

## Preface

From thinking that men and women naturally fulfill different roles at home or work to beliefs that some racial and ethnic groups are genetically inferior—much social ill has been done in the service of false assertions that members of different social groups are fundamentally different from one another. These beliefs reflect *psychological essentialism*—a set of conceptual biases that shape how we think about many everyday categories. Essentialist intuitions include the beliefs that the categories we see around us (e.g., *women, Christians, Black people*) mark people who are fundamentally similar to each other and different from members of other groups. Further, essentialism includes ideas that these similarities and differences are *natural*, and perhaps even reflect the way the world is *supposed* to be.

Essentialist intuitions are inaccurate and highly problematic, but they are also early-developing in childhood, wide-spread across diverse cultural contexts, and persistent across historical time. The chapters in this book bring together interdisciplinary perspectives to help us understand how essentialist beliefs about the social world develop, and how they shape cognition, behavior, and inter-group relations.

To address how social essentialism develops, In Chapter 1, Rhodes and Moty examine how essentialist beliefs arise from the basic processes that underlie conceptual development. They compare the development of these beliefs about social differences to how children construct conceptual representations in other domains of knowledge (e.g., for biological species), and examine how essentialism results from the interplay between the general mechanisms that drive conceptual development and the experiences that children have in the social world.

Offering another perspective on development, in Chapter 2, Diesendruck presents a motivational framework for understanding when, why, and how people essentialize social groups. He proposes that essentialism provides a way of fulfilling children's need to belong to secure and distinct groups, thus providing a new way of making sense of how and why essentialist beliefs emerge in childhood, and a new perspective on the consequences of those beliefs.

In Chapter 3, Pauker, Tai, and Ansari review variability in social essentialism across multiple dimensions, including across different elements of essentialist thought, children's own social group memberships, and various aspects of the context and culture in which children are growing up. They discuss how evidence of variability can provide insight into the mechanisms underlying essentialism and can point us in new directions for how essentialist thought might be prevented or reduced.

In Chapter 4, Feeney and colleagues present a fascinating case study of the development of a particular type of social essentialist beliefs—beliefs about the meaning of national identity categories. In doing so, they provide a detailed examination of the role that essentialism plays in children's everyday social reasoning. By examining how these beliefs emerge across children from different social backgrounds, this work also contribute to our understanding of the critical roles of context and experience in the development of social essentialist thought.

In Chapter 5, Ritchie and Knobe discuss how essentialism is manifest in language. Drawing on recent work in linguistics, they show how the cognitive distinction that people draw between categories they view as meaningful kinds—candidate categories for essentialist beliefs—and those that they view as less coherent collections

of individuals is reflected in subtle differences in how we speak. Further, they discuss the implications of this framework for understanding the how essentialism relates (and does not relate) to social stereotyping.

In Chapter 6, Heiphetz provides a fascinating case study of the role of essentialist beliefs in how children think about morality. She argues that essentialism leads people—and especially young children—to be prone to thinking of immoral behaviors as reflecting people’s underlying nature. She then discusses the important role of these beliefs in how people understand criminality and criminal justice.

Finally, in Chapter 7, returning to the central question of how essentialist beliefs give rise to problematic consequences, Mandalaywala provides a detailed examination of the processes by which essentialism contributes to social prejudice. She finds that essentialism does so not just by exaggerating difference, but by leading people to think that certain (socially-constructed) differences, especially those in social status, reflect the real, fundamental, and natural differences between people.

Together, these chapters advance our understanding of how essentialist beliefs develop, shape child cognition and behavior, and contribute to a range of problematic inter-group phenomena. Doing so is important for revealing the processes that underlie development. But perhaps even more so, it is important for helping us as a field think about how we might use what we know about development for social good—to prevent some of the pernicious consequences of essentialism, improve inter-group relations, and promote positive opportunities for development for children across diverse communities.

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