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The Essentialized Self: Implications for Motivation and Self-Regulation

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Persuasion attempts are more likely to stick and less likely to be counterargued if they fit the ways people naturally make sense of themselves and their world. One way to do that is to yoke persuasion to the social categories people experience as “true” and “natural.” Gelman and Echelbarger’s (2019) integrative review of essentialism outlines the emergence of essentialism in children’s reasoning. Connecting their discussion with identity-based motivation theory (D. Oyserman, 2015) and a culture-as-situated cognition (D. Oyserman, 2017) perspective, this commentary addresses how an essentialized self can facilitate or impair motivation and self-regulation and potentiate or undermine persuasive efforts.

Keywords Self and identity; Social cognition; Meta-cognition and metacognitive experience; Preference and choice; Identity-based motivation

Introduction

A preschooler works on a maze. When she is done, she is shown the work of another child. That child has wildly outperformed her. Then she is given a chance to do another maze. A middle schooler sees a graph and describes what the graph shows. When he is done he is asked to describe what is possible for him in the future. Having described his possible identities and any strategies he has to get there, he is given a novel math problem to work on. Does seeing a maze or a graph matter? Yes, but it depends on what the maze or graph implies about what “we” do and who “we” are. Preschool girls are more successful at maze-work after seeing good performance by a girl than by a boy (Rhodes & Brickman, 2008). Boys shown a graph of men’s and women’s income (men earn more) imagine more academically successful futures, articulate more strategies to get there, and actually work harder on

the math at hand than boys shown a graph of educational attainment (women do better) or graphs without gender (Elmore & Oyserman, 2012). Why does this gendered information matter?

Gelman and Echelbarger’s (2018, this issue) extensive review of the multifaceted literature on psychological essentializing in children and adults offers a persuasive explanation for why gendered information matters for children’s meaning making. In my reading, three key conclusions emerge. First, essentialistic reasoning emerges at an early age and is sticky; it remains in adult reasoning as well. Second, children universally have a propensity to essentialize. Third, essentialistic reasoning is consequential; children, like adults, infer value from unseen essences in people and objects.

In this commentary, I take a culturally situated cognition approach (Oyserman, 2011, 2017; Oyserman & Yan, 2018) to identity-based motivation (IBM) (Oyserman, 2007; Oyserman, 2009a; Oyserman, 2015). By doing so, I highlight four key implications of these three key conclusions about

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essentializing (early emergence and stickiness, universality, and consequentiality) for social interventions and persuasion in consumer contexts and beyond. First, using cues linked to essentialized categories will be an efficient way to shape judgment and choice—after all, across ages and cultures, consumers can be assumed to have a tendency to essentialize and to reason in terms of essences. Second, using cues linked to essentialized categories should increase preference stability among members of that category—after all, essences are by definition, constant. Third, using cues linked to essentialized categories is an efficient way to leverage motivation—especially if taking a particular action is part of the essence of a category to which the consumer belongs. Fourth, persuasive attempts linked to essentialized categories are less likely to be counterargued when presented in culturally fluent formulations. In the next sections, I outline what IBM theory is and how a culturally situated approach sheds light on how IBM can be leveraged to trigger and sustain essentialized reasoning.

Identity-Based Motivation

Identity-based motivation theory, a situated cognition theory of self-regulation and goal pursuit, predicts that people prefer to act in ways that feel congruent with important personal and social identities (Oyserman, 2007; Oyserman, 2009a; Oyserman, 2015). Social identities refer to membership in social groups (e.g., girl, student, working class, poor, American). Personal identities refer to content that may or may not be linked to a social group membership—smart, hardworking, reliable (Oyserman, 2009a, 2009b). According to IBM theory, if an action feels congruent with one's identities, then difficulties in succeeding, starting, or keeping going are likely to imply that taking action is important—that it is a for “me” or for “us” thing to do. To paraphrase William James (1890), thinking (about the self) is for doing. Because doing requires sensitivity to affordances and constraints, which identities come to mind, and what “on-the-mind” identities seem to mean, is sensitively attuned to momentary and chronic features of context (for a review, Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012). That people are sensitive to the implications of their immediate situation is a design feature, not a design flaw. Sensitivity to the social context allows people to make inferences about what people like themselves likely do, which strategies work for them, and what inferences to draw when their

current activity progresses smoothly or when they run into difficulties (Oyserman, 2009b, 2015; Fisher and Oyserman, 2017; Oyserman et al., 2017).

At the same time, following the logic of essentialism, people believe that in core ways, they maintain an essence across time and space, despite context sensitive variations in attitudes and behaviors. This essentialist belief is useful for several reasons. First, experiencing current “me” and future “me” as essentially the same “me” allows people to make predictions about their own and others' future behavior given what they believe to be true of them now. Second, it facilitates self-regulation. After all, taking current action for the sake of future “me”—whether by saving for retirement (Lewis & Oyserman, 2015) or doing schoolwork (Nurra & Oyserman, 2018)—makes sense if current and future “me” are essentially the same. Third, in the context of an essentialized social identity, difficulty is more likely to be interpreted as implying importance. If people like “me” can do this, not only does that imply that it is a “for me” thing to do, but also that it is identity-congruent to keep trying, persist, and to try alternative strategies (Oyserman, 2015). Hence, essentializing facilitates taking a “no pain, no gain” approach, investing more effort working toward goals in the face of difficulty (Fisher and Oyserman, 2017; Smith & Oyserman, 2015 for reviews Lewis and Oyserman, 2016; Oyserman, Smith, and Elmore, 2014). At the same time, an essentialized social identity makes it more likely that difficulty is interpreted as implying impossibility whenever people like “me” do *not* do this or are stereotyped as not doing it (Oyserman, Fryberg, and Yoder, 2007; for a review, Oyserman & Lewis, 2017). In this way, the propensity to experience some identities as essential, carrying an essence that is common across group members, can be both motivating and demotivating.

Returning to the maze and graph studies with which I opened this commentary. Getting information linked to gender shaped children's subsequent sense of what was possible for them in the future and their downstream performance—in part, because children psychologically essentialize gender. However, essentializing by itself is not sufficient to explain children's downstream action. Following IBM theory, features of the immediate situation dynamically construct what an on-the-mind identity seems to imply for action and what experienced difficulty implies. In the case of the preschoolers with the maze, maze-work became a defining feature of boy-ness or girl-ness in the moment, which was presumably not something

children came into the situation with. Instead, given their propensity to search for essential features of gender, they took on the contextual cue and used it. It is as if they implicitly reasoned: “If another girl can do this, so can I, even if it is hard, it is what ‘we’ do”. In the case of the middle school boys, doing schoolwork became a defining feature of maleness in the moment. It is as if they implicitly reasoned: “If men succeed, school is the path for me!”

More generally, when a social identity is essentialized, it implies that people who have that identity share essential features and that they can make predictions about themselves—what they will like and can do—based on that social identity. Essentialized social identities provide children (and adults) with what appears to be causality. Children infer from their belief about the immutability of category membership (boys cannot become girls by trying really hard) that category membership implies both current and possible future features, skills, and attributes. The particular categories that are essentialized and the inferences children (and adults) draw depend on the categories and the features associated with membership in these categories that are psychologically meaningful in a particular situation, in a particular culture, time, and place.

Beyond gender, psychological essentialism can be at play whenever people use labels such as “math person” or “visual learner” in ways that imply that the category not only describes something concrete about them now but also has deeper implications for the kind of person they are. Considered through an IBM lens, an essentialized “math person” identity signals that math is a “for me” thing; hence difficulties with school imply that a task is important for me and worthy of investment, “no pain, no gain.” In contrast, if I am not a “math person” then those same difficulties might imply that a task is impossible for me and rather than wasting my time, I should invest in something else. The question this raises is which categories are psychologically meaningful, that is, contain content that matters for induction. For example, if there are “math people” or “visual learners” then being or not being in that category determines whether trying at all, or trying in a particular way, matters.

There is abundant evidence that gender, social class, race, ethnicity, and other potentially essentialized identities, such as sexual orientations play such a role in academic performance and health outcomes (e.g., for reviews see Oyserman & Fisher, 2017; Oyserman & Lewis, 2017). Strategies linked with essentialized categories are easier to cue and

more likely to stick. In contrast, strategies that are irrelevant to essentialized categories are harder to cue and less likely to stick. For example, students attained better grades and were less likely to fail courses when IBM-based activities bolstered the idea that people like them see school as the path to their adult futures, use effective action to get going, and see difficulties along the path as normal signals of importance (Horowitz, Sorensen, Yoder, & Oyserman, 2018; Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006).

As this discussion illustrates, essentialistic beliefs can have important implications for people’s sense of self and identity. These beliefs imply (a) that some aspects of what the person once was, now is, and might become are linked to social category membership; (b) that category membership is fixed and stable; (c) that group members share common features; and (d) category memberships allows for causal inference. Hence, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, or social class can not only be used to describe people, but they also imply something essential about people’s essence—their current and possible future identities. As IBM research documents, when effective strategies are experienced as “me” or “us” things to do, students perform better.

Dynamic Construction of Essentialized Identities

Essentialized identities feel permanent; yet, small shifts in social context can shift which essentialized identity comes to mind and whether people are likely to accept or counterargue essentialism-based persuasion attempts. Consider age. On the one hand, what age entails is culturally defined—are old people wise or incompetent, are babies born with original sin or pure, when does childhood end, at what age to people become adults, does that differ for men and women? On the other hand, in each of these descriptions, age categories are essentialized. This essentializing of age has important consequences. People find it harder to imagine themselves in the future when the future is defined as being part of a different essentialized age group than when the future is defined as part of the same age group. Though people advance from one age to another age, while in one category, they find it difficult to imagine themselves in another category. Having shifted from being babies to being teens, neither childhood, nor adulthood will feel as essentially real. At some age, adulthood begins, but people express surprise that they are not quite sure when that is—or express uncertainty that they are a “real” adult, exposing their belief that adulthood is

a homogeneous social category with clear psychological features. To the extent that being a parent with children to support, or being a retiree in need of retirement savings, feels like an essentially different age group, people should find imagining these future states more difficult. Unfortunately, ease of imagination matters for motivation—if it is difficult to imagine these future states, then it implies that there is no point in starting or continuing investing in these futures.

As an example, the extent to which people find it easy to imagine themselves as old influences their impatience and willingness to wait for larger later rewards (termed temporal discounting). In a series of studies, Lewis and Oyserman (2015) randomly assigned adults to conditions in which the same temporal distance was described in terms of days or years. Adults were randomly asked to imagine a future in 18, 30, or 40 years or in the equivalent number of days. For example, adults asked to imagine themselves wanting to retire in 10,950 days found it easier to see themselves as retirees than adults asked to imagine themselves as wanting to retire in 30 years. Similarly, adults asked to imagine themselves having a newborn who would be ready to go to college in 6,570 days found it easier to see themselves as parents of a college student than adults asked to imagine themselves as having a newborn who would be ready for college in 18 years. In all cases, ease of imagination affected temporal discounting. When being in another age category was easier to imagine, people discounted the future less; they were more willing to wait for larger rewards and planned to start saving sooner. In related work, Hershfield et al. (2011) randomly assigned people to interact with an avatar based on a current photograph of themselves or a digitally aged one. Interacting with one's digitally aged future self increased the amount of money people allocated to retirement savings in a hypothetical scenario. Though these studies were not designed to test the idea that age groups are essentialized, their results illustrate both the power of essentialized categories and the context sensitivity of engaging essentialized social identities.

Children essentialize age as well—"when I was a baby" is distinct from "me now" and from adult "me"—making current "me" feel essentially different from adult "me." If adult future "me" contains a different essence than current "me," simply asking children to imagine who they might become in the future is not enough to yield future-focused action like doing the schoolwork instead of socializing. Instead, children's adult "me" needs to be made to

feel relevant to their current "me"—or in the language of essentializing, share the same essence. This can be done with children, as documented by Nurra and Oyserman (2018). In their experiments with fourth, fifth, and sixth grade children, they randomly assigned children to groups. One group was told that being an adult is near to the present because it arrives soon. Another group was told that being an adult is far from the present because it arrives in a long time. Children in both groups imaged their adulthood as arriving in about 10 years. Condition affected how connected children felt to their adult self (Study 1) and how much children engaged in their schoolwork (Study 3). Being randomly assigned to the "adulthood arrives soon" group increased felt connection to one's adult self (Study 1) and increased the number of math problems children solved (Study 3) compared to being randomly assigned to the adulthood arrives later. High school students also were affected by condition (Studies 2, 4, and 5). For example, being randomly assigned to the "adulthood arrives soon" condition increased students' subsequent grade point average, with effects of this simple framing lasting for 3 months and fading by 6 months (Study 4).

To leverage these effects over time, more than a single cue is needed. Indeed, when children are randomly assigned to complete a set of 12 30-minute IBM activities over 6 weeks at the beginning of the school year, results are stable over a 2-year period (Oyserman et al., 2006). Activities include a variety of ways to make adult "me" feel eminent without explicitly telling students that their adult futures are near. For example, in one set of two activities, students are led to draw pathways linking current "me," next year "me" and adult "me" (see Oyserman, 2015 for the manualized activity). Being randomly assigned to participate in this IBM-based intervention increased attendance and school grades compared to being randomly assigned to attend school as usual (the "control" condition). Because a variety of different tasks were used and tasks were spaced over time, children were likely to have learned that adult "me" is relevant to current "me." Indeed, effects were stable, found both at the end of the first school year and at the end of another school year.

Cultural Fluency and Disfluency

Cultures universally socialize members to pay attention to group membership, forms of relating to others, and the circumstances in which people

should focus on fitting in vs. doing their own thing (Oyserman, 2017). Being socialized into a culture provides expertise into what matters, what to expect, how things unfold, which groups matter and in what way, what group members do, think, value, and feel (Oyserman, 2017). This implies that though a propensity to essentialize may be universal, *what* is essentialized and what essentialism implies for particular categories varies by situation and culture. In other words, suggesting that people use essentialistic reasoning about social categories in making sense of themselves and others is not the same as saying that these categories actually *have* essences or that people *universally* make the *same* inferences about the *same* social categories.

Within a time and place, which groups are essentialized seems natural and obvious. Nevertheless, which groups are candidates for essentializing depends on time and place. For example, whether social class is essentialized and what content is linked to class varies across cultures (Mahalingam, 2003). Cultures, religions, racial and ethnic groups can all be essentialized, experienced as explaining something deeply core to all member of each of these groupings (Allport, 1954). In Northern Ireland, Catholics and Protestants are candidates for essentializing, while in Israel it is Jews and Arabs, and in the U.S., whites and blacks (Rhodes & Mandalaywala, 2017). In the U.S., homogeneous politically conservative settings are conducive of essentializing race for White American children; however, in less conservative settings, African American children essentialize Blackness at an earlier age than White American children essentialize Whiteness (Rhodes & Mandalaywala, 2017).

This latter finding may be surprising at first glance, but not when considered in light of African American parents' desire to protect their children from the dangers of racism. Racial socialization is one way for parents to do so (Hughes et al., 2006; Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995). Racial socialization can involve telling children that others will see them as members of one social category—"African American" rather than as individuals or as members of another social category "children." While both "children" and "African American" are essentialized, being seen as a child implies a different essence (e.g., "innocent," "cooperative," "intellectually open") than being seen as African American. The latter "essence" is negatively valenced as dangerous, uncooperative, unable or interested in learning. Counteracting this message can entail focusing on positive essences—e.g., that African Americans

value academic outcomes, as an aspect of racial-ethnic identity (Oyserman & Harrison, 1998; Oyserman, Harrison, & Bybee, 2001; Oyserman et al., 1995). Racial socialization starts early, being documented as being used by parents of preschool children (e.g., Caughy, O'Campo, Randolph, & Nickerson, 2003).

Racial socialization is a form of socialization that transmits information about how to think about race as well as how others outside one's family might think about race. While racial socialization can be explicit, it can also occur implicitly (Oyserman, Fryberg & Yoder, 2007). People convey messages through conversational norms and linguistic cues about which groups are worthy of attention. Which groups are worthy of attention and what to expect of these groups is marked for example, by using generic language as in "Black people don't break" or "Boys don't cry." Using the generic language implies that the social category "black" or "boys" matters. It also communicates what to expect of oneself as a member of this category. Moreover, it implies that the information applies to all members of a category rather than to a specific individual. When used repeatedly with different content, the inference to be drawn is that the category is psychologically meaningful and essential (Bigler & Liben, 2007; Gelman, Taylor, Nguyen, Leaper, & Bigler, 2004; Rhodes & Mandalaywala, 2017). This can be done by in-group or by out-group members, as a way of highlighting common fate or as a way of communicating stereotypes. What constitutes the essence of an essentialized social category varies culturally though for humans, the factors of warmth (goodness, trustworthiness, conscientiousness, morality) and competence are two key aspects across cultures (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014; Asch, 1946; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Jun, 2002). Even 4-year olds are sensitive to the use of generics (Cimpian, Arce, Markman, & Dweck, 2007).

Consider the statements "Boys don't cry," "girls finish their homework," and "sugar and spice and everything nice, that is what girls are made of." Each implies that gender is a richly inductive essential category and connects to the themes of likeability and competence. From a Gricean communicative logic perspective (Schwarz, 1996), the implication of using the generic ("boys," "girls") rather than the specific ("this boy" or "that girl") is that speaker intends to communicate that there is a gender category and that all boys share traits, as do all girls. Saying instead "this child doesn't cry" or "this good child gets a treat" or "this child is nice" implies that age is a category—that the person is a

child is noted, but the age category is not inductively rich—nothing can be inferred about what children are generally like from these statements. Parental use of essentializing language is one way that children learn which categories are essential. The categories parents and other adults essentialize are both culturally rooted and can vary by features of the immediate situation, depending on communicative intent. As already discussed, whether a potentially essentializing category is on the mind (accessible) and whether it feels relevant to the judgment task at hand matters for judgment, motivation, and behavior. I now turn to *when* people are more likely to essentialize.

In one's own culture, everyday life provides a feeling that the way things *are* is the way that they *ought* to be (Oyserman, 2011, 2017; Oyserman & Yan, 2018). For example, people know what brides wear to weddings; Israelis know that sausages are not likely breakfast food, whereas Americans know the same about cucumbers. This bolsters a feeling of inherence, that the way things are is the way that they ought to be, a precursor of essentialism (Cimpian & Salomon, 2014). Something as simple as rating the quality and attractiveness of Valentine's Day cards or of Labor Day shopping bags is enough to trigger higher perceptions of inherence in unrelated domains—provided that the cards are pink and have warm sentiments and the bags have patriot color schemes (Lin, Arieli, & Oyserman, 2018). In contrast, perceptions of inherence are reduced when the current situation does not unfold as culturally expected—all it takes is a Valentine's Day card in which the heart is made of skulls, or a Labor Day shopping bag embossed with an eco-friendly deer. When exposed to culturally fluent stimuli, such as a pink Valentine's card, people are more likely to rate other non-related things, the color of stop signs, orange juice as a breakfast drink with an essentializing lens—they are just the way things have to be. These perceptions of inherence are a crucial part of essentializing the social world and these perceptions are reduced or curbed when the current situation is culturally disfluent, which implies that things are not necessarily the way they ought to be.

The link between cultural fluency and essentialism holds cross-culturally, although what is culturally fluent depends on the specific culture. For example, propensity to essentialize was higher among Chinese participants who were randomly assigned to view photographs of culturally fluent Qing Ming preparations—a family preparing chicken to bring to their ancestral grave. In contrast, propensity to essentialize was lower among

Chinese participants who were randomly assigned to view photographs of cultural disfluent preparations of a family preparing pizza to bring to the grave (Lin et al., 2018).

Children are immersed in cultural contexts and absorb how “we” do things (termed enculturation). Culturally fluent formulations should increase the propensity to essentialize. For example, consider the essentialized idea that boys are brilliant, while girls are hard workers. This implies that girls should prefer a game framed a “hard work” game and boys should prefer a game framed as a “brilliance” game (Leslie, Cimpian, Meyer, & Freeland, 2015). But it also implies that they should be more likely to essentialize gender and prefer tasks framed in gender-essentialized ways after other, seemingly nonrelated culturally fluent experiences. For example, right after playing a game or singing a song in the culturally fluent “right way” rather than in a novel, disfluent way—by changing up the rules or by using a different melody or tempo.

As a whole, the emerging research on cultural fluency implies that persuasion attempts framed in culturally fluent ways are more likely to trigger a propensity to essentialize so that consumers will be more likely to nod along, and accept persuasion attempts that follow essentialized categories. In contrast, persuasion attempts framed in culturally disfluent ways are more likely to trigger counterarguing undermining propensity to essentialize. Whether “we” do schoolwork, save, conserve energy, or not should depend on triggering the specific aspect of essentialistic reasoning that is useful in the given context.

Summary

In sum, Gelman and Echelbarger's (2018, this issue) timely discussion of essentialism draws attention to early emerging powerful processes. Essentialism entails the experience of natural categories as having deep essences, invisible to the naked eye, which are fixed and cannot be changed and mark categories as distinct and nonoverlapping. IBM theory predicts that people prefer to act and to make sense of their experiences of ease and difficulty in ways that fit their identities, who they are and might become. People experience their identities as stable and prefer to act and make sense of their experiences in identity-congruent ways, but which identities come to mind and what these identities imply for meaning making and action are dynamically constructed in context.

From an IBM perspective, when a social identity is cued, readiness to act and make sense of experience in identity-congruent ways is also cued. Changing what people experience to be the essence of their social identity would go a long way to changing their life trajectory. Paying attention to ways to link persuasion attempts to essentialized categories will facilitate the power of these attempts and make them less likely to be counterargued. Persuasion attempts that connect to psychologically-essentialized social category memberships are more likely to be accepted, particularly if presented in culturally fluent ways—as part of a pink Valentine, wrapped in a patriotic Labor Day shopping bag, or sung to the tune of a nursery rhyme. Then difficulties are more likely to be experienced as signals of importance and counterargument is less likely to occur.

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