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In search of the elusive essence: Heuristics in the essentialization process

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Abstract

Drawing mostly from the field of cognitive psychology we treat essentialism as a bias under which social categories are perceived as having an underlying "hidden" cause feature. Study 1 shows how social categories can be separated into essentialized and nonessentialized according to inability to explain the core characteristics of the categories. Study 2 provides a link between inability to explain the core characteristics of the category and a general illusory correlational procedure that links the category to its characteristics. Study 3 links essentialism to a justice heuristic that leads to the naturalization of differences among categories. Based on the findings, an account of the cognitive process of essentialization is discussed, as a process that arguably starts from an inability to explain core characteristics of a category, builds on illusory correlation between the category and its characteristics and establishes the naturalization of differences among categories.

Keywords: essentialism, illusory correlation, prejudice, heuristics, biases

Psychological essentialism, which is conceptualized differently to essentialism in other disciplines such as philosophy, has been given special attention in recent years in the study of human categories (see Prentice & Miller, 2007). On the whole, most scientists would agree that psychological essentialism is not "*the view that things have essences but rather the view that people's representations of things might reflect such a belief*" (Medin & Ortony, 1992, p. 183). It is rather difficult to determine what kind of manifestations we would expect of essentialist beliefs since people are not often aware of such an essence underlying their beliefs about a social category. Medin and Ortony

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(1992) suggest that instead of an essence, there can be an essence placeholder that underlies people's beliefs about a category. In fact, emphasis is often given to representational, causal, placeholder essentialism (see Gelman, 2004), which refers to an essence that is causally responsible for the category characteristics and affects their representations *without* the knowledge of the perceiver. Especially in social psychology, indirect ways of measuring essentialism have been sought in the representational structure of categories. The study of essentialism has mainly focused on the concepts of natural kinds and entitativity, which have been viewed as dimensions of essentialism (see Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000). Both natural kinds and entitativity describe the structure of the beliefs about a category, a structure that often results in causal inferences about the category. Rothbart and Taylor (1992) argued that people often treat social categories as natural kinds although they should be treated as artifacts; this results in a tendency to infer deep essential qualities of the category from these natural kinds' beliefs. Entitativity of a social group can also encourage perceivers to infer underlying properties of the social group (see Yzerbyt, Corneille, & Estrada, 2001) although the opposite may occur as well: making causal inferences about a category can result in viewing the social group as an entity. Other aspects such as universality, i.e. the cross-cultural and historic invariance of the category, have been identified as aspects of essentialism (e.g., Haslam & Levy, 2006). In the related area of cognitive psychology, the study of essentialism focuses on the underlying link between surface and deeper, non-observable features of a category (e.g., Gelman, 2004; Gelman & Wellman, 1991; Malt, 1994; Malt & Sloman, 2007; Matan & Carey, 2001), rather than the structure of the beliefs about the category. This type of approach focuses more on cognitive processes and on the inductive potential that group membership can offer. The role of other concepts and their relations to essentialism has also been examined and it seems that focusing on related concepts in order to understand whether people's beliefs seem to be inferred by "hidden" underlying properties has led to a difficulty in understanding the exact contribution of the notion of psychological essentialism (see Hamilton, 2007). We will attempt to approach essentialism adopting a social cognition perspective that focuses mainly on *cognitive processes and specific heuristics*.

The placeholder approach

There is consensus, explicit or implicit, that deeper, non-observable features are causally responsible for surface features in the event of an essentialist belief, especially in cognitive research. A *"hidden"* underlying cause feature seems to correspond to the "as if" approach of essentialism, i.e. the view that people approach some categories *as if* they have essences. For placeholder essentialism, it does not matter whether people think there is an underlying essence to the category and whether they are aware of it. Strevens (2000) has stressed that K-laws alone, i.e. causal relationships that link the very being of the category to the category's characteristics without the mediating role of an essence, could stand as explanations for the phenomena the relevant literature has attempted to disentangle. In fact, it can be argued that people should *not* be able to understand what the essence is. Once people perceive the exact causes of the characteristics of a category, even if they are innate properties of the organism such as the DNA, they are able to link some, but not all, the category's characteristics to the "essence". If people are able to understand how an innate property such as the DNA actually influences the characteristics of the category, they will be able to attribute only the characteristics that satisfy that explanation to the very being of group members. At the same time, the underlying logic of the explanation could be applied to the characteristics of other categories. For example, if people understand that being black is due to an increased level of melanin in the body, they can also understand that being white is due to a decreased level of melanin in the body. They can also understand that these skin color differences have to do with sun exposure rather than some innate characteristic. The more people know about what makes a category what it is, the more they understand what the differences between social categories are, but also what their commonalities are. It is the *absence of knowledge* of the causes of social group attributes rather than its existence that lies at the core of an essentialist belief.

Specific essentialism, where the category's essence is known, is completely different to *placeholder essentialism*. In fact, 'natural kinds' beliefs or even entitativity could refer to either type of essentialism. In this paper, we focus more on placeholder essentialism which may have important repercussions on the study of social categories since their differences are accounted for by unknown rather than known "essences". Placeholder essentialism in social psychology would focus more on the ways people

develop representations about a category, attribute characteristics to the very being of the category and are not able to explain how and why.

Illusory correlation and essentialism

Essentializing can be thought of as a cognitive bias that links a social group to its characteristics and attributes them to its very being. In some ways, one of the cognitive aspects of this whole process resembles the process of illusory correlation. Illusory correlation, a term coined by Chapman (1967), was introduced in the cognitive study of stereotypes by the work of Hamilton and Gifford (1976). Illusory correlation is "*proposed for the report by observers of a correlation between two classes of phenomena which in reality (a) are not correlated, (b) are correlated to a lesser extent than reported, or (c) are correlated in the opposite direction from that which is reported*" (Chapman, 1967, p. 151). In the case of essentialism, the illusory correlation is the perceived association between the category and its characteristics. An illusory relationship between social groups and their attributes can be culturally transmitted or it can be created on the basis of purely cognitive mechanisms that are prone to distortions, thus creating biased perceptions of distinctive stimuli (cf. Hamilton & Gifford, 1976). Alternative explanations of the illusory correlation effect have been proposed as cognitive explanations, such as the principle of meta-contrast (McGarty, Haslam, Turner, & Oakes, 1993) or the 'information loss' account (Fiedler, 1991). Some possible explanations can be understood in terms of participants' efforts to make sense of the world (Berndsen, McGarty , van der Pligt, & Spears, 2001). Essentialism could offer a further explanation: social groups can be more easily correlated with characteristics in an illusory way once there is inability to explain the characteristics of the category. Of course it would be expected that the characteristics associated with a category in an illusory correlation manner will be difficult to explain in general. Compared to the simple illusory correlation effect, essentializing can be thought of as a more stable cognitive bias that extends to the majority of the group properties (including core characteristics) and influences attitudes toward the category.

Social attribution processes and biases such as illusory correlation procedures and the overattribution bias have been the object of social cognitive research on essentialism (e.g., Yzerbyt & Rogier, 2001; Yzerbyt, Rogier, & Fiske, 1998) but have not been given central status in the essentialism literature. A social cognitive approach

would focus more on why people attribute characteristics to social groups in ways that resemble K-laws. It would focus more on reasoning of the sort: "Why does group X have characteristic Y? I don't know. That's just the way it is!" In other words, the social cognitive approach would focus more on how people tend to link categories to its attributes without being able to explain why.

Essentialism and prejudice

Essentialism has already been linked to prejudice (e.g., Bastian & Haslam, 2006; Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2002) although its role is not exactly clear. If we accept the argument that a central aspect of essentialism is inability to explain why a category is what it is, another central aspect might be that people, lacking an alternative viable explanation, assign characteristics to the group by attributing observed differences between the group in question and other categories to fundamental unobserved "hidden" essences of the social category. Therefore essentialism leads to the accentuation of differences between categories and the attenuation of commonalities. Accentuation of differences can be used by the majority to reinforce intergroup distinctions and justify discrimination toward minorities (see Morton & Postmes, 2009). Mahalingam (2003, 2007) argues that the essentialism bias is used to "naturalize" (a term that is used by social constructionists, e.g., Stoler, 1997) power relations among different groups. Essentialism could therefore help rationalize the differential status of social groups.

In this way and through the scope of a social cognitive perspective, essentialism is a complicated bias that is characterized by inability to explain illusory correlation processes and an inductive element that links differential perception to the very being of the category. Essentialism, apart from an "attributional" heuristic that highly resembles illusory correlation, is characterized by another important heuristic that results in the "naturalization" of the differences of the social categories. Especially if these differences were the result of power relations, they could be noticed and attempted to be rectified through human behavior, according to the justice motive (see Lerner, 2003). However, the justice motive often takes the form of an intuitive appraisal that can, for example, be satisfied by derogating the subjects of unfortunate mishaps (see Lerner, 1971). This intuitive appraisal can be summed up in the phrase "good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people". This type of justice heuristic (in contrast to the justice motive) could be part of the essentialization process. The

differences observed can be "naturalized" by attributing different status to the very being of the person that belongs to the group. Although the justice motive can take the form of thoughtful responses, this type of justice heuristic can very well be a part of the essentialization process and account for the higher and lower standings of social groups in society as proper, just and in accordance with the inherent characteristics of the members of the social groups.

In study 1, we will examine whether inability to explain the core characteristics of a category can be a fundamental property of essentialized categories. In study 2, we will examine whether essentialized categories are more easily attributed characteristics in general (implying illusory correlational procedures that follow from inability to explain). In study 3, we will examine whether inability to explain tends to naturalize differences among social categories and influence the attitudes toward them.

Study 1

The purpose of study 1 was to assess directly whether there is a perceptual "hidden" cause that makes categories what they are. Our main contention is that essentializing is to have "hidden" causes, i.e. to be able to attribute characteristics to the social category, but not be able to explain why. Although the same may apply for any illusory correlational procedure, we focused on inability to explain the core properties of a social group, i.e. the most commonly attributed characteristics. Under this alternative operationalization we decided to study which categories would emerge as essentialized to a greater or lesser extent. The categories used in study 1 were initially identified through a pilot study.

Since all studies regarding essentialism, to the best of our knowledge, have approached essentialism by focusing on associated parameters, in the pilot study we decided to tackle the issue directly by asking a convenience sample of 30 social science graduates, comprising acquaintances of the researchers in the fields of sociology, psychology and business administration, whether they considered each of eighty categories to comprise of "people made of certain stuff" (answers were given on a 7-point scale, 1 = *totally disagree*, 7 = *totally agree*). In this way, we asked participants directly whether they thought there was an essence to the category, since "made of certain stuff" implies a substance that is particular to the category and makes it what it

is. Of the eighty categories, we selected 17 categories (see table 1) whose mean ratings reflected the range of participants' answers along the 7-point scale and also coincided to a certain extent with categories already studied in essentialism research (e.g. Haslam et al., 2000).

Table 1: Means and standard deviations of the measure "made of certain stuff"

Social group	Mean	SD
Cancer Patients	1,53	1,07
Ugly	1,73	1,26
Unemployed	1,87	1,31
Black	2,13	1,68
Immigrants	2,43	1,65
Fat	2,7	1,6
Men	2,97	2,13
Albanians	3,53	2,11
Schizophrenic	3,57	2,01
Homosexual	3,73	2,05
Judges	4,1	1,71
Policemen	4,27	1,78
Olympic Champions	4,3	2,04
Pilots	4,6	1,63
Politicians	5	1,34
Artists	5,03	1,52

Method

Participants and design. A snowball sample of four hundred and seventy-seven undergraduate social science students participated in this study. Each participant answered questions that involved only one of the seventeen social categories; thus, the design was completely between-subjects.

Measures and Procedure. Participants were required to write down five characteristics of the members for one of the seventeen social categories (characteristics that had to do with what members of the social category are or what they do). For each characteristic that they wrote down, they were required to express the extent to which they could explain why a member of the social category would exhibit the particular characteristic, using a six-point scale (1 = *I do not know any possible cause*, 6 = *I Know every possible cause*). We then identified the three most frequently mentioned characteristics for each category (see appendix for the number of nominations and scale means for characteristics).

Results

A one-way ANOVA with the social categories as the independent variable and "ability to explain" as the dependent variable was performed, $F(16,566) = 8.93$, $p < .001$. Since it was significant, we conducted post hoc comparisons which revealed two clearly distinct homogeneous groups (groups 1 and 6), as shown in table 2.

By the use of a median split on the frequency distribution on "ability to explain", we further distinguished the groups into those most essentialized (schizophrenic, homosexual, judges, ugly, black, immigrants, men, artists) and those least essentialized (cancer patients, olympic champions, unemployed, policemen, priests, pilots, politicians, fat, Albanians).

A more qualitative account of this view of essentialism is intuitively evident in the data (see appendix). For example, olympic champions are one of the least essentialized categories. They are seen as disciplined, well-trained and substance-abusive. These are attributes that can be easily accounted for and related to olympic champions. However, homosexuals are attributed characteristics such as liberated, sensitive and special. It is not easy to account for these characteristics, i.e. say why

homosexuals are as such; at least, it is not as easy as accounting for characteristics in the least essentialized categories.

Table 2: Duncan post hoc comparisons (based on the one-way ANOVA) on inability to explain the three most commonly mentioned of the category: Means and Standard Deviations

Social group	N	1	2	3	4	5	6
Schizophrenic	31	2,71 (1,48)					
Homosexual	28	2,89 (1,37)	2,89 (1,37)				
Judges	52	3,25 (1,33)	3,25 (1,33)	3,25 (1,33)			
Ugly	35	3,26 (1,33)	3,26 (1,33)	3,26 (1,33)			
Black	30	3,30 (1,26)	3,30 (1,26)	3,30 (1,26)			
Immigrants	21	3,38 (1,65)	3,38 (1,65)	3,38 (1,65)			
Men	27		3,48 (1,22)	3,48 (1,22)			
Artists	32			3,72 (1,50)	3,72 (1,50)		
Albanian	27			3,85 (1,51)	3,85 (1,51)	3,85 (1,51)	
Fat	35				4,20 (1,32)	4,20 (1,32)	4,20 (1,32)
Politicians	46				4,22 (1,19)	4,22 (1,19)	4,22 (1,19)
Pilots	35				4,31 (1,30)	4,31 (1,30)	4,31 (1,30)
Priests	29					4,48 (1,43)	4,48 (1,43)
Policemen	38						4,58 (1,15)

Unemployed	49						4,59 *(1,11)*
Olympic champions	34						4,65 *(1,36)*
Cancer Patients	34						4,88 *(0,97)*

Significance level	,071	,117	,114	,105	,085	,075

NOTE: Scales range from 1 (I do not know any possible cause) to 6 (I Know every possible cause)

Discussion

It seems that asking participants whether they considered a category to comprise of "people made of certain stuff" (i.e. asking directly whether they thought there was an essence to the category, a substance that is particular to the category and makes it what it is) which was the way we assessed the extent of essentialization in the pilot study, produces different results - especially in terms of the most essentialized categories - to those rendered by the use of the "ability to explain" measure that was adopted in study 1. It is still difficult to say which categories are indeed essentialized or not. Haslam et al. (2002) found that some of the eighty categories they examined (e.g. women, blacks, homosexuals and Jews) were essentialized in terms of the natural kinds dimension but not in terms of the entitativity dimension or vice versa. Should we focus on the natural kinds dimension, the entitativity dimension or some other one? In this study, we introduced a different conception of essentialism and another type of measure: (in)ability to explain the core attributes of the social category. The results of this proposed type of measurement bear some consistency with findings of previous studies that show, for example, that schizophrenics, homosexuals, blacks and men are essentialized, while cancer patients and fat people are not (e.g., Haslam et al., 2000; Haslam, & Ernst, 2002; Haslam & Levy, 2006). The proposed measurement also warrants the special interest the relevant literature takes in minority groups such as immigrants. It seems justified to consider it as a first step in introducing a new operationalization for essentialism that focuses more on "hidden" causes and inability to explain.

Study 2

The purpose of study 2 was to examine whether the (in)ability to explain why characteristics are linked with social categories can be associated with an illusory correlational cognitive procedure. Our main argument, made so far, is that essentialist thinking is a cognitive process which is characterized by inability to explain. The main difference between conceptualizations in the current literature (e.g., Yzerbyt, & Rogier, 2001) and our proposal is that illusory correlation between categories and characteristics is not a consequence of essentialization; it is part of the process of essentialization itself. To put it simply, we argue that essentialism is inability to explain the characteristics of category members and therefore is related to a general inability to link successfully, i.e. in a way that reflects reality, the characteristic to the category. Such inability may very well be identified as an illusory correlational procedure. In study 1, we focused on core properties of a social group and identified whether they could be explained. In study 2, we will focus on whether the social groups, to which participants attributed core properties that they could not explain, are more prone to illusory correlational procedures.

In the case of essentialism, the illusory correlation is the perceived association between the category and its characteristics. It can be argued that the essentialization process, involves both essentialized categories and essentialized characteristics, since it has to do with the perceived association between the two. Essentialized characteristics can be thought of as characteristics that are attributed to a hidden cause. The illusory correlation does not reside necessarily in the categories or the characteristics alone. It resides in the linkage the observer perceives between the two. The illusory correlation then must have something to do with either or both the categories and the characteristics. If, for example, the illusory correlation had something to do only with categories, we would expect essentialized categories to be linked with characteristics which in reality are not necessarily correlated (or correlated to a lesser extent than reported) with the categories. In this way, we could argue that essentialized categories will be linked with characteristics that are indeed correlated with the category plus characteristics that are not correlated with the category. This is the rationale on the basis of which hypothesis 1 was formulated. On the other hand, the same can be argued for essentialized characteristics (i.e. that essentialized characteristics will be linked with

categories that are indeed correlated with the characteristic plus categories that are not correlated with the characteristic), thus resulting in hypothesis 2.

Our hypotheses in study 2 are:

Hypothesis 1: Essentialized categories will be perceived to be correlated with characteristics to a greater extent than nonessentialized categories.

Hypothesis 2: Essentialized characteristics will be perceived to be correlated with categories to a greater extent than nonessentialized characteristics.

Method

Participants and design. Thirty-five psychology undergraduate students participated in this study. Each participant answered questions that involved seventeen social categories and seventeen characteristics; thus, the design was completely within-subjects.

Measures and Procedure. Participants completed a questionnaire in which they were asked to assess the likelihood that each of 17 characteristics were features of each of 17 categories - these being the seventeen categories examined in study 1 - using a seven-point scale (1 = *highly unlikely*, 7 = *highly likely*). This measure was thought to be an appropriate indication of a perceived correlation between categories and characteristics. The seventeen characteristics were chosen as follows: from each of the eight essentialized categories identified in study 1 we selected the most essentialized of the three most frequently mentioned characteristics (i.e. the characteristic with the lowest mean, indicating greater inability to explain why this characteristic was linked with the category) and from each of the nine nonessentialized categories identified in study 1 the least essentialized characteristic (i.e. the characteristic with the highest mean, indicating lesser inability to explain why this characteristic was linked with the category).

Results

We computed four indices corresponding to the perceived correlation between: a) *essentialized categories and essentialized characteristics* (the mean likelihood that each of the eight essentialized characteristics were features of each of the eight essentialized categories) b) *essentialized categories and nonessentialized characteristics* (the mean likelihood that each of the nine nonessentialized characteristics were features

of each of the eight essentialized categories), c) *nonessentialized categories and essentialized characteristics* (the mean likelihood that each of the eight essentialized characteristics were features of each of the nine nonessentialized categories), d) *nonessentialized categories and nonessentialized characteristics* (the mean likelihood that each of the nine nonessentialized characteristics were features of each of the nine nonessentialized categories). In order to test our hypotheses, we performed a 2 (Categories: essentialized, non-esstentialized) x 2 (Characteristics: essentialized, nonessentialized) within-subjects ANOVA with the perceived correlation index as the dependent variable (Table 3).

TABLE 3: Means and standard deviations of the correlation index according to categories and characteristics

	Essentialized Categories		Nonessentialized Categories	
	Essentialized Characteristics	Nonessentialized Characteristics	Essentialized Characteristics	Nonessentialized Characteristics
M	4.42	3.93	4.21	3.94
SD	*.33*	*.43*	*.37*	*.40*

The analysis revealed a significant main effect of categories, $F(1,34) = 14.07$, $p <. 001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.293$; perceived correlation between categories and characteristics was higher for essentialized ($M = 4.17$) than for nonessentialized categories ($M = 4.07$). There was also a significant main effect of characteristics, $F(1,34) = 42.77$, $p <. 001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.557$; perceived correlation between categories and characteristics was higher for essentialized ($M = 4.31$) than for nonessentialized characteristics ($M = 3.93$). These results support hypotheses 1 and 2. The categories main effect was qualified by a significant two-way interaction, $F(1,34) = 35.90$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.514$; perceived correlation between categories and characteristics was higher for essentialized ($M = 4.42$) than for nonessentialized categories ($M = 4.21$), only with regard to essentialized characteristics ($p < .001$).

Discussion

Drawing general conclusions about the categories or the characteristics used in this particular study would be unwarranted especially due to their small number. It is difficult to say whether the particular categories or the characteristics used in this study are more "prone" to illusory correlation, i.e. are more likely to be responsible for perceived correlations between categories and characteristics. Any one category or characteristic could be associated with other characteristics or categories due to the particular and somewhat arbitrary choice of categories. However, by grouping categories and characteristics in essentialized and nonessentialized, we ended up with two main groups of essentialized and nonessentialized categories and two main groups of essentialized and nonessentialized characteristics that may contribute toward the study achieving greater external validity. We formulated only two hypotheses that were supported. Essentialized categories are linked with characteristics to a greater extent than nonessentialized categories and essentialized characteristics are linked with categories to a greater extent than nonessentialized characteristics. The two-way interaction may further point to the fact that essentialized categories draw their "hidden causes" in an illusory correlational manner that links them mainly with essentialized characteristics.

From the results of study 2 it seems reasonable to suggest that characteristics such as special, weird and scruffy are easier to attribute to social categories in general. However, they are easier to attribute once the categories exhibit core properties that are difficult to explain. Semin and Fiedler (1988) have showed that abstract statements, as opposed to concrete statements are more difficult to verify. It could therefore be argued that the existence of "hidden causes" and inability to explain social categories' characteristics encourages people to use more abstract terms, since they are most appropriate for describing a social category the properties of which are not easy to explain. The use of abstract terms however accentuates the difficulty of explaining the characteristics of the category, as predicted by a linguistic bias (see Maass et al., 1989), and adds to a self-perpetuating illusory correlational procedure that seems to be part of the "essentialism bias". This account is somewhat consistent with cognitive theorists who argue that even the very process of naming a category may entail essentialist thinking (e.g., Bloom, 1996; Gelman & Bloom, 2001).

In general, it can be argued that essentialism refers to a cognitive bias that revolves around people's inability to explain core properties of a social category. This inability to explain leads to a "spiral" of illusory correlational procedures that result in a system of beliefs around a social category that appear to be structured around a basic "hidden" essence, the very being of the category itself.

Study 3

The purpose of study 3 is to provide a link between inability to explain core properties of social categories and prejudice. Status inequalities among social categories are quite common in society and it has been argued that essentialist cognitive distortions can lead to social folk theories that account for observed differences among social groups (see Mahalingam, 2007). Such rationalization of differences could be linked to a justice heuristic that simply attributes inequalities to the unequal nature of social groups. Under a thoughtful application of the justice motive (see Lerner, 2003), people would perceive that unjustified low status is not necessarily given to "lower" people and thus, their attitudes would not be distorted by a justice heuristic that devalues others (see Lerner, 1971), meaning that people would not derogate innocent victims. Similarly, we might expect that people would perceive that justified higher status is not necessarily given to "higher" people, and thus, their attitudes will not be as favorable as they would have been if they perceived that these groups are better by nature. On the other hand, if the essentialization process involves the application of a justice heuristic that rationalizes 'injustice', we would expect higher or lower status to be attributed to the essence of the category and appear fitting. Essentialized categories are therefore more likely to be treated with a heuristic process of the sort: "bad things happen to bad people whereas good things happen to good people". Attitudes will reflect an attempt to restore equal status only when categories are not essentialized whereas differential status will be treated as a natural reality when categories are essentialized.

Hypothesis 1: Justified higher status groups will be the subject of less favorable attitudes when they are not essentialized.

Hypothesis 2: Unjustified lower status groups will be the subject of more favorable attitudes when they are not essentialized.

Method

Participants and design. Forty-seven undergraduate psychology students participated in this study. Participants answered questions about the status of seventeen social groups and expressed their attitudes toward them. The design of the study was completely within-subjects.

Measures and Procedure. Participants completed a questionnaire in which they were asked: (a) to evaluate the status of members of the seventeen social categories that were used in the previous studies, (b) to assess whether their status was justified and (c) to express their attitude towards them. Five-point Likert-type scales were used. Perceived status of each group's members in relation to "other people" was assessed by two items ("do they enjoy better or worse fate?" and "are they in a higher or lower position?"). These two items were combined to form a single index of perceived status for each of the groups (alpha = .754). Two items were used to identify whether the status was justified ("do you think that their position is justified?" and "do you think they deserve their position?"). These two items were combined to form a single index of justification for each of the groups (alpha = .784). Three 7-point scales were used to assess attitudes towards each of the groups: a global attitude measure ("my attitude towards … is *very negative – very positive*) and two items in the form of semantic differentials (members of this group are "*pleasant/unpleasant*" and "*likeable/not likeable*"). These three measures were combined to form a single attitude index for each of the groups (alpha = .865).

Results

Groups were classified into those in higher or lower status using a median split on the frequency distribution of the mean perceived status of each group. Similarly, they were classified into justified/ unjustified status groups using a median split on the frequency distribution of the mean of status justification. Finally, groups were classified into essentialized and nonessentialized as identified on the basis of the results of study 1.

The groups belonging to each of the eight cells produced by the 2 (Perceived Status: higher, lower) x 2 (Justification: justified, unjustified) x 2 (Essence: Essentialized, Nonessentialized) classification are shown in table 4.

Table 4: Classification of social categories according to perceived status, justification and essence

Higher status				Lower status			
Justified		Non Justified		Justified		Unjustified	
Ess	Non-Ess	Ess	Non-Ess	Ess	Non-Ess	Ess	Non-Ess
1.Judges	1.Champions		1.Politicians	1.Homo sexual	1.Albanians	1. Black	1.Overweight
2. Men	2. Priests					2. Ugly	2. Cancer Patients
3.Artists	3.Policemen					3.Immigrant	3.Unemployed
	4. Pilots					4. Schizo-phrenic	

In order to test hypotheses 1 and 2, a 2 (Differential Status: justified high status, unjustified low status) x 2 (Essence: essentialized, nonessentialized) ANOVA was performed (Table 5).

TABLE 5: Means and standard deviations of attitudes towards groups according to differential status and essence

	Justified Higher Status		Unjustified Lower Status	
	Essentialized	Nonessentialized	Essentialized	Nonessentialized
M	3.27	3.08	3.31	3.57
SD	*.54*	*.55*	*.44*	*.44*

A significant main effect of differential status, $F(1,46) = 10.53$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.186$, was found since participants exhibited more favorable attitudes towards unjustified lower status groups ($M = 3.44$) than towards justified higher status groups ($M = 3.17$). No significant main effect of essence was found. However, the breakdown of the significant two way interaction, $F(1,46) = 24.81$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.35$, revealed that justified higher status groups elicited less favorable attitudes when nonessentialized ($M = 3.08$) than when essentialized ($M = 3.27$, $p = .03$), whereas unjustified lower status groups elicited more favorable attitudes when nonessentialized ($M = 3.57$) than when essentialized ($M = 3.31$, $p = .001$). These results support hypotheses 1 and 2.

Discussion

This study has certain limitations due to the small number of the social categories used. It also does not include unjustified high status and justified low status social groups. It is however an interesting extension to the previous two studies. Our main argument is that essentialism naturalizes differential perception by evoking a justice heuristic that justifies differential status. The more essentialized a category is, the more its status is naturalized. Consistent with the overattribution bias already established in the literature (see Yzerbyt, Rogier, & Fiske, 1998), the people in justified higher positions seem to be treated as naturally better whereas the people in the unjustified low positions seem to be treated as naturally worse when the social group is essentialized. Attitudes seem to follow that pattern: more favorable attitudes are expressed toward naturally better people and less favorable attitudes are expressed toward naturally worse people. However, if people are able to understand more about a social category, i.e. if the category is not essentialized, it seems they are able to understand that differences in status do not reflect differences in innate properties of the members of the groups. Therefore, attitudes towards nonessentialized categories are most likely to reflect a thoughtful application of the justice motive that attempts to restore balance in society: attitudes toward justified higher status groups will not be as favorable and attitudes toward unjustified lower status groups will be more favorable.

General discussion

Essentialization can be conceptualized as a complicated bias the starting point of which is inability to explain core properties of the social category. We have argued that this type of general inability to explain leads to a perpetuating illusory correlational cognitive procedure. In this way features are linked to a category in an illusory correlational manner and attributed to a "hidden cause". The hidden cause can be used for inferential purposes and in this way naturalize the differences among categories. It is as if there is an essence to the category. In the absence of a real and concrete essence, we can restrict ourselves to observing the existence of K-laws (Strevens, 2000). Since there may not be a viable explanation for the linkage between categories and their characteristics, the only "explanation" is that the category itself has a property that allows for this linkage. That property is the essence which differentiates the particular category from other categories. This kind of differentiation arguably intensifies already existing differential perceptions and leads to the perception that social groups are naturally different - thus evoking prejudice. Viewing essentialism under the operational definition of the "inability to explain how core characteristics are linked to categories", we can argue that it is a phenomenon that is really worth studying since it might help to understand why people exhibit prejudice towards some categories without any real and viable explanation.

There are two basic heuristic processes under this account of essentialization: one is illusory correlation and the other is a justice heuristic that naturalizes the differences among social categories. The whole process is arguably sparked by an initial inability to explain core properties of the social category. Based on the initial findings of the three studies that are presented, we argue for a greater emphasis on the study of cognitive distortions in social group perception and the formation of stereotypes. Especially in the field of social psychology and social cognition, heuristics and the specific cognitive biases that may underlie the phenomenon of essentialism have not been given much attention. Although the overattribution bias and illusory correlation procedures have been linked to essentialism, emphasis is mostly placed on the structure of beliefs about social categories and not on causal inferences per se. Focusing on cognitive processes and types of heuristics that are employed in the

essentialization process could potentially offer a different route to understanding this seemingly elusive phenomenon.

Limitations and potential for future research

It is very difficult to present a full account of the complicated cognitive process of essentialization (for an alternative account that treats essentialization as abduction, see Arvanitis, 2014). The support from these three studies is mostly indicative of an approach that focuses on types of heuristic processes and points toward a possible interdependence of these heuristic processes. The objective of future research would be to examine the ways and the conditions under which inability to explain core characteristics of a category is connected to illusory correlational procedures and similarly, the circumstances under which these two types of processes are connected to a justice heuristic that leads to the naturalization of differences.

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APPENDIX

Nominations for each of the three most frequently mentioned characteristics of each category as well as means and SD for all three (Study 1)

Categories	Characteristics	N	Means (SD)
1. Cancer Patients	Courageous	13	4,88 *(0,97)*
	Run down	9	
	Depressive	9	
2. Olympic Champions	Trained	13	4,65 *(1,36)*
	Disciplined	12	
	Dope-Users	9	
3. Unemployed	Desperate	20	4,59 *(1,11)*
	Poor	17	
	Stressed	12	
4. Policemen	Aggressive	16	4,58 *(1,15)*
	Power abusers	11	
	Authoritarian	11	
5. Priests	Hypocrites	11	4,48 *(1,43)*
	Conservatives	10	
	Church duties	8	
6. Air Force Pilots	Risky	14	4,31 *(1,30)*
	Brave	12	
	Disciplined	9	
7. Politicians	Liars	16	4,22 *(1,19)*
	Charlatans	15	
	Flexible	15	
8. Overweight	Complex ridden	13	4,20 *(1,32)*
	Happy-go-lucky	11	
	Greedy	11	
	Hard-working	11	

9. Albanians	Gang members	9	3,85 *(1,51)*
	Immigrants	6	
10. Artists	Talented	12	3,72 *(1,50)*
	Vain	11	
	Eccentric	8	
11. Men	Dynamic	11	3,48 *(1,22)*
	Selfish	10	
	Practical	7	
12. Immigrants	Hardship	9	3,38 *(1,65*
	Quest	7	
	Hard-working	5	
13. Black	Sociable	17	3,30 *(1,26)*
	Artistic	7	
	Hard-working	6	
14. Ugly	Low self-esteem	14	3,26 *(1,33)*
	Introverted	13	
	Scruffy	8	
15. Judges	Integrity	24	3,25 *(1,33)*
	Corrupted	15	
	Austere	13	
16. Homosexual	Liberated	10	2,89 *(1,37)*
	Sensitive	10	
	Special	8	
17. Schizophrenic	Weird	12	2,71 *(1,48)*
	Dangerous	10	
	Lonely	9	

Σε αναζήτηση της δυσδιάκριτης ουσίας: Ευρετικές στη διαδικασία του εσσενσιαλισμού.

Αλέξιος Αρβανίτης[9] & Αλεξάνδρα Χαντζή[10]

Περίληψη

Αντλώντας κυρίως από το χώρο της γνωστικής ψυχολογίας, αντιμετωπίζουμε τον εσσενσιαλισμό (ο όρος συναντάται και ως «ουσιοκρατία») ως μια μεροληψία κατά την οποία οι κοινωνικές κατηγορίες γίνονται αντιληπτές σαν να έχουν ένα υποβόσκον «κρυφό» αιτιακό χαρακτηριστικό. Η Έρευνα 1 δείχνει πώς οι κοινωνικές κατηγορίες μπορούν να διαχωριστούν σε «ουσιοκρατικές» και «μη ουσιοκρατικές» με βάση την αδυναμία εξήγησης των κεντρικών χαρακτηριστικών των κατηγοριών. Η Έρευνα 2 εστιάζει στη σύνδεση μεταξύ της αδυναμίας εξήγησης των κύριων χαρακτηριστικών της κατηγορίας και μιας γενικής διαδικασίας πλασματικής συνάφειας που συνδέει την κατηγορία με τα χαρακτηριστικά της. Η Έρευνα 3 συνδέει τον εσσενσιαλισμό με την λεγόμενη «ευρετική της δικαιοσύνης» που οδηγεί στην φυσικοποίηση των διαφορών μεταξύ κατηγοριών. Στη βάση αυτών των ευρημάτων συζητείται μια εξήγηση της γνωστικής διαδικασίας του εσσενσιαλισμού ως μιας διαδικασίας που ξεκινά από την αδυναμία εξήγησης των βασικών χαρακτηριστικών μιας κατηγορίας, επεκτείνεται στη βάση της πλασματικής συνάφειας μεταξύ κατηγορίας και χαρακτηριστικών και εδραιώνει τη φυσικοποίηση των διαφορών μεταξύ των κατηγοριών.

Λέξεις κλειδιά: εσσενσιαλισμός, ουσιοκρατία, πλασματική συνάφεια, προκατάληψη, ευρετικές, μεροληψίες

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