

Made to Stick? The Role of Essentialism in Naturalizing Social Status Hierarchies



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• Introduction

- Representations of many social categories are characterized by essentialist thinking.
- According to cognitive psychologists psychological essentialism is a cognitive heuristic leading people to assume category members share a deep underlying causal essence which is responsible for the perceptual and behavioural properties of category members (Medin & Ortony, 1989).
- Previous research has shown a correlation between social categories that are essentialized and their social status ratings (Haslam et al., 2000).
- However, previous studies have not manipulated social status therefore the causal direction of the relationship remains unclear.

Method

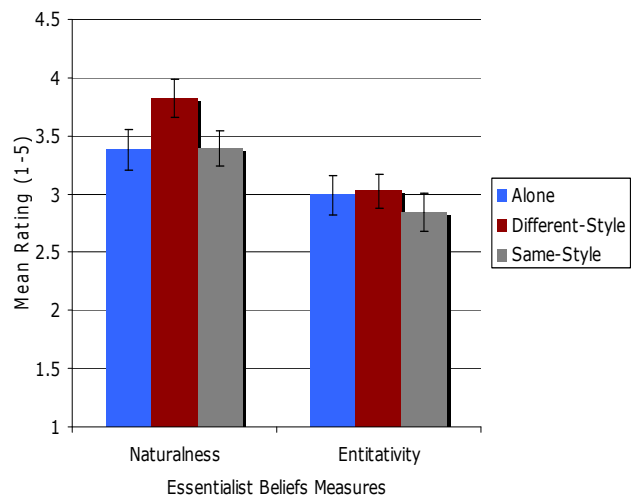
Participants: 139 Princeton university undergraduates

Experiment Overview:

- Participants completed a perceptual styles test (dot-estimation) in pairs or alone and received predetermined feedback.
- 3 experimental conditions:
 - (1) Different style condition (1 over-estimator & 1 under-estimator)
 - (2) Same style condition (both over or under-estimators).
 - (3) Alone condition (over or under-estimator).
- Status manipulation: participants assigned to high status role (boss) or low status role (subordinate) for upcoming task.
- Dependent measure: participants rated category perceptual style on 8 attributes tapping 2 dimensions of essentialism (naturalness & entitativity) on 5 point scale.

Results

- Factor analysis revealed 2 factors corresponding to 2 dimensions of essentialism.
- Naturalism scale: participants in different style condition (where perceptual style correlates with status) rated category perceptual style as significantly more natural than in the alone or same style conditions ($F(1, 119) = 4.71, p < .05$).
- Entitativity scale: no differences in scores across experimental conditions.



Discussion

- Findings suggest people naturalize the category perceptual style when it correlates with social status.
- Social status differences may well trigger beliefs in the naturalness of associated social categories.
- Psychological essentialism appears to facilitate the naturalization of status differences.
- This research highlights the importance of considering the role of cognitive factors in the stabilization of unequal social relations.

Future Directions

- What triggers beliefs in the entitativity of social categories?