

# Does essentialism lead to racial prejudice? It is not so Black and White

**Tara M. Mandalaywala\***

Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences, University of Massachusetts Amherst, Amherst, MA, United States

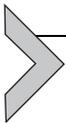
\*Corresponding author: e-mail address: tmandalaywala@umass.edu

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## Abstract

Over half a century ago, psychologists hypothesized that social essentialism, an intuitive theory comprising the beliefs that social categories reflect naturally occurring distinctions and that category members share an underlying and fundamental essence, lays the foundation for prejudice. In the intervening decades, research has shown that although essentialism *sometimes* leads to prejudicial beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, it does not always, sometimes even leading to decreased prejudice toward stigmatized groups. The relation between essentialism and prejudice is clearly complex, but this review proposes four questions that will help clarify how and when essentialism leads to prejudice: (1) What precisely is essentialism and how might a more nuanced understanding of its components and structure shed light on the mechanisms by which essentialist beliefs contribute to prejudice?; (2) Do essentialist beliefs orient group-based prejudice toward out-groups or toward stigmatized groups, and what are the consequences of essentialist beliefs among those with minoritized identities?; (3) Do essentialist beliefs engender group-based prejudice directly, or must essentialist beliefs interact with additional information or belief systems to lead to negative consequences?; and (4) Do essentialist beliefs lay a foundation for group-based prejudice to develop, or is essentialism strategically invoked to justify existing prejudice? By posing these questions, describing what is currently known about each, and proposing future lines of inquiry that focus on the importance of including participants from a diverse set of backgrounds and across developmental periods, this review aims to stimulate research studies best designed to fill the gaps in our knowledge. By understanding how and when essentialism contributes to prejudice, we will be better equipped to use this early-emerging, but malleable, aspect of cognition to decrease prejudice and create a more equitable society.



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## 1. Introduction

Prejudice is a pervasive problem across countries and cultures. Understanding how group-based prejudice (i.e., beliefs, attitudes, or actions that disadvantage or harm members of particular groups) arises is important to improve the lived experiences of all, especially those with minoritized, marginalized, or stigmatized identities. Although there are many societal factors that contribute to the development and maintenance of prejudice, researchers have hypothesized that humans possess *cognitive biases* that also contribute to the development of prejudicial beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. One such cognitive bias is psychological essentialism, an intuitive theory comprising the beliefs that categories reflect real distinctions found in nature, and that category members share an underlying, fundamental essence that leads them to be similar in both obvious and nonobvious ways

(Gelman, 2003; Medin & Ortony, 1989). In the biological domain, essentialist beliefs lead us to think of mice and tigers as fundamentally distinct species that are different in both obvious and nonobvious ways, and whose differences are largely due to differences in their underlying essence (in this case, their genetic makeup). Essentialist beliefs can be somewhat helpful by leading us to view biological categories as inductively rich and based in an underlying essence. If tigers are thought to have a “tiger essence” that imbues them with tiger-specific properties (like being ferocious or man-eating) and mice have an underlying “mouse essence” that imbues them with mouse-specific properties (like being skittish or cheese-eating), we know to interact differently with tigers and mice, even if a given tiger does not look like a prototypical tiger (e.g., it is smaller and white-striped, rather than larger and orange-striped). However, essentialist beliefs in the biological domain can also bias us in less helpful ways. For example, these beliefs have been shown to impede our understanding of evolution or the process of natural selection by leading us to ignore within-category variability (e.g., Gelman & Rhodes, 2012; Shtulman & Schulz, 2008) and by leading us to view categories as more stable and strictly defined than they actually are (e.g., Gelman & Rhodes, 2012).

These biases, already problematic in the biological domain, quickly become even more problematic when applied to the social world. Social categories that are viewed through an essentialist lens are considered to be biologically based (rather than culturally determined), stable across time and situation (rather than contextually bounded), and having strict and rigid boundaries that are uncrossable (rather than having flexible boundaries that enable one to hold fluid, malleable identities). In this way, social essentialist beliefs can lead to the belief that social groups are fundamentally distinct kinds and that group-based differences are due to some inherent, intrinsic factor, thus serving to reify social group boundaries and existing societal structures (e.g., Verkuyten, 2003; Yzerbyt, Corneille, & Estrada, 2001). We quickly see that applying our essentialist intuitions from the natural world (e.g., viewing mice and tigers as two distinct and fundamentally different species) to the social world (e.g., viewing White people and Black people as two distinct and fundamentally different species) can lead to problematic ideas.

Even before the recent heyday of research on essentialist beliefs, pioneering social psychologists had strong intuitions about the potential negative consequences of viewing social group membership as derived from some inherent group-based essence. In 1948, Muzafer Sherif wrote

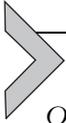
about the, “substantive mode of mentality, the tendency to account for or describe events (social and otherwise) in terms of the ‘essence’ of things instead of in terms of related processes...In spite of the facts that the masculine and feminine roles and statuses have actually undergone considerable changes in the United States since the Revolution, the prevailing conceptions of men and women are held to be *inherent*, immutable qualities of the sexes” (p. 361; emphasis in original). Sherif was not alone in speculating on the importance of the belief that it was an internal, unchanging essence that determined group-level properties. When theorizing about the psychological foundations of prejudice in 1954, Gordon Allport wrote, “One consequence of least effort in group categorizing is that a *belief in essence* develops. There is an inherent ‘Jewishness’ in every Jew. The ‘soul of the Oriental,’ ‘Negro blood,’ Hitler’s ‘Aryanism,’ ‘the passionate Latin’—all represent a belief in essence. A mysterious mana (for good or ill) resides in a group, all of its members partaking thereof.” (pp. 173–174, emphasis added). Both Sherif and Allport, as well as other key figures in the intergroup relations literature, such as Tajfel and Lewin (see [Yzerbyt & Rogier, 2001](#)), noted the possible importance of our bias to appeal to an internal essence, rather than external and situational factors, when explaining group-level properties.

However, psychologists did not again explicitly connect the theoretical dots between social essentialism and group-based prejudice for several decades. In 1992, Rothbart and Taylor brought this idea back, suggesting that people applied their essentialist intuitions to the social world, treating social categories as natural kinds even though social categories are socially—rather than biologically—determined and thus more similar to artifacts than to species. In the past three decades, researchers have empirically investigated the relation between social essentialism and prejudice across a variety of social dimensions, from gender to ethnicity to sexual orientation to race. These lines of research have produced an inconsistent picture, where essentialist beliefs are sometimes, but not always, associated with prejudicial attitudes (for a review of work in adults, see [Haslam & Whelan, 2008](#), for a review of work in children, see [Rhodes & Mandalaywala, 2017](#)). For example, some studies have found that essentialist beliefs are associated with greater likelihood of stereotyping ([Bastian & Haslam, 2006](#); [Brescoll & LaFrance, 2004](#); [Coleman & Hong, 2008](#); [Yzerbyt et al., 2001](#)), dehumanization ([Leyens et al., 2000, 2001](#)), holding prejudicial attitudes ([Haslam, Bastian, Bain, & Kashima, 2006](#);

Hodson & Skorska, 2015; Keller, 2005; Jayaratne et al., 2006; Levy & Dweck, 1999; Levy, Plaks, Hong, Chiu, & Dweck, 2001; Levy, Stroessner, & Dweck, 1998; Martin & Parker, 1995), and endorsing discriminatory or exclusionary policies (Hong et al., 2003; Plaks, Stroessner, Dweck, & Sherman, 2001; Roberts, Ho, Rhodes, & Gelman, 2017; Williams & Eberhardt, 2008). Some of this work has even found evidence for a causal relation, where essentialism appears to lead to greater prejudice (e.g., Brescoll & LaFrance, 2004; Dar-Nimrod & Heine, 2006; Mandalaywala, Amodio, & Rhodes, 2017). Although this work certainly suggests a relation between essentialism and prejudice, there are studies that complicate this simple picture. For example, although Bastian, Loughnan, and Koval (2011) found that essentialist beliefs predicted some types of automatic motor responses (e.g., decreased latency to approach in-group vs out-group members), they found no evidence for a connection to explicit prejudicial attitudes. Moreover, when relations between essentialism and prejudice are found, they are often quite weak, vary depending on the exact measure of essentialism used, or differ across different social dimensions (Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2002). Finally, some of this work suggests that essentialist beliefs only engender group-based prejudice when they co-occur with negative information about that group as well (Andreychik & Gill, 2015), although other research suggests this is not always the case. For example, research in children has found that negative attitudes can develop in the absence of essentialist beliefs (e.g., Newheiser & Olson, 2014) and also that prejudice might not develop even when both essentialist beliefs and negative information are present (Rhodes, Leslie, Saunders, Dunham, & Cimpian, 2017).

As even this brief summary of previous research illustrates, the relation between social essentialist beliefs and prejudice is neither as inevitable nor as straightforward as initially thought. Although this research hints at a relation between essentialism and prejudice, it also suggests that this relation is complicated and that it might vary as a function of several important factors, including who holds the essentialist beliefs and what other beliefs, theories, or information about the social world that person holds as well. Clearly there are still major gaps in our knowledge that inhibit our understanding of how and when essentialist beliefs become associated with prejudicial beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors, and there are many questions one could pose that would move this research area forward. In this article, I describe the four questions that I think offer the greatest

potential to clarify how, when, and why essentialist beliefs and prejudice become entangled and thus provide the best chance of improving our understanding of the mechanisms by which essentialist beliefs shape social biases.



## 2. Major questions

*Question #1:* What precisely is essentialism, and how might a more nuanced understanding of its components and structure shed light on the mechanisms by which essentialist beliefs contribute to prejudice?

*Solution #1:* Systematically separate out components of essentialist beliefs to assess each component's relation (or lack thereof) to prejudice.

Although essentialism is often treated in a unidimensional fashion, it might better be characterized as multidimensional, comprising several components that cohere in different ways across different social domains (e.g., race, gender, ethnicity) and across development (e.g., children, adolescents, adults). Moreover, there are a number of beliefs that I will refer to as “essentialism-adjacent constructs,” such as lay theories of dispositionism, entity theories, entitativity, and the inherence heuristic, that are sometimes considered to be components of essentialism and sometimes considered distinct from essentialism. This obviously creates quite a complicated landscape, where researchers use a variety of terms to refer to what might (or might not) fundamentally be the same underlying construct. Thus, I propose that a systematic investigation of the components and structure of essentialist beliefs, and how they are related to essentialism-adjacent constructs, is of the utmost importance and will lay a solid foundation for us to interrogate the links between essentialism and prejudice.

This proposed solution is borne out in the little research on this topic that currently exists. For example, and as will be discussed in more detail subsequently, work in adults has found that not all components of essentialism predict prejudicial attitudes, a nuance perhaps best illustrated by work in the domain of sexual orientation. Among heterosexual participants, one component of essentialism (i.e., viewing homosexual individuals as deeply and fundamentally different from heterosexual individuals) was associated with increased anti-gay sentiment (Haslam & Levy, 2006; Hegarty & Pratto, 2001). However, among these same participants, another component of essentialism (i.e., the belief that sexual orientation is biologically determined) was actually associated with *decreased* anti-gay sentiment (Haslam & Levy, 2006; Hegarty & Pratto, 2001). It is clearly important

to clarify the components and structure of essentialist beliefs, characterize each component's relation to prejudice, and examine these components and relations across various social domains.

*Question #2:* Do essentialist beliefs orient group-based prejudice toward out-groups or toward stigmatized groups?

*Solution #2:* Assess the relation between essentialism and prejudice among members of minoritized groups, who are often the targets of prejudicial attitudes, to clarify whom essentialism orients prejudice toward. Perhaps one of the most compelling reasons for determining the components and structure of essentialist beliefs is the fact that these components could lead to prejudice in different ways. For example, the belief that social categories reflect natural kinds (a component of essentialism akin to a species concept) might contribute to prejudice toward the out-group in particular. The rationale is that by emphasizing group boundaries, this aspect of essentialism leads people to view their in-group as fundamentally different from the out-group, and perhaps even leads people to dehumanize out-group members (e.g., Demoulin et al., 2009; Leyens et al., 2001; Leyens et al., 2000). However, essentialism also comprises beliefs about an underlying inherent, causal essence that determines group membership and group-based properties which could lead to prejudice toward groups stereotyped as having negative properties, regardless of group membership (i.e., whether the negatively stereotyped group is the in- or the out-group). The rationale here is that by leading people to view group-based properties as determined by an underlying essence, these negative properties are viewed as inherent and unchangeable, thus making prejudice toward those stigmatized groups more “acceptable.” In addition to assessing how each dimension of essentialism relates to prejudice, another way of assessing this relation is to study it across diverse populations, and especially in people who hold minoritized, and often stigmatized, identities (Goffman, 1968; Howarth, 2006; Meyers, 1984). In the domain of racial essentialism and racial prejudice, most prior research has been conducted in participants who are members of the majority group, who hold a social identity that often confers privilege rather than stigma (e.g., Haslam et al., 2002; Jayaratne et al., 2006; Williams & Eberhardt, 2008). Therefore, it is impossible to know whether prejudice toward the minority group is based on prejudice toward the out-group, or prejudice toward the stigmatized group (because among majority group members, the out-group and stigmatized group are one and the same). As a solution, I propose including participants from minoritized groups, who hold stigmatized identities and thus are the most frequent targets of

prejudicial beliefs, attitudes, and actions. By including participants from minoritized groups, we can better assess whether essentialism orients prejudice toward the out-group (in which case we would expect essentialism to lead to anti-majority bias among minority group members, and anti-minority bias among majority group members), or whether essentialism orients prejudice toward specific, stigmatized social groups regardless of one's own social identity (in which case we would expect essentialism to lead to anti-minority bias among both majority and minority group members).

*Question #3:* Do essentialist beliefs engender group-based prejudice directly, or must essentialist beliefs interact with additional information or belief systems to lead to negative consequences?

*Solution #3:* Study the link between essentialism and prejudice in both children and adults, to examine whether this link relies on additional beliefs or information that are also being acquired across childhood.

Thus far, I have focused on the direct relation between essentialism and prejudice. However, one outstanding question in this area of research is whether essentialist beliefs are sufficient to engender prejudice on their own. It is possible that essentialist beliefs are actually more likely to engender prejudice *indirectly*, with other types of beliefs shaping the consequences of essentialist beliefs. Here, I focus on two types of beliefs that are thought to or have been shown to modify the effects of essentialism on prejudice: stereotypes about social groups (e.g., Lepore & Brown, 1997; Levy et al., 2001; Putra, Holtz, Pitaloka, Kronberger, & Arbiyah, 2018) and beliefs about the acceptability of inequality or group-based hierarchies (e.g., Mandalaywala et al., 2017; Morton, Hornsey, & Postmes, 2009; Morton, Postmes, Haslam, & Hornsey, 2009; Roets & Van Hiel, 2011; Williams & Eberhardt, 2008; Zagefka, Nigbur, Gonzalez, & Tip, 2013). Stereotypes are likely to be important as they appear to provide information about group-based properties that can paint these groups in a positive or negative light. In this way, the content of group-based stereotypes could shape the consequences of essentialist beliefs about social groups, with essentialist beliefs only leading to prejudice for groups associated with negative stereotypes. Similarly, acceptance (or rejection) of social structures that foster inequity or group-based hierarchies (e.g., system-justifying beliefs, acceptance of the status quo) could also shape the consequences of essentialist beliefs. Although some research in adults attempts to untangle the complicated web of relationships between essentialism, prejudice, and these group-based beliefs, these studies run into the same fundamental issue over and over again. Namely, adults possess not only essentialist beliefs and prejudicial attitudes (both to varying

degrees) but also stereotypes and beliefs about social structures and hierarchies, making it difficult to determine whether essentialism engenders group-based prejudice directly or whether it takes an indirect path in which other types of information about the social world are also necessary. Fortunately, developmental research with children can help resolve this issue. Children do not acquire their entire adult set of beliefs at the same time, meaning that researchers can take advantage of natural variation in children's socio-cognitive development to determine whether essentialism affects the development of group-based prejudice through more direct or indirect means. For example, if we observe that only children who have essentialist beliefs about race *and* have negative racial stereotypes about minoritized groups express prejudice toward those groups, then we can more confidently conclude that essentialism engenders racial prejudice through an indirect pathway. In contrast, if we observe that children who have essentialist beliefs about race *but do not* have negative racial stereotypes about minoritized groups express prejudice toward those groups, then we might conclude that essentialism engenders group-based prejudice through a direct route.

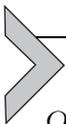
*Question #4:* Do essentialist beliefs lay a foundation for group-based prejudice to develop, or is essentialism strategically invoked to justify existing prejudice?

*Solution #4:* Examine the causal links between essentialism and prejudice, and explore whether essentialism lays the foundation for prejudice, or is invoked in a post hoc manner as a rationalization to justify prejudice.

Intimately related to the question of whether essentialist beliefs directly or indirectly engender group-based prejudice is the question of whether essentialism is in fact necessary at all! Developmental psychologists have oft considered essentialism to be a foundational cognitive bias or intuitive theory that acts as the soil in which stereotypes and prejudice take root and grow (see [Rhodes & Mandalaywala, 2017](#)). In contrast, social psychologists have more traditionally viewed essentialism as a strategically deployed, post hoc justification for stereotypes and prejudice that already exist (see [Brescoll, Uhlmann, & Newman, 2013](#)). Although both developmental and social psychologists agree that there is likely to be a causal relation between essentialism and prejudice, there is a lack of consensus as to which direction the causal arrow points (or whether it can point in both directions). One way to resolve this ambiguity is to conduct studies in which essentialist beliefs are experimentally manipulated and measure the effect on prejudice, while also conducting separate studies in which prejudice is manipulated and the effect on

essentialist beliefs are measured. As before, this is a place where developmental research could be useful; however, thus far there is little experimental research in which essentialist beliefs are manipulated and prejudice is measured (but see Rhodes et al., 2017) and no research exploring whether children invoke essentialist beliefs as *justification* for prejudice. Across childhood, children develop robust socio-cognitive abilities (e.g., system-justifying tendencies, beliefs about fairness and equity, a tendency to perpetuate inequality), suggesting that prior to adulthood, children are cognitively capable of using essentialist reasoning in a strategic, system-justifying manner. However, whether they actually do, and whether they are *motivated* to do so, is unexplored.

In this article, I will tackle each of these questions in turn, explaining the proposed solution to address this gap in knowledge and reviewing relevant studies in adults and children to describe what we know and what questions still remain. I will conclude by identifying several research areas that are still relatively unexplored and describing how future studies can best clarify the relation between essentialism and prejudice. Although much of this article will focus on the relation between racial essentialism and racial prejudice, work examining the link between essentialism and prejudice across other social domains can shed light on the mechanisms by which essentialism exerts its effects, and the limits of essentialism's reach (for good or ill). Therefore, where appropriate, I will supplement this discussion with research examining essentialist beliefs and prejudice based on sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and so forth. Identifying the mechanisms by which essentialism leads to negative (or positive) outcomes is of the utmost importance. By understanding the mechanisms by which essentialism and prejudice are related, and determining how and when they become linked (if they do), we have the best chance of determining whether essentialism—a malleable aspect of cognition—can be utilized as a targeted point of intervention to reduce prejudice and create a more equitable society.



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### **3. Question #1: What precisely is essentialism**

*Question #1:* What precisely is essentialism, and how might a more nuanced understanding of its components and structure shed light on the mechanisms by which essentialist beliefs contribute to prejudice?

*Solution #1:* Systematically separate out components of essentialist beliefs in order to be able to assess each component's relation (or lack thereof) to prejudice separately.

### 3.1 Components and structure of essentialist beliefs based on studies in adults

Essentialist beliefs comprise a set of beliefs, and from the early days of essentialism research, one of the major questions was whether essentialism was best considered a unidimensional construct (i.e., all of these components cohere and are well correlated), or whether it might better be considered multidimensional (i.e., some components are well correlated with each other, but there is no overall coherence). Rothbart and Taylor (1992)—some of the first to theorize about essentialism and prejudice—suggested that psychological essentialism consisted of two primary types of beliefs, the belief that category membership is fixed and unchangeable, and the belief that categories are inductively rich and informative. However, it was not until almost a decade later that researchers attempted to use empirical methods to assess the underlying content and structure of social essentialism. In their seminal study, Haslam, Rothschild, and Ernst (2000) asked participants to think about a particular social category (e.g., Catholics), and then asked them to assess this social category on the following dimensions: *discreteness*: the extent to which category boundaries are rigid and category membership inflexible; *naturalness*: the extent to which a category is considered natural or biological (vs. artificial or socially constructed); *immutability*: the difficulty associated with changing group membership or group-based properties; *stability*: the extent to which a category exists across different times and contexts; *uniformity*: the similarity of group members; *informativeness*: the inductive potential of category membership; *inherence*: the extent to which a category has an underlying essence or intrinsic basis; *exclusivity*: the extent to which category membership excludes an individual from belonging to another group as well; and *necessity*: the extent to which group membership is dependent upon an individual possessing some necessary characteristics (Haslam et al., 2000). Participants repeated this process for a number of social categories and dimensions (e.g., “Jews,” “Republicans,” “liberals”). Using factor analysis, Haslam and colleagues found evidence for an underlying two-factor structure, comprising a “naturalness” factor (i.e., the extent to which a category was thought of as a natural kind, including the component's discreteness, naturalness, immutability, stability, and necessity) and an

“entitativity/reification” factor (i.e., the extent to which a category was thought of as being coherent with a common core essence, including the components uniformity, informativeness, inherence, and exclusivity). Since this first empirical investigation into the structure of essentialist beliefs, a number of studies have subsequently found support for this two-factor structure (e.g., Demoulin, Leyens, & Yzerbyt, 2006; Haslam & Ernst, 2002; Hegarty & Pratto, 2001), including recent cross-cultural work that finds evidence for this structure across diverse countries (the United States, Northern Ireland, and China: Coley et al., 2019; but see Tawa, 2017 for recent suggestion of a four-factor structure for racial essentialism). This two-factor, rather than unidimensional, structure could have important implications for the relation between essentialism and prejudice. As I will discuss later, there are theoretical reasons and empirical evidence suggesting that each factor relates to prejudice in distinct ways (e.g., Haslam et al., 2002; Hegarty & Pratto, 2001).

### 3.2 Essentialism-adjacent constructs in adults

Although detailing each type of essentialism-adjacent construct is outside the scope of this article, studies examining constructs closely related to essentialism can provide useful information about the content, structure, and bounds of essentialist beliefs and thus are useful to review briefly here. In fact, essentialism-adjacent constructs often appeal to essentialist reasoning in their definition (e.g., Cimpian & Salomon, 2014; Yzerbyt et al., 2001) or appeal to well-established components of essentialist beliefs (e.g., static vs. dynamic as equivalent to immutable vs. mutable: Levy et al., 2001); therefore, the lines between essentialism and adjacent constructs are often fuzzy (however, for a nice example of an empirical attempt to separate essentialism from its adjacent constructs, see Bastian & Haslam, 2007). One domain of essentialism-adjacent beliefs that has received considerable attention are beliefs that focus on the *biological or genetic basis* of groups and group-based properties. These beliefs revolve around the idea that there is an underlying biological or genetic essence that determines group membership and group-based properties (e.g., Andreychik & Gill, 2015; Dar-Nimrod & Heine, 2011; Keller, 2005; Jayaratne et al., 2006; Williams & Eberhardt, 2008). These deterministic types of beliefs are most closely related to the *natural kinds* component of essentialist beliefs although they are clearly also related to beliefs about the stability and immutability of groups or of group-based properties. There are other essentialism-adjacent

constructs that align with this natural kind component of essentialism as well; for example, *lay theories* (e.g., Hong, Levy, & Chiu, 2001; Hong et al., 2003), *lay dispositionism* (e.g., Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1997; Haslam, Bastian, & Bissett, 2004), and *implicit person theories* (e.g., Levy et al., 1998; Plaks et al., 2001). These three types of theories are all closely related, in that they describe group membership or group-based properties as being fixed or malleable (i.e., entity vs incremental), again appealing directly to beliefs about stability and immutability. The primary difference between them is typically whether this essentialist-type reasoning is applied to the group or group members (lay theories, implicit person theories), or to group-based properties (lay dispositionism). There are other essentialism-adjacent constructs that are more closely related to different components of essentialist beliefs. As might be guessed by the name, the construct of *entitativity*, defined as the perceived coherence of a group, aligns closely with the entitativity or homogeneity component of essentialist beliefs (Brewer & Harasty, 1996; Hodson & Skorska, 2015; Rydell, Hugenberg, Ray, & Mackie, 2007; Yzerbyt et al., 2001). Finally, recent work has proposed an essentialism-adjacent construct that its creators envisioned as a precursor to essentialist beliefs; the *inherence heuristic* refers to tendency to appeal to internal or inherent explanations for phenomena observed in the world (Cimpian & Salomon, 2014; Salomon & Cimpian, 2014). In other words, if we observe that men's average salary is higher than women's average salary, the inherence heuristic might lead us to believe that men simply do better work than women and therefore earn more money. These authors suggest that our predisposition to rely on inherent explanations stems from the fact that explanations that appeal to intrinsic factors are simply easy for us to recall and to think about (Hussak & Cimpian, 2018), and further suggest that this cognitive bias sets us up to develop and use essentialist beliefs, even when they are inaccurate (as is the case for essentialist beliefs about social groups).

### 3.3 Components and structure of essentialist beliefs based on studies in children

The vast majority of research that has systematically examined the components and structure of essentialist beliefs about social groups has been conducted in adults. This is not because these questions are not of interest to developmental psychologists. Rather, it is difficult to obtain the data necessary to address these questions in children. As described above, much of the research examining the components and structure of essentialist beliefs

relied on researcher's ability to administer long surveys to large groups of people, which then enables the application of statistical techniques such as principle components analysis to examine the structure of essentialist beliefs. Developmental psychologists are thus hindered both by the difficulty of recruiting large sample sizes (e.g., young children typically cannot be recruited online or through undergraduate participant pools) and by young children's inability to complete extended surveys or long testing sessions.

Although this impedes developmental psychologists' ability to assess essentialist beliefs in the same manner as do social psychologists who study adults, it has also led developmentalists to think rigorously from the outset about exactly what components comprise essentialist beliefs and to develop creative measures that are designed to tap into a specific component. In a recent overview of the development and consequences of social essentialism, my colleague and I reviewed how social essentialist beliefs are typically measured in children and what components of essentialism have been identified through this research (Rhodes & Mandalaywala, 2017, see also Gelman, 2003). This research identifies five core components of social essentialist beliefs in children, including: *natural kinds beliefs*, or the idea that social categories (e.g., White/Black, man/woman, Christian/Muslim, gay/straight) reflect true distinctions found and created in nature, rather than social conventions that vary by context; *strict boundaries*, or the idea that categories have rigid and discrete boundaries; *homogeneity*, or the idea that category members will share properties with each other, and that category members are more similar to each other and more different from noncategory members; *stability*, or the idea that category membership is stable across time and context; and *causality*, or the idea that it is category membership that is responsible for the development of category-typical properties (see Rhodes & Mandalaywala, 2017 for a detailed review).

As should be clear based on the summary of adult's social essentialist reasoning provided above, there are points of similarity and points of difference in the proposed components and structure of essentialist beliefs between children and adults. One similarity is the importance of both natural kinds and homogeneity/entitativity beliefs in both children and adults. However, one difference is that children have more components and a less coherent structure to their essentialist beliefs than do adults. In children, these components are not well correlated with each other, suggesting that these components of essentialist beliefs have yet to cohere in children as they eventually do in adults (e.g., in adults, being biologically based and

immutable are both parts of the naturalness factor, whereas in children they are poorly correlated and thus best considered separate components, at least until roughly 9–10 years of age: [Gelman, Heyman, & Legare, 2007](#)). Although researchers hypothesize that this lack of coherence appears across a variety of social dimensions, actual data examining coherence of components across various dimensions is lacking. There are two studies, one examining coherence for group-based properties ([Gelman et al., 2007](#)) and one examining it in a novel groups context ([Yang & Dunham, 2019](#)), but there is no work in real-world groups, for example examining the factor structure or coherence between components for gender, ethnic, or racial essentialism.

This means that although there have been a number of studies in children that examine components of essentialist beliefs about race in children, none have yet examined the *structure* of children's essentialist beliefs about race. This could be an important gap to fill, as different components of essentialist beliefs have been shown to relate to prejudice in different ways, at least in adults (e.g., [Haslam et al., 2002](#); [Hegarty & Pratto, 2001](#)). However, research has demonstrated that children are capable of reasoning about race in an essentialist manner, for example, viewing race as stable ([Hirschfeld, 1995](#); [Pauker, Ambady, & Apfelbaum, 2010](#); [Roberts & Gelman, 2016](#)) and inductively rich ([Mandalaywala, Ranger-Murdock, Amodio, & Rhodes, 2019](#)). In line with the idea that there are distinct components of essentialist beliefs, different dimensions of essentialist beliefs seem to appear at different ages. For example, some children as young as 4 years old appear to view race as stable and heritable ([Hirschfeld, 1996](#); [Pauker et al., 2010](#); [Pauker, Ambady, & Apfelbaum, 2010](#)), but it is not until later in childhood that children view race as inductively rich ([Mandalaywala et al., 2019](#)) or as having objective boundaries ([Rhodes & Gelman, 2009](#)). Moreover, the development of racial essentialism seems to depend upon cultural input ([Diesendruck, Goldfein-Elbaz, Rhodes, Gelman, & Neumark, 2013](#); [Kinzler & Dautel, 2012](#); [Mandalaywala et al., 2019](#); [Pauker, Xu, Williams, & Biddle, 2016](#); [Rhodes & Gelman, 2009](#)); I cover this developmental story in more detail later (in [Section 7.2](#)).

### 3.4 Essentialism-adjacent constructs in children

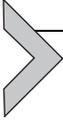
There has been far less investigation of essentialism-adjacent constructs in children than in adults, probably because developmental scientists are still working out the components and structure of essentialist beliefs themselves. However, there has been some work examining two constructs, namely lay

theories of dispositions and the inherence heuristic. There is good evidence that children engage in lay dispositionism, thinking of properties and traits in essentialist terms (Heyman & Gelman, 2000). For example, children think of the trait “aggressive” as being stable across time and caused by intrinsic factors (Giles, 2003). Moreover, there is some evidence that children are equally likely to view properties and social categories in essentialist terms early in development. One study on children’s belief about the stability of both emotion and race found that White American children were just as likely to say that emotion would be stable across time as they were to say that race would be stable across time (Roberts & Gelman, 2016). In other words, these children were equally likely to say that a happy White child would grow up to be a happy Black adult (an emotion match and a race mismatch) as they were to say that a happy White child would grow up to be a sad White adult (a race match and emotion mismatch), suggesting that these children saw emotion (a disposition) and race (a social category) as similarly flexible across time. Among White children, this tendency disappeared by age 9, when children began to view race as more fixed than emotion. However, Black children as young as 5-years-old exhibited this more adult-like intuition, viewing race as more fixed than emotion even at this younger age. As I will discuss in the next section, exploring similarities and differences in essentialist reasoning across children from diverse backgrounds and with diverse identities can help us understand both essentialist beliefs themselves and the possible consequences that stem from them. Finally, children as young as 4 years old tend to appeal to inherent or intrinsic factors, over external or extrinsic factors, when seeking to explain things they observe in the world, and this tendency is associated with their essentialist beliefs (Sutherland & Cimpian, 2018). However, the tendency to appeal to inherent causes decreases across development, with older children (6–7 year-olds) being less likely than younger children (4–5 year-olds) to endorse inherent explanations, and with adults being less likely than even the older children to do so (Cimpian & Steinberg, 2014).

### 3.5 Summary

In sum, although researchers have made progress defining the scope, bounds, and structure of social essentialist beliefs, there is still much work to be done. This is especially true in developmental work given that there is even less coherence between components of essentialist beliefs in children than there is in adults. Clarifying the components and structure of essentialist beliefs

only grows more important as we attempt to understand how and when these beliefs engender group-based prejudice. As I will illustrate below, without conceptual clarity, it is often difficult to understand the mechanisms by which essentialist beliefs operate, as each component of essentialism could plausibly produce prejudice in unique ways.



#### **4. Question #2: Whom do essentialist beliefs orient prejudice toward?**

*Question #2:* Do essentialist beliefs orient group-based prejudice toward out-groups or toward stigmatized groups?

*Solution #2:* Assess the relation between essentialism and prejudice among members of minoritized groups, who are often the targets of prejudicial attitudes, to clarify whom essentialism orients prejudice toward. Before diving into the question of whether essentialist beliefs engender prejudice, it seems prudent to define clearly the scope of what is meant by “prejudice,” as essentialist beliefs have been studied in relation to cognitive (stereotyping), affective (attitudes), and behavioral (discrimination, i.e., actions that favor one group over another) dimensions of prejudice. Therefore, I will first define each of these dimensions of prejudice—acknowledging that certain beliefs can fall into more than one dimension—and briefly describe why essentialist beliefs have been hypothesized to affect each. Within each dimension of prejudice, I will examine the consequences of essentialist beliefs across diverse groups of people, including those who are the targets of prejudice (often minoritized populations) as well as those who are more frequently the perpetrators or beneficiaries of prejudicial beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (often majority populations). Studying the consequences of essentialism on prejudice across diverse groups of people will clarify whether essentialist beliefs orient prejudice on the basis of in-group or out-group membership, or whether essentialism orients prejudice toward stigmatized groups in particular, regardless of the social identities of the belief holder. This distinction might be clearer when put concretely, in terms of racial essentialism and racial prejudice in the United States. In the United States, White Americans are both the numerical majority in the population and the materially advantaged higher status group, whereas Black Americans are the numerical minority, as well as the materially disadvantaged, lower status, and often stigmatized group (Hamilton, Darity Jr, Price, Sridharan, & Tippett, 2015). For White Americans, Black Americans are both the out-

group and the socially stigmatized group; therefore, in research that includes only White Americans as participants, it is impossible to know whether an essentialism–prejudice link emerges because essentialism orients prejudice toward the out-group (Black Americans) or because essentialism orients prejudice toward the socially stigmatized group (again, Black Americans). However, if we examine the relations between racial essentialism and racial prejudice among Black Americans, then we gain traction on this issue. For Black Americans, the out-group (White Americans) and the socially stigmatized group (Black Americans) are different, and in this way research that includes participants with minoritized identities helps clarify how racial essentialism leads to racial prejudice. Understanding precisely *how* essentialism engenders prejudice has important practical implications as well; clarifying these mechanisms will help psychological science determine whether and how interventions that target essentialist beliefs can be utilized to reduce prejudice.

Finally, although in this section I will explore the ways in which essentialist beliefs have been hypothesized to shape cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of prejudice, it should be noted that the essentialism–prejudice relation has been proposed to be bidirectional. In other words, some researchers have hypothesized and tested the idea that essentialist beliefs are invoked *in response to* existing prejudice (e.g., [Brescoll et al., 2013](#)). I will return to this idea and review the studies in support of it later (see Sections 6.1 and 6.2).

## 4.1 Relations between essentialist beliefs and dimensions of prejudice

### 4.1.1 *Essentialism and stereotyping: The cognitive dimension of prejudice*

Here I define stereotypes as a set of group-based beliefs (that may or not be based in reality) that one uses to make assumptions about particular individuals on the basis of their group membership ([Allport, 1954](#); [Hamilton, 1981](#)). For example, if one holds the stereotype that White Americans enjoy listening to National Public Radio (NPR), then when that person meets a new White American they might assume that this person likes NPR, solely on the basis of their racial group membership. Stereotypes can be based in reality and actual probability distributions, or can have no basis in reality. For example, because of a history of oppression and discrimination, in the United States White families hold significantly more wealth than Black families (e.g., [Hamilton et al., 2015](#)). Thus, a common racial stereotype is

that White people are wealthier than Black people, an assumption that will often (although, importantly, not always) be true. Although a racial stereotype about wealth might be based in reality in a way that a racial stereotype about enjoying NPR is not, for the purposes of this article I consider them both to be stereotypes that could be affected by essentialist beliefs about race.

There is a fairly straightforward connection between essentialism and stereotyping if we recall the components of essentialist beliefs, especially the belief in category homogeneity (in children) or entitativity (in adults). Because homogeneity/entitativity components set up expectations of within-group similarity, essentialist beliefs have been proposed to lead to the belief that category members share the same properties (see [Yzerbyt et al., 2001](#)). There is a wealth of evidence supporting the connection between essentialism and stereotyping, although much of it is about a general psychological essentialism, rather than racial (or gender, or religious) essentialism. However, this work has repeatedly found connections between essentialism and stereotypes; for example, that greater essentialism is associated with greater stereotype endorsement ([Bastian & Haslam, 2006](#)) as well as greater attention to stereotype-consistent, as compared to stereotype-inconsistent, information ([Bastian & Haslam, 2007](#)). Although there is less work examining the relation between stereotyping and essentialist beliefs within particular social domains, some work has looked at this association for gender essentialism and gender stereotypes. In this work, adults who read a fictional news story attributing gender differences to biological causes (an essentialist view) were more likely to endorse gender stereotypes than participants who read that gender differences stemmed from social factors ([Brescoll & LaFrance, 2004](#)). Essentialist beliefs about gender have even been found to impact people's beliefs about themselves; in a study of women in the United States, [Coleman and Hong \(2008\)](#) found that individual differences in gender essentialism predicted endorsement of negative gender stereotypes and self-stereotyping. In particular, women who viewed gender as biologically based were more likely to endorse negative stereotypes about women and to apply these stereotypes to themselves than were women who viewed gender as socially constructed ([Coleman & Hong, 2008](#)). This is one of the few studies that illustrates the potentially negative consequences when essentialist beliefs are held by members of the more stigmatized group—here, women. It demonstrates the importance of including participants from both the privileged and the stigmatized groups in these lines of research to better understand the mechanisms by which essentialist beliefs exert their effects,

in this case by orienting harmful beliefs toward the stigmatized group, even when those beliefs negatively impact the self.

Although I have thus far focused on stereotyping, there are other types of cognitive intergroup consequences that can arise as a consequence of essentialist reasoning. For example, the naturalness factor of essentialism can lead people to view social categories as marking natural kinds, and thus as marking fundamentally different kinds of people (e.g., [Leyens et al., 2001](#); [Rothbart & Taylor, 1992](#)). In this way, essentialism has been hypothesized to lead people to apply a sort of species concept to group membership, leading to dehumanization of out-group members. Indeed, adults sometimes view essentialized out-groups as less human than essentialized in-groups ([Leyens et al., 2001](#)), denying these essentialized out-group members the full suite of human emotions attributed to in-group members ([Leyens et al., 2000](#)). Given research exploring the links between racial prejudice and dehumanization (e.g., [Goff, Eberhardt, Williams, & Jackson, 2008](#)), it is surprising that comparable studies have not been conducted to examine whether racial essentialism engenders dehumanization of racial out-groups, an important gap to fill in future work.

In contrast to the relative lack of research examining the relation between racial essentialism and racial stereotyping in adults, there are a few studies in children that have directly examined this relation. This research has found that essentialist beliefs are related to increased out-group stereotyping in young children ([Pauker et al., 2010, 2016](#)). For example, in a sample of children between 3- and 10-years of age, [Pauker et al. \(2016\)](#) found that children's racial essentialism predicted their endorsement of negative racial stereotypes. Although we see evidence for a relation between racial essentialism and racial stereotyping in children, we actually find evidence for no relation when examining gender essentialism's relation to gender stereotyping. In a study of 5- to 7-year-old children and their parents, [Meyer and Gelman \(2016\)](#) found no relation between children's essentialist beliefs and their likelihood of endorsing gender stereotypes. In line with other research in adults (e.g., [Brescoll & LaFrance, 2004](#); [Coleman & Hong, 2008](#)), Meyer & Gelman did find an essentialism-stereotyping relation among parents. It is intriguing that Meyer and Gelman found no relation in children, especially given the importance and primacy of gender in children's everyday lives (e.g., [Kinzler, Shutts, & Correll, 2010](#)). However, much more research is necessary before strong conclusions can be drawn regarding when and how essentialism and stereotyping become linked in childhood.

#### **4.1.2 Essentialism and intergroup attitudes: The affective dimension of prejudice**

Here I define intergroup attitudes as feelings of positive or negative affect that engender more positive (e.g., liking, feeling warmly toward) or negative (e.g., disliking, feeling cold toward) attitudes toward in-group or out-group members, respectively. In the context of racial prejudice in the United States, we typically think of the affective dimension of prejudice as comprising negative attitudes or feelings toward Black Americans, members of the stigmatized racial group considered by many in American society to be lower status, as well as more positive attitudes or feelings toward White Americans, members of the privileged racial group considered by many in American society to be higher status. Briefly, essentialist beliefs have been hypothesized to contribute to negative intergroup attitudes by highlighting between-category differences and within-category similarity. In this way, essentialist beliefs are predicted to lead to increased perception of group boundaries, a greater belief that social categories are biologically and naturally determined—rather than socially constructed, acceptance of the idea that existing social structures and hierarchies are inevitable and would emerge in their current form in any other culture or time, and an increased tendency to ignore out-group variability and instead rely on group-based stereotypes when drawing inferences about individual group members (see Haslam & Whelan, 2008; Rothbart & Taylor, 1992). It should be noted that cognitive forms of prejudice, such as stereotyping, are not completely dissociable from affective dimension of prejudice, such as intergroup attitudes or implicit associations (e.g., Dovidio, Brigham, Johnson, & Gaertner, 1996; Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998; Mann, 1959; Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005). Therefore, there is often overlap in these constructs such that essentialism might be related to both cognitive and affective dimensions of prejudice (e.g., negative stereotypes and negative attitudes toward particular groups).

As described at the outset of this article, research exploring the relations between essentialism and affective forms of prejudice often produced an inconsistent picture, where essentialist beliefs are only sometimes associated with prejudicial attitudes. For example, although several studies have found evidence that stronger racial essentialism is associated with more racial prejudice (Dar-Nimrod & Heine, 2006; Hodson & Skorska, 2015; Keller, 2005; Jayaratne et al., 2006; Mandalaywala et al., 2017), these relations are often quite weak (e.g., Haslam et al., 2002), if they are present at all (e.g., Bastian et al., 2011). Fortunately, there are several means to resolve this

ambiguity and clarify precisely how and when essentialism and affective forms of prejudice become linked.

One way to clarify essentialism's relation to prejudice is to return to our previous discussion of the components and structure of essentialist beliefs. Essentialist beliefs (at least in adults) have been hypothesized to relate to affective forms of prejudice in different ways depending upon both the factor (i.e., naturalness or entitativity) and the social dimension (e.g., race, sexual orientation, gender) in question (see Haslam et al., 2002; Haslam & Whelan, 2008; Hegarty & Pratto, 2001; Prentice & Miller, 2007; Rhodes & Mandalaywala, 2017). For example, studies on essentialist beliefs about sexual orientation and anti-gay prejudice have found that the naturalness factor of essentialist beliefs about sexual orientation (i.e., that orientation is biologically determined) is associated with *decreased* anti-gay sentiment, whereas the entitativity factor of essentialism (i.e., that homosexual men are deeply and fundamentally different from heterosexual men) is associated with *increased* anti-gay sentiment (Hegarty & Pratto, 2001, see also Haslam & Levy, 2006). This nuance emphasizes the need for increased clarity and conceptual precision in future studies examining the links between essentialism and prejudice.

Another way to clarify how, when, and why essentialism relates to prejudice is by examining the relation between them in participants who are members of minoritized, stigmatized groups who are often the targets of prejudice. However, only recently researchers have undertaken this line of inquiry. As one example, in a recent study my colleagues and I examined the relation between racial essentialism and racial prejudice among a large sample of both White and Black American adults (Mandalaywala et al., 2017). As in previous research, among White Americans greater racial essentialism was associated with greater racial prejudice toward Black Americans. However, we found this same pattern among the Black Americans in our study. In other words, greater racial essentialism was associated with greater racial prejudice toward Black Americans among both White *and* Black American adults. This pattern suggests that racial essentialism does not simply orient prejudice toward the out-group (for then we would have observed no association, or a negative association, between racial essentialism and racial prejudice among the Black participants). Rather, it suggests that essentialism orients prejudice toward members of groups stigmatized by society, even when that leads an individual to express dislike of their own in-group. We found this same relation even when we experimentally manipulated the salience of essentialist beliefs (asking participants to read a fictional news

article that claimed race was either biologically or socio-culturally based, as in Williams & Eberhardt, 2008). In this experimental study, both White and Black participants who read that race was biologically based were more likely to express racial prejudice toward Black Americans than were participants who read that race was a social construction. Although there are no other studies examining the consequences of racial essentialism on racial prejudice that include racially minoritized participants, there is some work in other social domains such as ethnicity (Bastian & Haslam, 2008; No et al., 2008; Verkuyten, 2003) and sexual orientation (Morton & Postmes, 2009) that examine the effects of essentialist beliefs on members of minoritized groups. Some of this work reveals that essentialist beliefs do not inevitably result in negative outcomes, but rather that they can sometimes be a positive force. For example, in the domain of sexual orientation, essentialist beliefs can bolster the extent to which sexual minority (e.g., gay, lesbian, or bisexual) individuals recognize and identify with their sexual identity (Morton & Postmes, 2009). In this example, essentialist beliefs appear to support the idea that one's social identity is based in a meaningful and stable community, and in this way engender positive feelings and beliefs about the self and about the group one belongs to. This positive outcome lays in direct contrast to the work my colleagues and I have done showing that racial essentialism is associated with racial prejudice toward Black Americans even among Black American participants (Mandalaywala et al., 2017), and suggests—yet again—that the relation between essentialism and prejudice is complex and quite possibly dependent upon the social domain in question.

In children, essentialist beliefs have been found to relate to affective forms of prejudice in the domains of gender (Meyer & Gelman, 2016) and ethnicity (Diesendruck & Menahem, 2015), but—quite surprisingly—had not been examined in the domain of race. In response, my colleagues and I conducted a study to examine the development and consequences of racial essentialism among 5 and 6-year-old American children (Mandalaywala, Ranger-Murdock, et al., 2019). Moreover, as developmental work suffers from the same issue as work in adults, with participants often comprising children from the majority group rather than also including children from minoritized groups, we included both White and Black American children, as well as a sample of White and Black American adults. We measured racial essentialism, as well as participants' attitudes toward both White and Black targets. Using this basic design, we were able to assess whether essentialist beliefs only affected attitudes toward Black individuals, or whether it might also affect attitudes toward White individuals.

This provided another way of clarifying whether essentialism specifically orients prejudice toward members of a stigmatized group, or whether it could also orient positive affect toward members of a privileged group (in this case, toward White Americans).

Among both White and Black adults, we replicated our previous finding, showing that racial essentialism was associated with more negative attitudes toward Black individuals. We found no evidence that racial essentialism was associated with more positive (or more negative) attitudes toward White individuals, regardless of the race of the participant. We found exactly the same pattern among Black children; greater racial essentialism was associated with more negative attitudes toward Black individuals, but was unrelated to attitudes toward White individuals. Among White child participants, we did not find evidence for relations between racial essentialism and attitudes toward Black or toward White individuals. While curious, the general pattern of results suggests that the pernicious effects of essentialism can strike early, as young as 5-years-old, at least among racially minoritized children, and that the relation between racial essentialism and prejudice remains fairly consistent across development. The fact that only Black, and not White, children showed a relation between racial essentialism and prejudice might actually provide some clues about the mechanisms by which essentialism engenders group-based prejudice, and further illustrates the value of including participants from a diverse set of backgrounds and identities in these types of studies.

#### ***4.1.3 Essentialism and discrimination: The behavioral dimension of prejudice***

Finally, there is the behavioral dimension of prejudice. Here I focus on two primary types of prejudicial behaviors: support for discriminatory policies, and lack of desire or willingness to engage in intergroup interactions. Essentialism has been hypothesized to shape discriminatory behaviors in largely the same way and for the same reasons that it is hypothesized to shape affect and attitudes. In the domain of race, [Williams and Eberhardt \(2008\)](#) explored the relation between racial essentialism and participant's acceptance of racial inequity, as well as participants' willingness to engage in cross-race interactions. Across a series of studies, [Williams and Eberhardt \(2008\)](#) manipulated the salience of racial essentialist beliefs using a fictional news story manipulation, in which participants either read about race being biologically determined (pro-essentialist) or socially determined (anti-essentialist). In one of these studies, [Williams and Eberhardt \(2008\)](#)

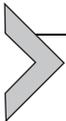
found that participants exposed to essentialist messages about race were less concerned or upset about racial inequity than were participants in the anti-essentialist condition. Additional studies in this series found both correlational and experimental evidence linking greater racial essentialism with less interest in a variety of interracial interactions, including decreased motivation to engage with racially and ethnically diverse others and a decreased interest in befriending someone of a different race (Williams & Eberhardt, 2008). Moving to other social domains, we find evidence for strong links between essentialist beliefs and support for discriminatory policies, especially in the domain of gender. For example, Wilton and colleagues found that greater gender essentialism was associated with reduced support for both women's rights and the rights of transgender individuals (Wilton et al., 2019). Additionally, Roberts et al. (2017) found that greater gender essentialism was associated with increased support for boundary-enhancing legislation, policies, and social services. However, Roberts and colleagues also found that greater gender essentialism was associated with support for services designed to benefit the LGBTQ+ community. Again, this illustrates the fact that essentialism might have some positive outcomes, and I will return to this idea later when discussing future directions in social essentialism research.

Surprisingly, there is no developmental work examining how racial essentialist beliefs might affect behavioral dimensions of prejudice, such as decisions about whom to exclude or befriend. However, there is clear evidence that children use race when making these types of decisions (see Mulvey, Hitti, & Killen, 2010 for a review) and that even Black children often prefer to associate with White, over Black, individuals (Clark & Clark, 1947; Raabe & Beelmann, 2011). Children also use race when deciding with whom and how to share resources, again often in ways that perpetuate societal inequality by giving more to White individuals than to Black individuals (e.g., Elenbaas, Rizzo, Cooley, & Killen, 2016; Renno & Shutts, 2015). However, the extent to which essentialist beliefs undergird these decisions (or are invoked retroactively to justify them) is unknown. This is yet another area of research calling out for additional research.

## 4.2 Summary

In sum, racial essentialism relates to cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of prejudice, although these links are perhaps less robust than typically thought. To firm up our understanding of the links between

essentialism and prejudice, we need substantially more research, both in adults and in children. Moreover, there is a serious need to include participants from more diverse backgrounds and identities, especially those who are members of groups traditionally stigmatized by society. It is only by including these participants in studies of the essentialism–prejudice relation that we can improve our understanding of the mechanisms by which essentialist beliefs engender group-based prejudice. Research that has included diverse participants has shown that although essentialism sometimes harms members of stigmatized groups (e.g., in the domain of race: [Mandalaywala et al., 2019](#); [Mandalaywala et al., 2017](#); [Williams & Eberhardt, 2008](#)) it can also engender positive outcomes in other stigmatized groups (e.g., in the domain of sexual identity and orientation: [Morton & Postmes, 2009](#)). Thus, while such inclusive research sheds invaluable light on the wide range of consequences that can follow essentialist beliefs, it simultaneously raises questions about precisely *how and when* essentialism exerts its pernicious effect, a question I tackle in the next section.



### **5. Question #3: Do essentialist beliefs directly, or indirectly, engender prejudice?**

*Question #3:* Do essentialist beliefs engender group-based prejudice directly, or must essentialist beliefs interact with additional information or belief systems to lead to negative consequences?

*Solution #3:* Study the link between essentialism and prejudice in both children and adults, to examine whether this link relies on additional beliefs or information that are also being acquired across childhood.

As detailed above, stereotypes are perhaps inextricably linked to both essentialist beliefs (as these beliefs lay the foundation for reasoning about stereotypes) and prejudicial attitudes and behaviors (as these stereotypes provide some justification for feeling or acting in biased ways). It is thus unsurprising that scholars have theorized about the relations between these factors, speculating that essentialist beliefs and stereotypes interact to produce prejudicial outcomes. However, the extent to which the relation between essentialist beliefs and prejudice relies on stereotypes, or other types of group-based beliefs, has rarely been investigated.

This could be, in part, because the relations between these clearly interrelated concepts and ideas are hard to untangle. In fact, essentialist beliefs and stereotypes often appear to operate in a bidirectional manner. Essentialist beliefs create attentional biases for stereotype-consistent, over

stereotype-inconsistent, information (Bastian & Haslam, 2007), lead people to view group members as more perceptually similar than they actually are (Yzerbyt et al., 2001), and increase endorsement of stereotypes (Bastian & Haslam, 2006; Coleman & Hong, 2008). However, evidence of the reverse relation exists as well; for example, adults are more likely to infer a deep, causal essence when presented with groups that are perceived to be coherent and highly entitative, than when presented with less coherent groups (Yzerbyt et al., 2001).

Stereotypes are not the only types of beliefs that could shape the consequences of essentialist beliefs, and there is a wealth of work in adults suggesting that system-justifying beliefs, or other types of group-based beliefs that serve to reify existing societal structures, might also be of crucial importance (e.g., Brescoll & LaFrance, 2004; Brescoll et al., 2013; Zagefka et al., 2013). In the domain of race, my colleagues and I examined whether endorsement of social hierarchies (e.g., acceptance of a societal structure where certain groups are dominant to others) mediated the relation between essentialism and racial prejudice (Mandalaywala et al., 2017). Among both White and Black participants, we found that increasing the salience of essentialist beliefs about race increased the extent to which participants accepted hierarchies and group-based inequality, which in turn increased racial prejudice toward the racial group often viewed by society as lower status.

Although the links between essentialism, group-based beliefs, and prejudice are undoubtedly complex, there are several means available to clarify these relations. First, we can measure and/or systematically manipulate all three of these factors (one at a time), and use statistical techniques (such as mediation or moderation analysis) to test the hypothesis that essentialist beliefs only lead to prejudice when awareness or endorsement of stereotypes are also present. Second, we can conduct studies across development, as children are in the process of developing not only essentialist beliefs and social biases but also stereotypes and other group-based beliefs. By examining whether essentialism and prejudice only become related once children become aware of other information about the social world and social systems, developmental studies are particularly useful for assessing whether essentialist beliefs engender group-based prejudice through more direct or indirect pathways. Finally, a third approach is to use a novel groups paradigm to study the relations between essentialist beliefs and prejudice. In this article, I am primarily concerned with reviewing research on the links between essentialist beliefs and prejudice grounded in real-world group

membership. However, in novel groups research, the experimenter can control exactly what information the participant has about the groups, systematically providing (or not) different types of information about the novel group(s) and examining which types of information or beliefs are necessary for prejudice to emerge. In the following sections, I will review work that has used the latter of these two approaches, developmental and novel groups methods, to explore the psychological foundations of prejudice.

### **5.1 Assessing the role of moderating factors in studies with children**

There has been very little work in children that has examined whether the effects of essentialist beliefs on prejudice are dependent upon other types of beliefs, such as stereotypes or system-justifying beliefs. Historically, children have been thought to have rather simplistic views on the world, with little knowledge of societal stereotypes and little tendency or motivation to think in terms of social psychological constructs (i.e., system justification or acceptance of inequality and the status quo). However, recent work has illustrated that children are capable of quite complex reasoning about the social world and social structures (e.g., [Hussak & Cimpian, 2015](#); [Olson, Dweck, Spelke, & Banaji, 2011](#)), leaving open the possibility that these types of group-based beliefs might shape how essentialism and prejudice relate in childhood.

One indirect piece of evidence in favor of this proposal comes from our study that examined racial essentialism and racial prejudice in Black and White children and adults ([Mandalaywala et al., 2019](#)). In this study, Black children showed a relation between racial essentialism and greater anti-Black bias. Curiously, White children did not show this same relation. This pattern of results led us to speculate that essentialist beliefs engender racial prejudice through an indirect pathway where additional information, such as negatively valenced racial stereotypes about Black people, are necessary for racial prejudice to emerge. Although we did not measure racial stereotypes in our study, given typical racial socialization practices (see [Abaied, Perry, & Stanger, 2017](#); [Lesane-Brown, 2006](#)), it is entirely plausible that the Black children in our sample were more aware of negative societal stereotypes of Black Americans than were the White children in our sample. As additional support for this supposition, by adulthood—when both White and Black adults are equally likely to express awareness of negative racial stereotypes about Black Americans—greater racial essentialism

was associated with greater racial prejudice toward Blacks among both White and Black adults. The pattern of results in this study suggests that awareness of stereotypes, especially stereotypes that systematically disadvantage a particular racial group, might be an integral piece of the puzzle when trying to understand when essentialist beliefs produce prejudicial attitudes or actions.

Children acquire awareness of many stereotypes across early childhood (e.g., Pauker et al., 2010). For example, between the ages of 3- and 10-years-old, children develop a racial stereotype about status, expecting White people to be wealthier than Black people (Olson, Shutts, Kinzler, & Weisman, 2012; Shutts, Kinzler, Katz, Tredoux, & Spelke, 2011; Elenbaas & Killen, 2016; Mandalaywala, Tai, & Rhodes, 2019), and by 6-years-old children develop racial stereotypes about occupational prestige, expecting Black people to have lower status occupations than White people (Bigler, Averhart, & Liben, 2003). Understanding the development of racial stereotypes about status in particular is important as people, beginning in childhood, often prefer people and groups at the top of the hierarchy (Bigler & Liben, 2007), perhaps because high-status individuals are likely to have preferential access to resources and social capital and thus are likely to be good coalition partners (Cheney & Seyfarth, 2007). This preference for high-status groups is evident even among individuals who belong to stereotypically low-status groups (e.g., when Black children in the United States exhibit a pro-White bias, see Raabe & Beelmann, 2011). Thus, while any type of racial stereotype might shape how essentialist beliefs affect prejudice, stereotypes about status might be particularly potent (Bigler & Liben, 2007).

It is likely that other types of status-related beliefs could help explain how and when essentialist beliefs engender prejudicial beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Unfortunately, there is a complete lack of developmental research examining how other types of beliefs about status shape the relation between essentialism and prejudice. This is true even for status-based beliefs that have been found to be important in adults, such as acceptance of group-based inequality (Mandalaywala et al., 2017) and system-justifying beliefs (Brescoll et al., 2013). Even young children possess a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of societal structures, as well as a tendency to perpetuate group-based inequality (e.g., Elenbaas et al., 2016; Olson et al., 2011) and the status quo (Hussak & Cimpian, 2015). For example, although by 7.5-years of age, children will often choose to rectify inequality when given the option (e.g., offering to redistribute resources so that a

disadvantaged individual gets their fair share), younger children do not do so, instead perpetuating inequality (Olson et al., 2011). Moreover, children as young as 4-years-old tend to explain phenomena—including status hierarchies—in terms of inherent, intrinsic properties as opposed to external, extrinsic properties (Hussak & Cimpian, 2015). For example, when asked why some people were rich, children would be more likely to say something like, “because they are really smart” (an inherent explanation) rather than, “because there are more places they could work” (an extrinsic explanation). Although this work suggests a connection between essentialist-type reasoning and one type of status-based belief, more work is necessary to understand what types of beliefs shape the relation between essentialism and prejudice, and why those beliefs exert the effects they do.

## 5.2 Novel groups research on the essentialism–prejudice relation

The idea that essentialism engenders group-based prejudice through indirect pathways is consistent with recent developmental studies using a novel groups paradigm. Because all pieces of information must be provided by the experimenter, using a novel groups paradigm is a particularly powerful method to understand whether essentialism engenders group-based prejudice on its own, or if prejudice emerges only when essentialism interacts with other types of information or experiences. Because participants have no knowledge of the novel groups apart from what they are told in the context of the experiment, they cannot hold negative (or positive) stereotypes or ideas about these groups unless they are explicitly told such information; therefore stereotypes cannot affect the essentialism–prejudice relation. Moreover, because children are not members of these novel groups (unless this is a part of the experimental design), motivational concerns are reduced or eliminated. In this way, the novel groups paradigm simplifies the number of factors that could contribute to prejudice, eliminates potentially confounding variables such as stereotypes or motivation, and allows researchers to examine the direct (or indirect) effects of essentialism on prejudice.

Recent years have seen the novel groups paradigm put to good use in the study of the relation between essentialism and prejudicial beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. For example, across a series of studies, researchers told children (aged 4.5–7-years-old) about a novel group (“Zarpies”: Rhodes et al., 2017). In each study, half of the children were told about this novel group using generic language—a common linguistic technique shown in previous work to stimulate the formation of essentialist beliefs (Rhodes, Leslie, & Tworek, 2012); the other half heard the same information about the novel

groups but in the absence of generic language (Specific language condition). As expected, children in the Generic language condition showed greater essentialist beliefs about Zarpies than children in the Specific language condition. However, children in the Generic language condition did not show greater levels of affective prejudice toward Zarpies than children in the Specific language condition. Regardless of condition, children were equally likely to choose to associate with a Zarpie. This suggested evidence against the direct pathway as essentialist beliefs *on their own* were insufficient to engender group-based prejudice. In line with ideas proposed above, especially those speculating on the potential importance of stereotypes and an indirect pathway to prejudice, the researchers hypothesized that perhaps essentialist beliefs needed to interact with negatively valenced information about the group in order for prejudice to emerge. Thus, in a subsequent study, Rhodes and colleagues not only used the same language manipulations (Generic vs. Specific) but also told all children that the Zarpie had done something bad (e.g., stolen a cookie). Even with the addition of this negatively valenced information about Zarpies, children in the Generic language condition were still *not* more likely to express prejudice toward the Zarpies than children in the Specific language condition. Although these researchers found no relations between essentialism and affective measures of prejudice in either of these studies, they did find a relation between essentialism and a behavioral measure of prejudice, with children in the Generic language condition being more likely to withhold resources from Zarpies than were children in the Specific language condition. This pattern of results provides further evidence of the complicated relation between essentialist beliefs and prejudice, illustrating both that essentialist beliefs do not inevitably result in prejudice (even in the presence of negative information about a group) and also that the measure of prejudice matters (with essentialism predicting resource allocation behavior, but not affect).

### 5.3 Is essentialism necessary at all?

Although throughout this article we have documented links between essentialist, or essentialism-adjacent, beliefs and prejudice, it is possible that essentialist beliefs are not in fact necessary for the development of prejudicial attitudes. This perspective is perhaps best encapsulated by a commentary written in response to [Cimpian and Salomon's \(2014\)](#) article describing the Inherence Heuristic. In their article, [Cimpian and Salomon \(2014\)](#) hypothesized that this essentialist frame on the world could lay the foundation for prejudicial attitudes. In their response to this article,

Newheiser and Olson (2014) asked whether there might be multiple pathways to prejudice and suggested that a tendency to appeal to deep, inherent, or essential natures might not be necessary for the development of prejudice toward stigmatized groups. Rather, simply learning that society devalues these groups and considers them to be lower in social status might be sufficient information to engender prejudicial attitudes. Newheiser and Olson (2014) thus put forth a call for research directly investigating whether both status hierarchies *and* explanations of these hierarchies in inherent or essential terms are necessary in order for group-based prejudice to emerge (in line with the indirect pathways discussed above), or whether prejudice can emerge even when status hierarchies are not conceived of in essentialized terms (thus rendering essentialism unnecessary).

It is entirely possible that prejudice could sometimes emerge in the total absence of essentialist or essentialist-adjacent beliefs. However, existing research suggests that essentialism and essentialism-adjacent beliefs might be quite important for explaining how and when stereotypes contribute to affective or behavioral prejudice. In particular, work examining whether racial stereotypes about status predict the expression of racial prejudice has found a weaker relation than one might anticipate if racial stereotypes were the primary factor driving the development of pro-White biases. For example, in a sample of 3- to 10-year-olds in South Africa, Olson et al. (2012) found a marginal relation between children's tendency to express a racial stereotype about status (i.e., saying that White families lived in nicer houses than Black families) and expression of racial prejudice (Olson et al., 2012). My colleagues and I have found similar results in a sample of 3.5- to 7-year-olds in the United States; children that expressed a racial stereotype about status were only slightly more likely to show racial biases that favored the White target than were children that did not express this stereotype (Mandalaywala, Tai, & Rhodes, 2019). Again, if racial stereotypes about status are the primary factor driving the development and expression of racial prejudice, we might expect to see much stronger relations than we actually do.

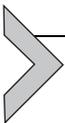
As laid out by Newheiser and Olson (2014) there are likely to be multiple pathways to prejudice, some of which do not rely on essentialism or its adjacent constructs. And it should be clear by now that we need much more research on this topic to understand when essentialism is necessary for prejudice to emerge, and when prejudice can emerge in its absence. Fortunately, this is a question that can be investigated using the general developmental approach outlined above. For example, research can start

by examining whether racial prejudice or bias is present in children who have developed racial stereotypes about status, but who have not yet developed racial essentialist beliefs. Research has shown that racial essentialism, racial stereotypes about status, and racial bias all tend to develop during early childhood, but with substantial interindividual variation in their emergence and developmental trajectories (Kinzler & Dautel, 2012; Mandalaywala, Tai, & Rhodes, 2019; Mandalaywala et al., 2019; Pauker et al., 2016). Thus, perhaps the most obvious next step to build off this prior work is to assess all three factors (racial stereotypes about status, racial prejudice, and racial essentialism) within the same participants to test three questions directly. First, in what sequence do essentialist beliefs, racial stereotypes, and racial prejudice develop? Second, do we find evidence for racial biases in the total absence of essentialist beliefs? And third, does the presence of racial essentialist beliefs mediate the relation between racial stereotypes and racial prejudice (or, alternatively, do racial stereotypes mediate the relation between racial essentialism and racial prejudice)?

However, I would like to propose a perhaps less obvious next step as well, which is to examine whether it is not essentialist beliefs about *race*, but rather essentialist beliefs about *status* that best predict the development of prejudicial attitudes that disadvantage lower status groups (in this case, leading to prejudice toward Black people). These essentialist beliefs could take the form of essentialist intuitions about status-based group membership (e.g., membership in a low-status *group* is fixed and heritable) or they could take the form of essentialist intuitions about status as a property (e.g., individuals who are lower in social status will continue to be low status because being the property of being low-status is fixed and heritable). Although some research has examined both children's (e.g., Giles, 2003; Heyman & Gelman, 2000; Roberts & Gelman, 2016, 2017) and adult's (Haslam et al., 2004) essentialist reasoning about traits, there are substantial gaps, such as research examining whether people reason about social status in essentialism terms (but see Davoodi, Soley, Harris, & Blake, 2020; Kraus & Keltner, 2013 for work examining children's and adult's essentialist intuitions about high- and low-status group members). A close interrogation of the nature of essentialist beliefs about status (whether at the group- or property-level) could go a long way in clarifying how and why essentialist beliefs and prejudice become linked. Moreover, this type of work could most effectively be conducted in childhood, before essentialist beliefs about race or status become fully developed and intertwined.

## 5.4 Summary

In sum, work from both children and adults, and across studies using both real-world and novel groups methods suggests that essentialism is unlikely to engender negative social attitudes through a direct pathway. Rather, essentialism appears more likely to affect racial attitudes via an indirect pathway, through its interactions with other pieces of social information, group-based beliefs, and experiences. This is important because it suggests that essentialist beliefs can have very different implications for different people, a point I will return to later when examining whether essentialist beliefs might (directly or indirectly) actually have the potential to engender positive intergroup interactions or healthy social identity development. However, studies examining how a variety of factors might modify the effects of essentialism on prejudice are lacking, and thus more work is needed in this area, especially in children. Finally, I raised the question of whether essentialist beliefs are in fact a necessary precursor for the development of prejudice. This last question connects directly to the next section, in which I will explore whether essentialist beliefs might actually be a consequence, rather than an antecedent, of prejudice.



## 6. Question #4: Is essentialism foundational or motivated?

*Question #4:* Do essentialist beliefs lay a foundation for group-based prejudice to develop, or is essentialism strategically invoked to justify existing prejudice?

*Solution #4:* Examine the causal links between essentialism and prejudice, and explore whether essentialism lays the foundation for prejudice, or is invoked in a post hoc manner as a rationalization to justify prejudice.

While the question of whether essentialism leads to prejudice, or prejudice leads to essentialism, has only recently been asked by developmental psychologists, it is likely to be a familiar question to social psychologists. Developmental psychologists often think of essentialist beliefs as laying the psychological groundwork for the development of prejudicial beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, drawing a hypothetical causal arrow *from* essentialism *to* prejudice (Rhodes & Mandalaywala, 2017). In contrast, many social psychologists have asked whether the causal arrow might actually point in the opposite direction, *from* prejudice *to* essentialism (i.e., Brescoll et al., 2013; Verkuyten, 2003). For years, social psychologists have conceived

of social essentialism as a type of motivated cognition that is applied post hoc to rationalize and justify existing prejudice (see Verkuyten, 2003). In particular, social psychologists have pondered whether negative stereotypes about groups are explained in essentialist or inherent terms, in this way serving to justify existing prejudicial beliefs and attitudes. To give a brief example from Yzerbyt and Rogier (2001) who argued that essentialist explanations for stereotypes were created and maintained to rationalize existing social arrangements, “To the extent that observers have been able to identify a ‘true’ feature of the actor, subsequent behavior would seem to be legitimized. For instance, if the immigrant is *inherently* aggressive, then I have every reason to want him to be expelled from my country.” (p. 109, emphasis added). In this section I will review the evidence from across social domains suggesting that essentialist beliefs are in fact sometimes used in such a strategic and motivated fashion.

## 6.1 Essentialism as motivated cognition: Work in adults

Research suggesting that essentialist beliefs can be employed in this motivated way comes almost exclusively from work in adults where several lines of research illustrate the close, seemingly bidirectional relation between essentialist beliefs and dimensions of prejudice. Perhaps some of the most compelling and oft referenced work illustrating that essentialist beliefs can be employed in a strategic manner comes from outside the domain of race, examining whether essentialist beliefs are invoked to justify prejudicial beliefs, attitudes, or stereotypes based on caste (Mahalingham, 2003), ethnicity (Verkuyten, 2003), social status (Kraus & Keltner, 2013), and gender (Brescoll et al., 2013; Wong, Horn, & Chen, 2013). One correlational study examined the caste system in India, specifically asking whether members of the high-status Brahmin caste were more likely than members of the low-status Dalit caste to endorse essentialist intuitions about class and identity (Mahalingham, 2003). Finding this pattern would suggest that one’s place in society affected one’s motivation to explain group-based differences in terms of intrinsic, immutable, biologically based factors, with those at the top (i.e., Brahmins) highly motivated to explain their privileged position in essentialized, inherent terms. This is, in fact, exactly what Mahalingham (2003) found; Brahmins were significantly more likely to think that a poor man would change to be more like the rich man if he received a brain transplant giving him the brain of a rich man, but did not believe that a rich man would become more like the poor man if he received a brain from a poor

man. In contrast, Dalits were at chance in answering whether or not the man would change, regardless of whether the poor man received a rich man's brain or vice versa.

Some experimental work comes from the domain of gender, where [Brescoll et al. \(2013\)](#) tested the hypothesis that essentialism serves the function of rationalizing and legitimating existing social inequalities by leading people to think of them as natural and inevitable and arising out of some underlying causal essence. This idea is closely related to the idea that essentialism might engender group-based prejudice through its interactions with acceptance of the status quo or endorsement of system-justifying beliefs (as found in [Mandalaywala et al., 2017](#)). However, there is one crucial difference between these studies, namely the direction of the causal relations between these variables. Brescoll and colleagues, along with others who suppose that essentialism might be motivated, propose that people appeal to essentialist intuitions and explanations to support system-justifying beliefs that in turn prop up prejudicial attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. In their studies, [Brescoll et al. \(2013\)](#) tested this idea by experimentally manipulating system-justifying beliefs (by creating a system threat, a technique shown to increase people's tendency to engage in system justification: [Jost, Kivetz, Rubini, Guermandi, & Mosso, 2005](#); [Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005](#)). They then assessed essentialist beliefs, focusing on beliefs about immutability, finding that participants who were exposed to system threat were also more likely to express essentialist intuitions or endorse explanations that relied upon inherent, intrinsic factors. The fact that Brescoll and colleagues found evidence for essentialism as motivated cognition, while my colleagues and I find evidence for essentialism as foundational ([Mandalaywala et al., 2017](#)), suggests that essentialism is likely to relate to prejudice in more than one way, at least in adults.

## 6.2 Essentialism as motivated cognition: Work in children

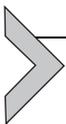
Hopefully by this point it is clear that essentialist beliefs in adults can be employed in this strategic, justificatory manner. Unfortunately, although some developmental psychologists have suggested that essentialist beliefs might actually be a consequence of prejudicial attitudes and thus resemble this motivated cognition account ([Newheiser & Olson, 2014](#)), empirical developmental work on this question is lacking. Although there is a dearth of research examining whether essentialism can be invoked in this motivated sense, there are limited indirect pieces of evidence suggesting that children

are possible of using essentialist reasoning in a motivated fashion to justify prejudicial beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. First, studies that have measured the correlations between essentialism and aspects of prejudice often find that greater essentialism is associated with greater stereotyping (Pauker et al., 2016) and greater prejudice toward stigmatized groups (Mandalaywala et al., 2019). Although no experimental studies have been done to examine the causal direction of these relations, it is possible that essentialist beliefs are employed in service of these stereotypes and prejudice (rather than being foundational). Second, starting in middle childhood, there is some evidence that children's social status shapes their beliefs about societal structures. In particular, in a study conducted in India—where caste is a salient social dimension—children as young as 10-years-old who endorsed the idea that the caste system was important were also more likely to endorse essentialized, deterministic theories about caste (Srinivasan, Dunham, Hicks, & Barner, 2016). This relation was found in adults as well, but not in children younger than 10-years-old, raising the possibility that essentialist beliefs might only come to be used in a motivated sense later in development. Finally, other aspects of children's cognition and decision-making appear to be influenced by their motivations, and by the context established in the study. For example, children often display different types of behaviors depending upon whether or not they are being watched (e.g., choosing to share resources evenly when watched, and giving themselves more when not being watched: see Engelmann & Rapp, 2018). Although it is far too early to draw any conclusions about whether essentialism could be a form of motivated cognition in children, it certainly seems plausible and worthy of further investigation.

### 6.3 Summary

In sum, adults are capable of using essentialist beliefs to justify prejudicial attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, or existing systems of power and status, at least in the social domains (status, caste, ethnicity, and gender) that have been studied thus far. However, there appears to be a total lack of research examining whether people use essentialism to justify racial prejudice, an important gap to fill. It should be noted that although studies have found that adults *can* use essentialism in a motivated manner, that does not mean that they always do. Clarifying when essentialism is invoked post hoc, and when essentialism acts as a foundation for the development of prejudice, still deserves much more study. This is a place where developmental research

can be particularly useful. Although the available indirect evidence in children is informative, empirical research that determines the direction(s) of the causal arrow(s) between essentialism and prejudice is necessary to draw any firm conclusions. Future research in children should employ child-friendly versions of experimental designs from adults, in which essentialist beliefs, motivation, or prejudice is manipulated in a systematic fashion, and the effects on the other two factors are measured. In addition to clarifying the causal relations between essentialism and prejudice, studying this question in children can clarify whether essentialist beliefs play different roles across different periods of development. For example, in adulthood where individuals already hold fairly stable beliefs, motivations, and attitudes, essentialist beliefs could be employed in a motivated manner, in service of existing prejudice. In contrast, in childhood, essentialist beliefs might instead create a stable foundation upon which stereotypes can form, take hold, and engender prejudice. Additionally, whether and when motivation plays a role in childhood is still up in the air. However, given that children have clear motivations that shape their behaviors in other domains (e.g., having a motivation to appear fair and thus sharing equally when watched: see [Engelmann & Rapp, 2018](#)), it is entirely plausible that these aspects of cognition, attitudes, and behavior might be comparably motivated. Here again, I call back to my earlier imperative for inclusivity and diversity in participant backgrounds, experiences, and identities. Many of these studies could benefit from the inclusion of diverse participants, including those who are the most likely perpetrators of inequality as well as those who suffer from that same lack of equity. We are most likely to gain substantial insight into the question of whether essentialism is a motivated cognition by including members of groups who differ in their own motivations.



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## **7. Future directions and new approaches to clarify the links between essentialism and prejudice**

Although the previous decades have seen an explosion of research into the relations between essentialist beliefs and prejudice, there is clearly still much work to be done. In this penultimate section, I will briefly highlight a final few question that are related to the four questions above, but that push the bounds of our current understanding of the nature and consequences of social essentialist reasoning and will help illuminate how, when, and why essentialist beliefs lead to prejudice.

## 7.1 What social categories, or social phenomena, do people view in essentialist terms?

In recent years researchers have begun to explore whether people hold essentialist beliefs for a broader range of social dimensions. No longer are researchers only examining essentialist beliefs about gender and race; now, scholars interested in psychological essentialism are studying essentialist beliefs in the domains of religion (Chalik, Leslie, & Rhodes, 2017; Diesendruck & Haber, 2009; Smyth, Feeney, Eidson, & Coley, 2017), ethnicity (Birnbaum, Deeb, Segall, Ben-Eliyahu, & Diesendruck, 2010; Diesendruck et al., 2013;), national identity (Davoodi et al., 2020; Ellwood-Lowe, Berner, Dunham, & Srinivasan, 2019; Hussak & Cimpian, 2019), language (Dautel & Kinzler, 2018; Kinzler & Dautel, 2012), and social status (Davoodi et al., 2020; Kraus & Keltner, 2013). There is much to be gained by examining the development and consequences of essentialist beliefs across this wider range of social dimensions.

First, people express prejudice on the basis of a variety of social identities; therefore, it is relevant to study the possible psychological precursors to prejudice based on ethnicity, religion, language, or other social identities in order to understand where this prejudice comes from and how we might reduce it. Second, we can—and should—apply our previously stated imperative to interrogate the components of essentialist beliefs to investigations of these less studied social dimensions. By doing so, we will clarify the core beliefs that contribute to essentialist reasoning for religion, for ethnicity, for nationality, and so forth. This does more than simply grow our knowledge about essentialist beliefs for a given dimension; it also sheds light on whether there are certain components of essentialist beliefs that appear to be social domain-general and others that appear to be social domain-specific. For example, if we find that beliefs about immutability of group membership appear in people's essentialist reasoning regardless of whether we are studying essentialist beliefs about religion, ethnicity, nationality, gender, or race, then we might reasonably conclude that immutability beliefs are a core component of essentialist reasoning writ large. In this way, by studying essentialist beliefs about a variety of social dimensions we gain clarity into the very nature of essentialist beliefs.

Third, studying the relation between essentialist beliefs and prejudicial beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors across social dimensions can illuminate the precise mechanisms by which essentialism and prejudice become linked. Again, if we find that certain components of essentialist beliefs are linked

to prejudice regardless of the social dimension in question, then we can more confidently conclude that these components are foundational in the development of prejudice regardless of whether that prejudice is based in race or sexual orientation, language, or nationality. In fact, the literature on the relation between anti-gay attitudes and essentialist or essentialism-adjacent constructs (such as genetic determinism or belief in a biological basis to homosexuality) is particularly interesting and enlightening when we compare it to the relations between racial prejudice and racial essentialism. Studies on essentialist beliefs about homosexuality and anti-gay prejudice often reveal the opposite pattern to the one found when examining the relation between racial essentialism and racial prejudice. The belief that sexual orientation is biologically determined, rather than consciously chosen, is actually associated with *decreased* anti-gay sentiment (e.g., Haslam et al., 2002; Hegarty & Pratto, 2001). In stark contrast, the belief that racial group membership is biologically determined either finds that these beliefs are associated with greater anti-Black sentiment (Jayaratne et al., 2006; Keller, 2005; Mandalaywala et al., 2019; Mandalaywala et al., 2017; Williams & Eberhardt, 2008) or that they are unrelated to prejudicial attitudes (Haslam et al., 2002; Haslam & Levy, 2006; Hodson & Skorska, 2015). In no study that I am aware of did essentialist beliefs about race predict pro-Black sentiment. This discrepancy in results illustrates the value of studying the links between essentialism and prejudice across social dimensions, where the relations can differ in meaningful ways that illuminate the mechanisms through which essentialist beliefs exert their (sometimes) pernicious effects. This type of information is critical for predicting the efficacy of different types of essentialism-based interventions. If the relations between essentialist beliefs and prejudice differ across social domains, then we might be best served by tailoring interventions by domain. If the components of essentialism that predict prejudice differ across social dimensions, then perhaps the ideal interventions will differ as well.

## 7.2 How do social essentialist beliefs develop?

As discussed earlier, essentialist beliefs are sensitive to linguistic input. Hearing novel groups discussed in generic language results in the development of essentialist beliefs about those groups (Rhodes et al., 2012, 2017), and even simple labels can prompt adults to essentialize race (i.e., increasing essentialist thinking about race when presented with a racially ambiguous group that is discussed with monoracial labels: Young, Sanchez, & Wilton, 2013). However, these beliefs also appear sensitive to other types

of input, such as the diversity of people and experiences that individuals, especially children, are exposed to on a regular basis. For example, racial essentialism in early childhood appears to be affected by exposure to racial diversity; Black American children who grew up in neighborhoods with a larger percentage of White inhabitants and same-age White American children who grew up in neighborhoods with a larger percentage of Black inhabitants were less likely to express racial essentialist beliefs than were Black or White children with less exposure to racial out-group members (Mandalaywala et al., 2019). Similarly, children who grew up in a rural context were more likely to view race in essentialist terms than were children who grew up in an urban setting, although this pattern only emerged later in development, around 10 years of age (Rhodes & Gelman, 2009). Expanding in geographic scale, 4- to 11-year-old children who grew up in Massachusetts, a more racially homogenous state, were more likely to express racial essentialist beliefs than children who grew up in Hawaii, a state with substantially more racial diversity (Pauker et al., 2016). Finally, on an even broader scale, researchers examined the development of essentialist beliefs about race (White/Black) and ethnicity (Jewish/Arab) across two different cultural contexts, the United States and Israel (Diesendruck et al., 2013). In line with the idea that essentialist beliefs develop about social domains that are locally relevant, children in Israel came to express greater essentialism about ethnic categories, whereas children in the United States came to express greater essentialism about race. Both groups of children expressed gender essentialist beliefs, demonstrating that these country-level differences could not be explained by a general difference in the tendency to view social categories in essentialist terms. Finally, work on other social dimensions, most notably religious or ethno-religious categories (Chalik et al., 2017; Birnbaum et al., 2010; Diesendruck & Haber, 2009; Smyth et al., 2017), has found comparable effects of the cultural context, illustrating that a wide variety of social essentialist beliefs are sensitive to environmental input.

Although recent years have seen an increase in research examining the role of cultural context in the development of social essentialist beliefs, there is still relatively little work examining how either the development or the consequences of essentialist beliefs might differ across different contexts. For example, although we have seen that exposure to diversity tends to reduce the development of essentialist beliefs about race (Mandalaywala et al., 2019) as well as reduce stereotype development (Pauker et al., 2016), we might predict that this is no longer true when diversity is experienced in a high-conflict or resource-scare areas. Therefore, future work

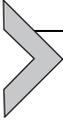
attempting to understand the development or consequences of essentialist beliefs should endeavor to measure and include environmental factors.

### 7.3 Can essentialist beliefs have positive outcomes?

We often think of essentialism as a pernicious cognitive bias that leads to stereotypes and prejudice by distorting our ability to perceive the world in an accurate and objective manner. Up until this point, I have only discussed research examining the possibility that essentialism has negative consequences, either contributing to the formation of prejudice or being invoked as justification for it. However, essentialist beliefs might not always lead to negative outcomes. Although the vast majority of studies of essentialism have focused on the possible negative consequences of essentialism, there is good reason to suspect that essentialist beliefs might also carry some positive benefits, such as facilitating the development and maintenance of a strong, positive group identity (Morton et al., 2009; Verkuyten, 2003). For instance, by fostering the belief that one's social identity is based in a meaningful, stable, and supportive community, identity and belongingness could facilitate beliefs and behaviors that engender positive feelings about oneself and about the group one belongs to. Here, the future research imperative is clear: examine whether essentialism relates to beneficial outcomes such as social identity development or positive intergroup attitudes and relations.

Although there is almost no research in this vein, either in adults or children, there is a strong theoretical foundation for the premise that essentialism might contribute to positive individual and group-based identity development. Scholars have suggested that essentialist beliefs actually lay the foundation for progressive movements, such as feminism, multiculturalism, and gay rights, that seek to establish the existence, fundamentality, and immutability of minoritized and often stigmatized identities (see Morton et al., 2009; Verkuyten, 2003). Moreover, essentialist beliefs, especially the entitativity component, have been hypothesized to facilitate a sense of group identity and group unity, by emphasizing a shared nature and commonalities within group members (Yzerbyt et al., 2001). By making social identities immutable and rooted in natural causes, and by making group-level properties the outcome of a shared underlying essence, essentialist beliefs might thusly lay the foundation for positive group-based identity development. Social identity development and group-based pride have been associated with beneficial outcomes across racial-ethnic minorities, in both

younger children (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990) and in older children and adults (Altschul, Oyserman, & Bybee, 2006; Ratner, Halim, & Amodio, 2013; Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin, & Lewis, 2006). In sum, there are several ways that essentialism might be a force for good.



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## 8. General conclusions

In this article, I outlined four big questions that I believe illustrate the largest gaps in our knowledge of the essentialism–prejudice relation. I explained why these particular questions impede our ability to determine how essentialism relates to prejudice, reviewed what existing data say, and suggested solutions to these impediments that will move this research area forward. Although I focused on the relation between racial essentialism and racial prejudice, I reviewed findings from a variety of social domains, as research from across domains can clarify the mechanisms by which essentialist beliefs engender group-based prejudice. Finally, I concluded by suggesting a few directions that researchers interested in the connections between essentialist and prejudice could go, all of which I think will substantially increase our understanding of the consequences of essentialist beliefs. First of these was a call for careful study of essentialist beliefs across a wide variety of social domains, taking care to understand the development and consequences (on prejudice) for each component of essentialist beliefs within a given domain. Second was a request to continue studying the development of social essentialist beliefs. By clarifying the developmental timeline, the factors that contribute to the development of essentialist beliefs, and how environmental factors might also shape the consequences of these beliefs, we can better predict the conditions under which essentialist beliefs might engender prejudice. Finally, although I have focused on the ways that essentialist beliefs might contribute to prejudice, especially in the domain of race, we should also study the possibility that essentialist beliefs might lead to positive outcomes, such as fostering a strong self-identity or collective action and social justice movements. Understanding how essentialist beliefs affect a myriad of outcomes—from positive to negative—can only help clarify the mechanisms by which essentialism exerts its effects and how we can harness those mechanisms to reduce harm and foster healthy development and outcomes.

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