Taylor, 1992). Adults in India essentialize caste (Mahalingam, 2003), in Mongolia ethnicity (Gil-White, 2001), and in Western countries race (Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000).
At the sociological level, each of these cultures has unique structures and narratives for justifying social order. At the psychological level, these variations create minimal diversity in adults’ tendency to essentialize social groups.

In fact, children as young as 5 years of age manifest essentialist-like beliefs. North American children believe that one’s biological sex determines preferences irrespective of the social input people receive (Taylor, 1996), that one’s race is determined by one’s biological parents (Hirschfeld, 1996), and that racial categories correspond to objective partitions of the natural world (Rhodes & Gelman, 2009). Analogous notions are expressed by 5- to 6-year-olds in Madagascar (Astuti, Solomon, & Carey, 2004) and Israel (Diesendruck & HaLevi, 2006), with regard to ethnic groups. This cross-cultural prevalence and developmental early emergence of social essentialism begs the question of how it emerges. Why is it that adults and children around the world come to converge on this belief?

Broadly speaking, there are three kinds of explanations for why a belief may be early emerging and found cross-culturally: (a) reality calls for it, (b) we are all taught it from early on, or (c) we are all born with it. For the past 5 years, my students and I have been examining these possibilities with respect to social essentialism. Our strategy has been to tackle this issue via cross-cultural and developmental studies. Our conclusion so far is that reality has very little to do with how children create and conceive of social categories, and that while instruction may reinforce essentialism, it does not create it from scratch. Essentialism seems to be an intuitive belief about social reality, with instruction serving to direct children toward the culturally relevant social categories on which to apply it. Now to the evidence.

**WHAT’S IN A NAME?**

One of the basic means by which reality could dictate how we form categories is by packaging members of categories in tightly similar groups, visually distinctive from members of other groups. It arguably works for how we differentiate between cats and dogs, and thus perhaps it also works for how we differentiate between Black and White people. If this were the case, then seeing two people who look alike should be sufficient to lead children to treat them as members of the same category. For instance, children should assume that if person A has property P, then similar-looking person B has it, too. Studies have shown that perceptual similarity is not sufficient to drive children’s inferences about animals or people (Gelman, 2003). We wanted to see whether it even contributes.

In a series of studies, we investigated this question among Israeli secular kindergarteners (Diesendruck & HaLevi, 2006). In a typical trial, an experimenter showed children pictures of two characters—for example, a Jewish-looking boy and an Arab-looking boy—and labeled their category membership (e.g., “He is a Jew/Arab”) and a contrastive personality trait (e.g., “He is nice/mean”). A variety of other social categories and personality traits were also used. Furthermore, the experimenter told children about a unique psychological characteristic of each of the characters (e.g., their favorite game). The experimenter then showed children a third character who belonged to the same category as one of the initial characters but had the same personality trait as the other. Children were asked to decide whose psychological characteristic this third character shared. One of the main findings of this study was that children drew their inferences based on the ethnic membership of the characters, indicating that already by age 5, Israeli children regard it as a most inductively powerful category.

The second study, however, was the most revealing about the role of visual similarity. In that study, all three characters looked alike, and thus children could not rely on perceptual similarity to draw inferences. The main finding here was that children responded exactly as they did in the first study. In other words, the fact that two ethnicity members looked alike in the first study did not contribute at all to the inductive power of ethnicity. All that mattered was their category names: two of them were “Jews,” and the other an “Arab.”

The idea that names have a substantive role in the way children conceive of categories has been widely supported in the developmental literature (see for reviews, Waxman, 2010; Xu, 2010). But what exactly do names do? One idea is that by applying the same name to seemingly disparate individuals we imply that there is some reality to that category (Carey, 1995). In this sense, naming may cause essentialization. An alternative idea is that naming has a more moderate role; it marks the boundaries of categories and denotes relevant categories for discourse (Sperber, 1996). In this vein, names do not create essentialism in a vacuum but instead exploit fertile grounds. In particular, labels may be effective triggers of essentialism only when applied to a priori potent
categories, and only for children already inclined to essentialize these categories.

To address this latter hypothesis, we embarked on an investigation of kindergarten, second-grade, and sixth-grade Israeli children from three cultural subgroups: secular Jews, modern-orthodox Zionist Jews, and Muslim Arabs. In a set of studies, we used a similar induction task to the one described earlier (Birnbaum, Deeb, Segall, Ben-Eliyahu, & Diesendruck, 2010). Only this time, we gave children a more difficult choice for drawing their inferences; namely, they had to decide between two alternative social categories (e.g., gender or social status vs. ethnicity). Moreover, for half of the children we labeled the social category membership of the characters in a triad, whereas for the other half of the children we did not. Our main findings were that by sixth grade, almost all children systematically drew inferences based on ethnicity. However, in second grade—and remarkably in kindergarten as well—only one group of children did so: modern-orthodox Zionist Jews. Importantly, these second graders and kindergarteners relied on ethnicity only when it was explicitly labeled. When children were not provided with the labels, and the only kind of information they had to go by for making their decisions was the perceptual similarity between the characters, then none of the second-grade or kindergarten groups systematically inferred by ethnicity. In fact, there was no correlation between children’s capacity to recognize the category a character belonged to and their tendency to draw inferences based on it.

Thus again, what impacted children’s tendency to rely on a category for drawing inferences was not the physical attributes of the category members. Rather, it was their category membership as marked by a label. Crucially, this was the case only for ethnic categories—for example, not for gender or social status—and only for a particular sector of children—modern-Orthodox Zionist Jews. This category specificity of the effect of labels intimates that children are relying on more than what is made available to them in the task. Namely, children are relying on their underlying concepts about the categories. Importantly, the finding that often times children drew inferences based on ethnicity even though they were incapable of visually identifying Jews or Arabs indicates that their ethnic concepts were abstract; they did not derive from detailed knowledge. The sector specificity of this effect reinforces the aforementioned conclusion, by indicating that labeling emphasizes ethnic essentialism not on all children, but rather only on those who might be already susceptible to such a belief. In brief, labeling is not enough to lead any child to essentialize any social category.

Why are modern-Orthodox Zionist Jewish children susceptible to ethnic essentialism? One possibility is that these children may be absorbing their parents’ political ideology. Within the Israeli political spectrum, modern-Orthodox Zionist Jews tend toward the right wing, rejecting a two-state solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In a current study, we are indeed finding correlations between parents’ endorsement of right-wing statements and their children’s scores in various ethnic essentialism measures (Segall & Diesendruck, 2011). Moreover, there are differences in how parents talk to their children about ethnicity, consistent with the group differences vis-à-vis essentialism described earlier. A second possibility is that religious beliefs per se may endorse essentialist beliefs. In a study among secular and religious Jewish children, we found that the more children believed that God was the creator of social categories, the more essentialist they were about social categories (Diesendruck & Haber, 2009).

Taken together, these findings indicate that essentialism does not derive from bottom-up processes, insofar as there is nothing in a category itself that makes children essentialize it. Rather, cultural factors affect this process. But what exactly does culture do?

CULTURE PROVIDES CONTENT, NOT FORM

On the one hand, the sheer fact that different social categories are essentialized in different cultures intimates that culture plays a fundamental role in social essentialism. On the other hand, the finding that people in all cultures studied do essentialize suggests that the tendency to essentialize some social category may be universal. We believe our developmental findings shed light on these seemingly disparate possibilities.

I will focus on two sets of data here. One set comes from the induction studies across three Israeli sectors mentioned earlier (Birnbaum et al., 2010). Recall that in those studies, children’s task was to decide which among a number of social or personality categories was a better source for inferring people’s characteristics. In other words, that task provided an estimate of the relative essentialist status of ethnicity. The other set comes from studies on similar sectors, as well as two
groups of “integrated” children, which I will discuss later (Deeb, Segall, Birnbaum, Ben-Eliyahu, & Diesendruck, 2011). The essentialism measure here was quite different. It involved a series of direct questions about the extent to which Jews and Arabs constitute essentially different kinds of people. For instance, children were asked, “To what extent do Jews and Arabs differ in the way they think/what they like/what they have inside their bodies?” “Is it possible for an Arab to become a Jew?” and “Is it possible for a Jewish mother to give birth to an Arab child?” (see Diesendruck & Haber, 2009, for the questions). In short, the questionnaire asked exclusively about ethnicity and thus provided an estimate of children’s absolute ethnic essentialism.

What we found is that the tendency to draw inferences based on ethnicity—instead of based on other social or personality categories—increased with age, from kindergarten to sixth grade. In turn, children’s absolute ethnic essentialism scores decreased across these same ages. What seems to be going on is that by kindergarten, Israeli children are highly essentialist about ethnicity. But in fact they seem to be highly essentialist about other social categories as well—as shown by the work of Hirschfeld (1996) on race, Taylor (1996) on gender, and Rhodes and Gelman (2009) on race and gender. As they mature, two processes take place. First, they acquire more knowledge about ethnicity and realize that some of their preconceived essentialist notions about ethnicity may not be true. For instance, they may learn that there are ways for an Arab to become Jewish. Consequently, absolute ethnic essentialism decreases. At the same time, children learn to discriminate the cultural relevance of the various social categories available in their particular society. Israeli children learn that ethnicity is a more relevant category than gender, social status, or niceness and thus is the category that one should conceive of essentialistically. As a result of this realization, relative ethnic essentialism increases. A recent study more directly confirmed these developmental processes (Diesendruck, Birnbaum, Deeb, & Segall, in press).

What the earlier account implies is that essentialism per se may not be taught, but instead it is a default conceptualization of social groups. As I noted earlier, Israeli kindergarteners essentialize ethnicity even though they cannot systematically recognize what Jews and Arabs look like. As Medin and Ortony (1989) conjectured, essentialism is a conceptualization devoid of details—a “placeholder” belief—held by people in the absence of specific knowledge of what the essence might be. By chronically labeling relevant categories, cultures identify for the child the categories onto which such placeholder notions should be attached (see also Bigler & Liben, 2007). In some cases, cultures can go further and reinforce these notions, by providing ideological information consistent with an essentialist construal.

**CAN ESSENTIALISM BE UNDONE?**

A theoretically interesting and practically important implication of these conclusions is that essentialism toward a particular category may be undone. To recapitulate: Essentialism is not an inevitable imposition of social reality, and its targeting of ethnicity, for instance, is largely due to cultural input. Thus, what if instead of being exposed to political and religious ideology endorsing an essentialization of ethnicity, young Israeli children were to be exposed to a radically different experience of ethnicity? What if knowledge of a different kind was to supplant the placeholder belief?

To answer this question, we investigated children from four groups: secular Jewish and Muslim Arab children attending regular public schools, and secular and Arab children attending integrated schools (again, kindergarteners, second graders, and sixth graders; Deeb et al., 2011). While in the regular schools, all pupils were either Jewish or Arab and the curricula focused either on Jewish or Arab traditions, in the integrated schools, pupils were both Jewish and Arab and the curricula included traditions and values from both cultures. Children performed a number of tasks, but here I will mention only two.

In the first task, children were told a simple story about a boy looking for his dog, which was lost in a park. During his searches, the boy encounters four different adults, each characterized by a different set of social categories explicitly labeled (e.g., one is described as a “Jewish religious rich woman”). After hearing the story, children were asked to recount it. We did not expect children to remember all the social category information about all four characters in the story. But that was exactly our goal. We wanted to see which social category information children stored and considered relevant to recount, and which children did it. The second task was the absolute ethnic essentialism questionnaire described earlier.

What we found in the first task was that children from the integrated schools were more likely than children from the regular schools to recount
the ethnicity of the characters in the story. Second, we found that children from the integrated schools were less essentialist than children from the regular schools. In fact, we found that the more a child mentioned ethnicity in his or her recount of the story, the lower was his or her essentialism score. Finally, we found that in kindergarten, children from all four groups had an equivalent high level of essentialism. For those attending the integrated schools, essentialism dropped significantly by second grade. For those in the regular schools, it took 4 more years for this to occur.

These findings corroborate our conclusions from the earlier studies. They show that not only is category salience an unreliable predictor of the tendency to essentialize a category, but under certain circumstances, it may be even negatively related to it. Furthermore, again we see that the youngest children tested were the most essentialist vis-à-vis ethnicity in absolute terms. That is, independently of their home environment, 5-year-old Jewish and Arab children in Israel start off highly essentialist about ethnicity. With learning, essentialism drops; and if the learning occurs in the context of integrated, institutionalized, and collaborative settings, then essentialism drops quite fast.

There is a popular belief that if we do not talk about people's race or ethnicity, then children will not "see" race or ethnicity—they will be "color blind"—and thus they will not be racist either. The problem with this sort of blindness is that by not informing children about race or ethnicity, we leave them with empty concepts. Empty social concepts are the cognitive niche of essentialism. Our findings in the integrated schools indicate that in such contexts, knowledge about ethnicity dispels, rather than creates, essentialism.

**FINAL THOUGHTS**

In his attempt to understand the Rwandan genocide, Phillip Gourevitch writes: “Mass violence…must be conceived as the means toward achieving a new order, and although the idea behind that new order may be criminal and objectively very stupid, it must also be compellingly simple and at the same time absolute.” The ideology of genocide is all of those things, and in Rwanda it went by the name of Hutu Power” (Gourevitch, 1998, pp. 17–18, my emphases). Essentialism is precisely this kind of idea. It is absolute by definition and so simple that even 5-year-olds get it. Recognizing that some of the worst human atrocities may be founded on basic and arguably intuitive ways of conceiving of the social world is certainly not very comforting. Ignoring this, however, only distances us even more from remedying essentialism's potential dangers.

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