How does social essentialism affect the development of inter-group attitudes?

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Psychological essentialism entails expectations that category members are fundamentally similar to each other and distinct from non-members. When applied to social categories, scholars from diverse disciplines have long theorized that essentialist beliefs are detrimental for inter-group relations, facilitating stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination (Allport, 1954; Leslie, in press; Haslam, 2002). Yet, very little prior work has experimentally tested the implications of essentialism—particularly in early childhood when negative inter-group attitudes first develop.

In three studies with 5-year-olds (N = 144; 60 male; 70% European American), we introduced children to a novel group—“Zarpies”—using either generic language (“Zarpies sleep in trees”) or non-generic language (“This Zarpie sleeps in a tree”), building on prior work showing that generic language elicits essentialism as children learn about new social groups (Rhodes, Leslie, & Tworek, 2012). We then assessed children’s willingness to give resources to and feelings towards Zarpies. Across all studies, children exposed to the generic language developed more essentialist beliefs about Zarpies (Study 1, OR = 1.54, p = .04; Study 2, OR = 1.70, p = .005; Study 3, OR = 2.44, p < .001). In Study 1, children exposed to generic language also gave 20% fewer resources to Zarpies (p = .05), but did not feel more negatively towards them. In Study 2, children received more exposure to either generic or specific language, over the course of two weeks. We again found that children in the generics condition withheld more resources from Zarpies (18%, p < .001), but did not feel more negatively towards them.

Studies 1 and 2 might indicate that essentialism increases the salience of group boundaries. On this account, children in the generic language condition were more likely to consider that Zarpies were members of an out-group, and thus withheld resources because of diminished expectations of reciprocity (Dunham et al., 2011). To test if this was the case, in Study 3, we made the out-group nature of Zarpies salient to all children, by assigning children to a fictional group identity of their own (the “Gorps”), prior to exposing them to information about Zarpies. In this study, children in both conditions withheld more resources from (30%, p < .001) and felt more negatively towards (Cohen’s D = .5, p = .002) Zarpies than in-group members. Overall, essentialism did not amplify the levels of in-group bias found in both conditions, but on the individual-level, children’s beliefs about the discreteness of the boundaries between Zarpies and Gorps predicted their tendencies to withhold resources from Zarpies, r = .30, p = .04.

We conclude that essentialism increases the salience of group boundaries (when they might not otherwise be brought to mind), thus leading to reduced expectations of reciprocity and impeding the sharing of resources. Yet, essentialism—alone—does not appear sufficient to increase out-group disliking. These findings do not preclude the possibility that essentialism contributes to out-group disliking when it is combined with other factors, such as one’s interpersonal experience, knowledge of negative actions of group members, or other social experiences.