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The strategic value of essentialism

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Abstract
Social essentialism—the belief that individuals contain an underlying essence determined by the social categories they belong to—has generally been regarded as a harmful cognitive process that results in prejudice and other forms of injustice at the group level. Trait essentialism, also termed a fixed mindset—the belief that people’s trait levels are determined and relatively unchangeable—has been construed as a parallel impediment to self-improvement at the individual level. However, each of these domains contains findings that do not fit this narrative, suggesting that such essentialized thinking is not always detrimental at either the group or individual level and that its effects may instead depend on motivation and context. Incorporating advances in research on moral judgment and identity allow for a reconciliation of the variable effects of social and trait essentialism. In some instances, essentialism can be a strategy for reducing blame over uncontrollable aspects of individuals and groups and for identity formation.

1 | INTRODUCTION

When people view attributes, such as intelligence or weight, as unalterable, they dissolve the possibility of improving and transcending their current selves. Students give up on math problems they could potentially understand with more effort; obese individuals fail to make lifestyle changes that could result in weight loss. The perception of such immutable characteristics underlying groups and individuals has been termed essentialism (Gelman, 2003). The overwhelming majority of research on essentialism has focused on the advantages of renouncing such a fixed world-view—seeing math as a developable skill, and weight as a controllable characteristic, instead, can cause people to try harder and more often succeed (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007; Burnette & Finkel, 2012; Verkuyten, 2006).

This review outlines how, while essentialism can clearly lead to negative outcomes, there are also many examples of essentialism benefiting individuals and groups. In reconciling these sets of findings, we focus on essentialism as a strategy for both decreasing moral responsibility over uncontrollable aspects of the self or others and for identity formation. Looked at in this light, many of the de-essentializing interventions may work not by broadly rejecting fixed attributes in individuals and groups, as currently theorized, but through selectively essentializing, or conceiving as innate, the good aspects of oneself and one’s group, while viewing the negative as malleable and changeable.
2 | THE NATURE OF ESSENTIALISM

Psychological essentialism describes an innate tendency to form natural categories in both non-social and social domains (Gelman, 2003; Medin & Atran, 2004; Rothbart & Taylor, 1992). Essential categories are thought to share an underlying structure, be biologically based, and have well-defined boundaries, in contrast to nonessential groups (Rhodes & Gelman, 2009). Though the perceived essence need not be tangible, it is thought to result in the shared characteristics of groups and to contribute to the identity of those belonging to the group (Medin & Ortony, 1989). People begin essentializing social categories as early as 4 years old (Heyman & Gelman, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c; Medin & Atran, 2004), do so in every culture studied (Gil-White, 1999; Rhodes, Leslie, & Tworek, 2012), and do so regardless of whether they are members of high or low status groups (Leyens et al., 2001). Essentialism can be culturally imprinted and acquired through the language used to describe a group (Gelman, Taylor, & Nguyen, 2004; Rhodes et al., 2012).

Two partially overlapping domains of research have emerged regarding essentializing aspects of people. The first, social essentialism, examines how the social categories people belong to, such as race, gender, and sexual orientation are essentialized (Rhodes et al., 2012). For example, gender essentialism describes the extent to which women and men are perceived as having stable, shared within-group characteristics and a shared within-group common identity (Smiler & Gelman, 2008).

The second domain, trait essentialism, examines how a specific individual's attributes, such as level of intelligence or creativity, are essentialized (Haslam, Bastian, Bain, & Kashima, 2006). Research concerning trait fixedness has been largely conducted through the lens of implicit person theories (Bastian & Haslam, 2006), so our discussion of trait essentialism adopts the terminology of this line of research. Implicit person theories reflect the perceived fixedness of any particular attribute (Dweck, 1999; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). An essentialized view of the trait—that the attribute is a fixed, nonmalleable, or stable—is called entity theory. The de-essentialized concept of the trait—that the attribute is malleable and developable with effort—is called incremental theory. Incrementalists focus on factors that can affect trait levels, such as effort, whereas entity theorists believe trait levels to be relatively unalterable (Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). For example, a student holding an incremental theory of intelligence who earns a poor grade works to improve her performance, whereas the entity theorist assumes that the grade reflects an unalterably low level of intelligence. While some people appear to have a generalized theory for all attributes, others hold individual theories for different traits (Dweck et al., 1995).

Our review begins by examining the major findings on the drawbacks of social and trait essentialism. We then emphasize more recent research that challenges the initial narrative that either form of essentialism is always maladaptive. We propose a reconciliation for why essentialism is sometimes good, and sometimes not, emphasizing that essentialism can reduce blame and contribute to identity, particularly when the underlying essence is perceived as good, rather than bad. This reconciliation could allow for alternative, potentially more effective, pathways to addressing individual or group underachievement than the wholesale rejection of stable individual or group differences.

3 | THE STANDARD VIEWS OF SOCIAL AND TRAIT ESSENTIALISM

3.1 | Social essentialism

The rejection of group differences as meaningful can be traced back to Allport's (1954) theory of a prejudiced personality, which was thought to reflect a general cognitive style that perceives social categories as rigid and rejects ambiguity in them. In 1992, Rothbart and Taylor expanded on this idea, proposing a two-factor structure for social essentialism: viewing social categories as unalterable, and as having inductive potential, or being informative (entitative). By this time, social constructionists had grown to view perceived group differences as false cognitive
constructions that supported an unjust status quo (Burr, 1995; Fuss, 1989; Stein, 1990). Social psychologists have, following this work, primarily examined perceived differences as a precursor to prejudice, stereotyping, and other forms of intolerance (Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000; Haslam & Whelan, 2008; Hirschfeld, 1998; Prentice & Miller, 2007; Yzerbyt, Rocher, & Schadron, 1997). Essentialism largely remains seen as a destructive force at the group level (Verkuyten, 2003, 2006).

3.2 | Trait essentialism

The rejection of stable individual differences as meaningful can be seen as emerging from the study of learned helplessness in rats, who, after continually being shocked by an unavoidable stimulus, failed to adapt to new situations in which they could avoid shocks (Dweck, 1975; Maier & Seligman, 1976). Such animal findings were extended to humans: Certain children, exhibiting an extreme reaction to failing a problem-solving task, likewise exhibited learned helplessness at solving related tasks, and only improved after being taught to attribute success to motivation and effort (Dweck, 1975). Fixed mindsets were subsequently found to be maladaptive more generally (Dweck, 2012). For example, viewing personality as fixed, or essentialized, was associated with worse scholastic performance (Blackwell et al., 2007) and worse physical health (Yeager, Henderson, et al., 2014a; Yeager, Johnson, et al., 2014b). Indeed, targeted interventions promoting incremental (de-essentialized) mindsets improve scholastic achievements (Blackwell et al., 2007; Levy & Dweck, 1999; Paunesku et al., 2015), social relationships (Kammrath & Dweck, 2006), and health outcomes (Yeager, Henderson, et al., 2014a; Yeager, Johnson, et al., 2014b). Entity theories have, as a result, become generally viewed as a self-handicapping mindset (Wheeler & Omair, 2016), akin to rigidly essentializing social categories that deny the possibility of improvement or change. Incremental mindsets, by contrast, have become viewed as broadly beneficial (Wheeler & Omair, 2016).

Nuance can be added to these narratives by examining newer findings regarding social essentialism that are inconsistent with essentialism having a uniformly negative effect. After exploring such findings and the theories of moral judgment and identity that support their generalizability, we will examine a parallel discrepancy emerging in research on trait essentialism. The domain of trait essentialism allows us to expand on the relationship between identity, moral judgment, and essentialism, as relevant research on how moral responsibility interacts with identity has been done at the individual, rather than group level.

4 | EMERGING NUANCE IN SOCIAL ESSENTIALISM

As the empirical study of social essentialism developed in the wake of Rothbart and Taylor’s (1992) work, the theory of a general rigid cognitive style seemed increasingly inconsistent with empirical findings on how people actually essentialize groups. In one study, essentialist beliefs were found to only weakly correlate with sexism and racism scales, though aspects of essentialism were found to correlate with anti-gay attitudes (Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2002). Increasingly, evidence suggested that essentialism may be a flexible conversational resource, rather than a cognitive style (Figgou, 2013; Morton, Hornsey, & Postmes, 2009a; Verkuyten, 2003; Verkuyten, 2006). In a sample of Australians, though essentializing race generally correlated with prejudice against Aboriginals, if race could be used to exclude the racial majority that the prejudiced participants belonged to, they no longer essentialized race (Morton, Hornsey, et al., 2009a). In a sample of Dutch majority and minority participants, Verkuyten (2003) found that both ethnic minority and majority participants used essentialism flexibly when discussing multicultural issues. Dutch (majority) participants essentialized culture when discussing how different cultures coexisting is inherently problematic but used de-essentialist arguments when discussing minority groups needing to assimilate into their culture. Conversely, minority group participants essentialized culture and claimed a right to their identity when resisting assimilationism. When challenging the majority view that their group is negative and homogenous, they adopted a de-essentialist position.
Such research provides initial evidence that essentialism is flexibly used to advance competing goals—essentialism can decrease responsibility for a group’s position but can be rejected to avoid being entirely defined by group membership. Because these goals appear to be traded off, rejecting the meaningfulness of group membership may come at the cost of increased responsibility for group (or individual) status. We briefly describe findings in social essentialism regarding various groups that support this argument, before expanding on how theories of moral judgment support this as a general principle.

4.1 | Essentialism and gender

Initially, essentialized conceptions of gender, arguably the most essentialized social categorization (Haslam et al., 2000), were thought to contribute directly to sexism (Bem, 1993; Brescoll & LaFrance, 2004). Subsequent studies, however, revealed a context-dependence of essentialism in sexism, not unlike the flexibility observed in discussions between minority and majority groups. Morton, Postmes, Haslam, and Hornsey (2009b), after experimentally manipulating the stability of gender inequality (by presenting gender inequality as changing, having already changed with both genders now equal, or having remained stable), found essentialism to be associated with increased sexism only among men, and only when inequality between sexes was presented as changing. In a later study, gender essentialism was found to be endorsed by both genders in response to a system-threat (a report that the United States had reached a social, economic, and political nadir; Brescoll, Uhlmann, & Newman, 2013). Having an opportunity to reject the threat led participants to reject essentialist explanations (Brescoll et al., 2013). Such studies suggest that gender essentialism is not necessarily linked to sexism, though it certainly can be. More importantly, rather than being a stable cognition, gender essentialism appears to be motivated by threats to the social order.

4.2 | Essentialism and sexual orientation

Social essentialism has also been explored in the context of sexual orientation. Essentialism regarding sexual orientation, like other forms of social essentialism, was first thought of as stable but increasingly appears flexible. Initially, some components of essentialist thinking were found to contribute to prejudice against homosexuals, yet, unlike for other social categories, other components of essentialism were directly related to the acceptance of homosexuality (Haslam et al., 2002; Hegarty & Pratto, 2001). Anti-gay attitudes were associated with believing that sexual orientation is discrete, fundamental, and an informative category, while tolerance was associated with believing sexual orientation to be biologically based, immutable, and universal. Essentializing homosexuality thus legitimized the social category (Haslam & Levy, 2006), although potentially at the cost of decreased perceived intragroup variability.

More recently, essentialism regarding sexual orientation has been shown to be a flexible resource, rather than a rigid way of thinking. Newman, Bloom, and Knobe (2014) found that conservatives and liberals selectively essentialize a person’s conflicting beliefs and feelings to fit with their own political stance. When a person’s homosexual feelings conflicted with his beliefs that one should not act on such feelings, conservatives judged the person’s beliefs to be the more essential part, whereas liberals interpreted his feelings as more essential. When another person’s negative feelings toward homosexuals were inconsistent with his beliefs that homosexuality is perfectly acceptable, liberals essentialized his beliefs and de-essentialized his feelings, while conservatives essentialized his feelings and de-essentialized his beliefs. Non-prejudiced people appear to differ not in the extent to which they essentialize but rather in which aspects of the person they essentialize.

4.3 | Essentialism and mental health

Paralleling the role of essentialism regarding other social groups, essentializing psychiatric problems can both absolve sufferers of personal responsibility for their condition and also perpetuate pessimism regarding improvement, resulting in inconsistent effects (Kvaale, Haslam, & Gotttdiener, 2013). While biological and genetic explanations decrease acceptance of depressives and schizophrenics, they increase acceptance of alcoholics (Angermeyer, Matschinger, &
Schomerus, 2013). Judges likewise give shorter sentences when given biological and neurodevelopmental explanations for a convict’s psychopathy (Aspinwall, Brown, & Tabery, 2012). Biogenetic explanations may, like essentialism more generally, have two competing effects—decreasing personal responsibility at the cost of increasing perceived differentness (i.e. entitativity), providing yet another context in which aspects of essentialism appear to decrease moral responsibility.

4.4 Essentialism and genetic determinism

Social essentialism has also been explored in the context of genetic determinism more broadly, or the extent to which one views genetic contributions to behaviors, individuals, or groups resulting in them being immutable, homogenous, discrete, and natural (Dar-Nimrod & Heine, 2011). Researchers have expressed concern that ascribing an outcome to genetics can result in the “naturalistic fallacy,” or viewing the current status as good, particularly when evaluating behaviors that may be controllable—such as criminal behaviors or obesity (Dar-Nimrod & Heine, 2011). Viewing obesity as genetic can indeed demotivate healthier eating and other potentially effective lifestyle changes: An induction describing obesity as genetic lead participants to consume more food (Dar-Nimrod, Cheung, Ruby, & Heine, 2014).

While embracing genetic determinism is problematic, undervaluing the actual contributions of genetics and other external causes to behavior can likewise be dysfunctional (Logel, Stinson, & Brochu, 2015; Turkheimer, 2011). If one were to adopt the stance that behavior is (almost) entirely controllable, obesity or any other condition increasingly becomes a personal responsibility. Perceived control over obesity correlates with stigmatizing obese people (Sikorski et al., 2011) when, in fact, evidence for whether obesity is a controllable behavior is at best unclear (Logel et al., 2015). Paradoxically, for certain populations (women highly concerned with weight loss), receiving high numbers of messages of weight acceptance from friends and family correlated with weight maintenance or loss, whereas receiving fewer messages of acceptance correlated with gained weight (Logel et al., 2014). While rejecting genetic determinism may cause people to expend more effort, it appears that at least some groups can benefit from essentializing their weight instead.

An underlying theme to the research we have reviewed is the tension between the acceptance of a group’s status or behavior and belief in its improvability. Essentializing aspects of social groups appears to shift blame away from members of the group for their current status—outgroups essentialize their identity to resist assimilation; aspects of biological determinism reduce personal responsibility for homosexuality, and essentializing the genetics of obesity leads to less stigmatization. This trade-off must be carefully weighed when reevaluating any behavior as a choice, as making a previously uncontrolled behavior a choice can increase personal responsibility for it.

5 SOCIAL ESSENTIALISM AND ACCEPTANCE

Theories of moral judgment provide a general framework for understanding the process by which perceiving a behavior as a choice increases responsibility for it. Attribution Theory proposed that controllability—whether one has control over the behavior or not—is a critical causal perception in the evaluation of actions (Weiner, 1985, 1995). Experimentally manipulating an agent’s capacity for choice, for example, affects blame ascriptions (Monroe, Dillon, & Malle, 2014). Essentialism should thus be expected to decrease moral judgment and absolve blame, since it decreases what people have control over. However, empirical research has found that essentialization can contribute to intolerance (Morton, Hornsey, et al., 2009a). More recent models of moral judgment focus on how moral character, or a person’s core, can affect perceptions of control and blame attribution (Alicke, 2000; Malle, Guglielmo, & Monroe, 2014). These models add an additional underexplored level of analysis that may contribute to our understanding of when essentialism contributes to negative outcomes and when it contributes to positive ones.
This character-based approach to morality grew out of virtue ethics, a long-neglected approach to morality (Pizarro & Tannenbaum, 2011). Most psychologists and philosophers have focused on the morality of specific acts, rather than how judgments of acts reflect broader evaluations of moral character (Pizarro & Tannenbaum, 2011). Virtue ethics instead proposes that the morality of an act depends not on outcomes (consequentialism) or rule compliance (deontology), but on how the act reflects good or bad character (Pizarro & Tannenbaum, 2011). This approach better accounts for some empirical findings on morality, where, despite two actions breaking the same rule and causing the same outcome, one is nevertheless consistently viewed as worse (Uhlmann, Pizarro, Tannenbaum, & Ditto, 2009). For instance, college liberals are less likely to sacrifice a Black than a White individual to save a group of people, because sacrificing a Black individual would reflect a racist, negative character (Uhlmann et al., 2009). Thus, while morality has generally been examined through actions, a fuller depiction of morality emerges from examining how actions reflect character, or who a person is at their core—their essence (Alicke, 2000; Malle et al., 2014). Applying this understanding of the relationship between essence, or character, and moral responsibility to essentialism may reconcile its disparate effects. We next explore whether the valence ascribed to the essence underlying a category can reconcile the positive and negative effects of essentialism.

6 | VALENCE IN SOCIAL ESSENTIALISM

Considering the role of character in moral judgment, one factor that may determine whether essentialism contributes to negative or positive effects is the valence of the social category—whether the underlying essence is perceived as good or bad. In Ho, Roberts, and Gelman’s (2015) study, essentialism was associated with an increased tendency to categorize multiracial individuals as Black only for participants with negativity bias towards the minority group, a distortion in which negative entities weigh more heavily than positive entities. When the valence of the essence is positive or neutral, anti-racism efforts instead rely on essence to emphasize respect for group differences, such as by claiming a right to identity (Taylor, 1994; Verkuyten, 2003). Thus, it appears that, at least in some instances, the negativity of the essence, rather than its existence, is critical for negative outcomes.

People appear inclined to disproportionally essentialize the normatively good aspects of categories (Barsalou, 1985; Hall, 1998; Knobe, Prasada, & Newman, 2013; Lynch, Coley, & Medin, 2000). For instance, De Freitas, Tobia, Newman, and Knobe (2017) found that the identity of a nation is perceived as more enduring when it is improving by becoming more egalitarian, as opposed to when the nation is becoming more discriminatory. Likewise, Knobe et al. (2013) found that when people fit poorly into groups, such as a dogmatic scientist who refuses to change an incorrect theory or a person with no scientific training who thinks like a scientist, the normatively good aspects of that person’s membership (the parts consistent with being a good scientist) are most essentialized, rather than the aspects that make them a poor fit. People seem inclined to think that the essences defining categories are good, and it appears essentialism may only be problematic when a negative entity is ascribed. We next explore a theory of identity that accounts for why people would be motivated to seek out essentialized categories, regardless of valence.

7 | SOCIAL ESSENTIALISM AND IDENTITY

Essentialism’s role in identity formation can be understood through Uncertainty Identity Theory as well as its predecessor, Social Identity Theory, which posit that people form their individual identities through identification with social categories (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Usborne & Taylor, 2010; Verkuyten, 2006). People identify with groups in order to reduce personal uncertainty, a perceived instability in the self, world, or relationship between the two (Hogg, 2007; Hogg, Adelman, & Blagg, 2010; Van den Bos, 2009). When deciding which group to align with, Hogg, Sherman, Dierselhuis, Maitner, and Moffitt (2007) found that individuals prefer to identify with groups that are high in entitativity or high in inductive potential, one of the components of social essentialism. Low-entitativity groups make for poor reductions in uncertainty because of their vague structure and indistinct boundaries (Hogg, 2007).
Identification with a social category may thus rely on the category being somewhat essentialized. The endorsement of multiculturalism by ethnic minority groups correlates with increased in-group essentialism (Verkuyten & Brug, 2004), and, more generally, intercultural training has been found to increase cultural essentialism alongside increasing openness to other cultures and cultural intelligence (Fischer, 2011). Because identification reflects a general motivation to seek out social identities to reduce personal uncertainty (Hogg et al., 2010), receptiveness to interventions that reduce the meaningfulness of group differences may be limited (Taylor & De La Sablonnière, 2013). Furthermore, rejecting the meaningfulness of membership can ironically push individuals towards intolerance and even fundamentalism by increasing uncertainty, subsequently causing them to seek out more extreme groups to identify with (Baron, Crawley, & Paulina, 2003).

Uncertainty Identity Theory also provides an account for hostility emerging in social change, such as gender essentialism contributing to sexism only when gender roles are perceived as changing—such change increases personal uncertainty. Laboratory studies demonstrate that in-group favoritism can be eliminated in classic paradigms of in-group bias if participant uncertainty is mitigated before administering the tasks (Hogg & Grieve, 1999). Collectively, such findings suggest that people utilize social categorization to create an identity and that in-group bias emerges not from social categorization itself but from the uncertain context within which the categorization is made. By turning to trait essentialism, and the emerging nuanced findings within it, we see further support for the necessity of a stable identity and the notion that valence is crucial to whether essentialism is beneficial or hindering.

8 EMERGING NUANCE IN TRAIT ESSENTIALISM

Implicit person theories, or the extent to which one perceives any given attribute as fixed or developable, have, like social essentialism, not neatly fit the relationship between control and blame central to most models of moral judgment (Molden & Dweck, 2006; Plaks, Levy, & Dweck, 2009). Entity theorists, despite seeming to ascribe less personal control, make stronger negative moral judgments of people behaving undesirably, judge transgressor moral character as more negative, ignore mediators such as situational constraints, desire more punishment and revenge, and blame the wrongdoer more (Dweck, Hong, & Chiu, 1993; Erdley & Dweck, 1993; Gervey, Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1999; Heyman & Dweck, 1998; Molden & Dweck, 2006; Yeager, Trzesniewski, Tirri, Nokelainen, & Dweck, 2011). Incremental theorists have been found to instead focus on reforming the transgressor (e.g., Yeager, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2013).

While the incongruity between the action-based moral judgment literature and the implicit person theory literature has been noted (e.g., Dweck & Molden, 2008; Plaks et al., 2009), there exists little empirical support for any of the explanations offered for the disparity: that entity theorists maintain the illusion of personal responsibility to keep society functional (Chiu, Dweck, Tong, & Fu, 1997), that determinism is ignored in the moral domain (Dweck & Molden, 2008), or that entity theorists hold people accountable for not having been the exception where effort triumphs (Dweck & Molden, 2008). Such explanations are inconsistent with findings regarding the importance of capacity for choice in blame attributions and with empirical findings that greater determinism results in less ascribed moral responsibility (e.g., Baumeister & Monroe, 2014).

Research on mindsets and blame attribution over longer periods of time suggests an even more complex relationship between implicit theories, control, and blame. Incrementalists, while more self-forgiving after single failures, are harsher on themselves after multiple failures to improve (Niiya, Brook, & Crocker, 2010). Incrementalists likewise exhibit greater negative affect than entity theorists do when seeing a person fail to improve despite showing effort to do so (Plaks, Grant, & Dweck, 2005) and blame others more for continual failures (Ryazanov & Christenfeld, 2018). Such findings may reflect character judgments: Incrementalists may excuse a single failure as resulting from external causes, while entity theorists believe the failure reflects an unchangeable trait level. However, incrementalists expect themselves to be able to overcome the failure and thus blame themselves more for continued failure. Either of
these options requires ascribing an underlying identity: either positive and capable of improvement, or negative and incapable, so we turn to research on how the valence of identity affects blame attribution next.

9 | TRAIT ESSENTIALISM, ACCEPTANCE, AND IDENTITY

Examining how implicit person theories relate to conceptions of the true self, or the degree to which a person is thought to be good or bad at their inner core, may reconcile the discrepancy between implicit theory findings and models of moral judgment. If incrementalists expect people to be able to improve because people are essentially good, and entity theorists are pessimistic about improvement because they think people who fail do so because they are essentially bad, incremental theorists may make more forgiving character evaluations than entity theorists do, despite perceiving more control. As in the case of social essentialism, the valence of the essence may be critical, rather than the degree to which an actor is perceived as having an essence.

Paralleling the way that an essentialized group identity can promote functioning, the true self distinguishes a person’s deep essence from their more superficial, inauthentic attributes (Newman, De Freitas, & Knobe, 2015) and comprises the perceived innate and immutable characteristics that allow a person to live a meaningful life (Schlegel, Hicks, King, & Arndt, 2011). Thinking that we have discoverable innate attributes facilitates psychological well-being by providing a sense of meaning and seems most closely aligned with entity theories because the discoverable traits are perceived as unalterable (Schlegel, Vess, & Arndt, 2012). The alternative and more incremental theory, that we create ourselves, is associated with decreased perceptions of a meaningful life, both among college students and adults (Schlegel et al., 2012). More essentialized traits are judged as more important to defining identity, and people work hardest towards enhancing the traits they see as stable and important (Dunning, 1995).

The incongruity between such findings and the benefits of incremental mindsets may be largely overlooked because, like for all social categories, people essentialize positive qualities more readily than negative ones. The asymmetry emerges early on in the life course: Children expect both psychological and biological negative attributes to spontaneously improve over time, even expecting a missing finger to grow back (Lockhart, Chang, & Story, 2002). Adults may have dampened expectations regarding missing fingers, but likewise essentialize positives more readily than negatives (Haslam, Bastian, & Bissett, 2004; Newman et al., 2014). For example, adults find impulsive negative actions to be less blameworthy than deliberated ones yet maintain that impulsive positive actions are just as praiseworthy as deliberated ones, suggesting that positive behaviors are more readily ascribed to character than negative behaviors (Pizarro, Uhlmann, & Salovey, 2003). As a result, the true self, or core essence, is usually asymmetrically positive (Newman et al., 2014).

Since entity theorists are thought to generally perceive attributes as fixed, the same mechanism that makes a single failure diagnostic for entity theorists should also buttress them against the fears of failure after a single success. That is, if a fixed mindset had no valence, entity theorists would be less worried than incrementalists about the good things they have slipping away. The current literature, however, focuses on entity theorists specifically overgeneralizing from negative instances (Wheeler & Omair, 2016). Wheeler and Omair (2016) have theorized that it may be that the entity mindset reflects selectively viewing negative qualities as stable and positive qualities as transient, whereas an incremental mindset is selective towards positive attributes being stable, while viewing negative ones as transient. If this is the case, then incremental mindset interventions work not by de-essentializing the person as a whole, but by selectively essentializing a positive core, or true self, while de-essentializing negative attributes. Haimovitz and Dweck (2016) recently found that parents’ mindsets specific to failure, rather than to intelligence more broadly, affect their children’s intelligence mindsets. Such research provides initial evidence for incrementalism towards failures, rather than general incrementalism, conferring the benefits of incrementalism.

Like in social essentialism, it may be that some of the difference between incremental and entity theorists lies in what they essentialize, rather than whether they essentialize. Manipulating whether a participant sees an actor’s true self as evil or good—the valence of the essence—leads people to interpret the same actions as more or less
blameworthy, respectively (Alicke, 2000; Newman et al., 2015). Given the importance of the true self’s valence, developing a broad positive true self could be a strategic intervention that encourages well-being, achievement, and interpersonal cooperation in a way that avoids implied over-ascriptions of control. We next outline how this view of essentialism can be strategically employed and describe several examples of interventions that convey a broad positive true self consistent with the strategy we advocate for.

10 | STRATEGIC ESSENTIALISM: A PROPERLY CALIBRATED PSYCHOLOGICAL FLEXIBILITY

Although essentialism was initially construed as maladaptive at both the group and individual levels, recent findings suggest a more nuanced and sometimes beneficial role of essentialism. Rejecting essences outright may strip people and groups of identity and may also foster illusions of control over aspects of the self that one has no control over. This could lead to a more negative true self, as one continually fails to live up to perceived potential.

10.1 | Flexibility in social essentialism

In discussing social essentialism, we covered findings suggesting that essentialism is used as a conversational resource that can foster acceptance of outgroups, non-traditional sexual orientations, mental disorders, and obesity. When an outgroup is seeking acceptance, it should consider claiming a right to identity to legitimize its status. However, this must be carefully balanced with becoming overly defined by group membership, and as such, should be strategically deployed, rather than constantly emphasized. Given that people find personal uncertainty aversive and seek out entitative groups to identify with, dysfunctional identities should be replaced with more functional ones. Furthermore, instead of rejecting underlying essences altogether, positive identities should be developed where they do not exist.

10.2 | Flexibility in trait essentialism

Though implicit person theories are currently thought of as stable cognitive patterns, future research should explore the stability and context-dependence of these mindsets. Implicit person theories may be more effectively harnessed as conversational resources—often times it will be adaptive to have an incremental mindset, yet other times, such as in the face of continual failure, a fixed, essentialized mindset will be more beneficial in avoiding self-blame.

The contexts in which malleability is explored are generally ones in which goal persistence is rewarded or is itself an operationalization of success, rather than where goal-switching would be most expedient (Wheeler & Omair, 2016). Such goal-persistence also suggests that incrementalists may be less likely to give up not just on attainable goals but on futile ones too. Disengaging from unattainable goals is associated with fewer symptoms of illness, greater well-being, better self-reported health, and more normal diurnal cortisol secretion (Miller & Wrosch, 2007; Wrosch, Miller, Scheier, & De Pontet, 2007). Switching from an incremental to a fixed mindset regarding continuous failure should buttress against the potentially deleterious effects of incremental mindsets in this context. A general positivity, rather than a rigidly incremental mindset, may facilitate better functioning by making one more willing to goal switch in the face of insurmountable obstacles and uncover the domains one may be best suited to. Likewise, developing a sensitivity to determining which domains one can and cannot control may help maintain a positive identity. Thus, flexibility in the extent to which one views attributes as flexible may be advantageous.

10.3 | Two levels of intervention

Given the close relationship between self and group identities, it may be reasonable to strategically develop positive identity at both levels. People with unclear social category memberships will benefit more from positive group level
essentialization, whereas those with clear positive memberships may benefit most from positive true self essentialization. At a theoretical level, taking into account valence of essence, rather than the presence or absence of essence, may reconcile the complex patterns of blame attribution that have emerged in social and trait essentialism that are currently unaccounted for. Drawing on McNulty and Fincham's (2012) notion that we should seek properly calibrated flexibility rather than one-dimensional representations of traits, future research should continue looking beyond broad rejections of essentialism to find the optimal flexibility in essentialism.

10.4 Examples of strategic essentialism

Some interventions already strategically employ the relationship between essentialist thinking and positive identity formation. Simply labeling an identity with a noun, such as “helper,” rather than describing its corresponding action “helping,” seems to encourage prosocial behavior in children (Bryan, Master, & Walton, 2014). Avoiding negative identities likewise decreases behaviors associated with these identities. Asking people to not be “cheaters,” rather than to not “cheat,” discourages cheating more effectively (Bryan, Adams, & Monin, 2013). However, striving for a specific identity, particularly if the identity depends on performance, can result in negative responses to failure (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981). Thus, it is important to distinguish the flexibility we are advocating for—the cultivation of a positive identity not reliant on any particular goal—from such identity striving.

Value-affirming interventions are one strategy for essentializing a goal-independent positive true self. Walton, Logel, Peach, Spencer, and Zanna (2015) tested the efficacy of two value-affirming interventions in increasing female engineering student GPAs: emphasizing social-belonging by providing a narrative within which to fit the adversity experienced by females in engineering and an affirmation-training that incorporated aspects of the self into a self-identity. While both raised female engineer GPAs, the affirmation-training deepened identification with gender, as measured through responses to statements such as "my gender is an important reflection of who I am." This may reflect an increased essentialization of gender, if such responses convey an increase in the perceived meaningfulness (entitativity) of gender. Walton et al. (2015) speculate that increased broad gender identification may have allowed these female engineers to be less affected by the narrow threat of the “chilly climate” towards women in engineering, which we theorize may rely on having essentialized a clearer positive female-ness capable of withstanding such threats. In another approach to positive identity formation, asking participants to think of the good they can contribute to the world by invoking a prosocial, self-transcendent purpose improved high school science and math GPAs (Yeager, Henderson, et al., 2014a; Yeager, Johnson, et al., 2014b). In yet another example, writing about how one could make a positive impact on the world led to similar scholastic improvements to an incremental mindset intervention (Paunesku et al., 2015).

Our position does not oppose rejecting essentialized categories in all contexts, particularly in conflicts between stratified, negatively-valenced groups, where describing group membership as malleable does increase intergroup cooperation (e.g., Goldenberg et al., 2017). However, moving beyond a blanket rejection of essentialism expands the possible routes to facilitating well-being and, in the case of obesity, for some populations, may actually be more effective than advocating changeability (e.g., Logel et al., 2014).

10.5 Towards situated freedom

Too rigid a perception of social categories and individual attributes stifles intergroup relations and individual improvement. Conversely, ignoring the facts of the situation and focusing on sheer transcendent will can become equally problematic—both constitute acting in bad faith (Sartre, 2004, in Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Optimal functioning emerges from accepting the duality of situated freedom, rather than from organizing one’s world as limitless or limited. Beyond providing an identity, a strategic use of essentialism harnesses the contrast of acceptance and improvement, flexibly shifting between the two.
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