Research Article

Essentializing Differences Between Women and Men

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ABSTRACT—*People represent many social categories, including gender categories, in essentialist terms: They see category members as sharing deep, nonobvious properties that make them the kinds of things they are. The present research explored the consequences of this mode of representation for social inferences. In two sets of studies, participants learned (a) that they were similar to a member of the other gender on a novel attribute, (b) that they were different from a member of the other gender on a novel attribute, or (c) just their own standing on a novel attribute. Results showed that participants made stronger inductive inferences about the attribute in question when they learned that it distinguished them from a member of the other gender than in the other conditions. We consider the implications of these results for the representation of social categories and for everyday social inference processes.*

Human beings are lay essentializers: They see many categories as having deep, nonobvious properties, or essences, that make category members the kinds of things they are (Medin & Ortony, 1989). Natural-kind categories, including animals, plants, minerals, and chemicals, have this representational structure (Hirschfeld & Gelman, 1994), and so, too, do some human categories, especially those defined by race and gender (see Atran, 1990; Gelman & Taylor, 2000; Hirschfeld, 1996; Taylor, 1996). Categories imbued with essences are taken to be "homogeneous, mutually exclusive, and unalterable," and to have "rich inductive potential" (Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000, pp. 114–115).

This "rich inductive potential" is the subject of the present research. In this article, we report two sets of experiments that demonstrate how the inductive potential of essentialized categories can be triggered in ordinary social encounters. We begin with a brief review of the literature on psychological essentialism.

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PSYCHOLOGICAL ESSENTIALISM

Psychological essentialism is a theory of category representation. It posits that people approach the categorization of many objects with an essentialist heuristic. This heuristic is embodied in two related assumptions. First, people assume that members of an essentialized category share a deep, underlying similarity (the essence) that constrains many of their observable features (Medin & Ortony, 1989). Consider, for example, the category "wolf." All wolves are assumed to have wolf essence, from which springs their pointy noses, sharp teeth, thick fur, and fluffy tails, as well as their hearty appetites, taste for pork, nocturnal habits, hunting skills, sociability, aggressiveness, and perhaps additional features not yet apparent. Second, people assume that the essence of a category is immutable, and so, to a large extent, are the features constrained by it (Medin & Ortony, 1989). Thus, a wolf remains a wolf even if it is wearing sheep's clothing (Gelman & Markman, 1986, 1987), even if a doctor performs an operation that makes it look like a sheep (Keil, 1989), and even if it eats something that turns it into an object resembling a sheep (Rips, 1989). Moreover, a wolf will develop wolflike characteristics even if it grows up in a community of sheep (Gelman & Wellman, 1991). Category essence determines innate potential, and thereby constrains not just what category members are but also what they can become.

At the same time, many features of essentialized categories remain mysterious. For example, people typically do not know much about the essence of the category itself; instead, their representations include an essence placeholder that stands in for a true understanding of the category's deep properties (Medin & Ortony, 1989). They also do not know which of the observable features of category members are causally linked to the essence, although they assume that many features must be (Ahn et al., 2001; Medin & Ortony, 1989). This ignorance about category contents, combined with certainty about category structure, gives rise to categories of enormous inductive potential: Any

attribute of a particular wolf, for example, might be linked to wolf essence, and therefore be seen as characteristic of wolves in general and over time.

ESSENTIALIZED SOCIAL CATEGORIES

Early formulations of psychological essentialism argued that it characterizes primarily, if not exclusively, the representation of natural kinds (e.g., Gelman, 1988). However, recent studies have shown that it characterizes the representation of social categories as well (Gil-White, 2001; Haslam et al., 2000; Hirschfeld, 1996; Rothbart & Taylor, 1992; Yzerbyt, Rocher, & Schadron, 1997). For example, racial categories are represented in essentialist terms (Hirschfeld, 1996), as are some ethnic categories (Gil-White, 2001; Rothbart & Taylor, 1992).

However, the strongest evidence for psychological essentialism of social categories comes from research on gender (Gelman, Collman, & Maccoby, 1986; Gelman & Taylor, 2000; Taylor, 1996). From preschool on, children base social inferences on gender category membership, generalizing within, but not across, gender categories even when doing so conflicts with outward appearances (Gelman et al., 1986). Moreover, young children believe that an infant will develop to have the personality traits associated with his or her gender category regardless of the environment in which the infant is raised (Taylor, 1996). Adults, too, imbue gender categories with distinct essences. For example, in a study of adults' representations of 40 social categories, Haslam et al. (2000) found that gender categories received the highest ratings on the properties associated with natural kinds (i.e., naturalness, necessity, immutability, discreteness, and stability).

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL INFERENCES

We maintain that essentialist representations of social categories have important implications for social inference processes (see also Bastian & Haslam, in press; Rothbart & Taylor, 1992; Yzerbyt, Rogier, & Fiske, 1998). Specifically, they provide a basis for strong inductive inferences. Given that women, for example, are assumed to share a common essence that gives rise to many of their observable qualities, then any one woman can stand in for the category. Her attributes, to the extent that they are linked to her female essence, are seen as characteristic of women in general (the *generalization hypothesis*) and as stable over time (the *stability hypothesis*). The same is true for men. And when are attributes linked to gender essence? We expect this link to be established with most confidence when an attribute covaries with category membership—that is, when women and men differ. Indeed, even the most minimal evidence of category covariation—a difference between just one woman and one man—may be sufficient to trigger essentialist thinking about the attribute in question. We focus on this most minimal case in the empirical studies we present here.

THE PRESENT RESEARCH

The present research tested the claim that encountering a difference between a woman and a man (in this case, oneself and a member of the other gender) gives rise to inductive inferences. All of the experiments used a similar paradigm: Participants first completed a test that was purportedly designed to measure a psychological attribute. Then they received feedback about their standing on the attribute. Finally, they completed another task that included a measure of the inferences they made about the attribute.

For purposes of this research, the attribute in question needed to be novel, evaluatively neutral, and one on which participants held no a priori expectations of a gender difference. One attribute that met these criteria was perceptual style (see Miller, Turnbull, & McFarland, 1988; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). Thus, in all the studies, participants first completed a test that ostensibly measured their perceptual style: They saw 10 slides, each for a very brief duration, and estimated the number of dots on each slide. Following the test, participants were told either that they were *overestimators* (i.e., they consistently overestimated the number of dots on the slides) or that they were *underestimators* (i.e., they consistently underestimated the number of dots on the slides). Pilot testing indicated that people did not view one of these styles as more positive than the other, nor did they view men and women as disproportionately likely to have one or the other style.

We administered this test under several different conditions. In the critical condition, 2 participants, 1 male and 1 female, completed the test in the same experimental session and learned that they had different perceptual styles. In another condition, male and female participants completed the same procedure, but alone rather than in pairs. We included this condition to provide a baseline indication of people's tendency to make inductive inferences about the attribute on the basis of a single observation. In a third condition, 2 participants, 1 male and 1 female, completed the test in the same experimental session and learned that they had the same perceptual style. We included this condition to test our hypothesis that cross-category differences are what trigger essentialist thinking.

STUDY 1

Study 1 examined the generalization hypothesis: that people would generalize an attribute from individuals to gender categories when that attribute differentiated between a man and a woman.

Method

One hundred eighteen Princeton undergraduates (69 women, 49 men) participated in this experiment for pay.

Participants were run either alone or in mixed-sex pairs of previously unacquainted individuals. The experimenter introduced

the study as focusing on perceptual style and its correlates. She first conducted a test ostensibly intended to assess each participant's perceptual style. Specifically, she presented a series of 10 slides, each for about half a second, and asked participants to estimate the number of dots on each one as accurately as they could.

After leaving the room to score responses, the experimenter returned to deliver the feedback: In the *alone condition*, she told the participant that he or she was either an overestimator or an underestimator; in the *same-style condition*, she told both participants that they were overestimators or both that they were underestimators; and in the *different-style condition*, she told one participant that he or she was an overestimator and the other that he or she was an underestimator. Assignment to experimental condition and perceptual-style feedback was determined at random prior to each experimental session.

Finally, the experimenter distributed a brief questionnaire to assess participants' beliefs about their perceptual styles. The questionnaire included the two key dependent measures:

1. What percentage of males do you think have your [perceptual] style?
2. What percentage of females do you think have your [perceptual] style?

Participants wrote in a percentage estimate in response to each question.

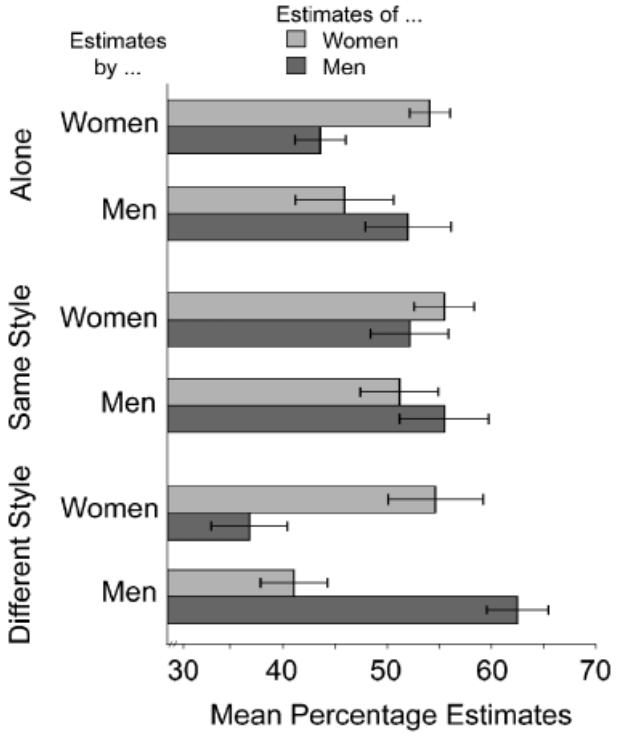

Fig. 1. Results from Study 1: male and female participants' mean estimates of the percentages of women and men who share their perceptual style, by condition.

Results and Discussion

Participants' estimates of the percentages of females and males who share their perceptual style were analyzed using a 2 (participant's gender: male or female) × 3 (condition: alone, same-style, or different-style) × 2 (target gender: males or females) mixed-model analysis of variance (ANOVA), with participant's gender and condition as between-participants variables and target gender as a within-participants variable. The analysis revealed a significant two-way interaction of participant's gender and target gender, $F(1, 112) = 26.53$, $p_{rep} = .99$, $\eta^2 = .19$, which was qualified by the predicted three-way interaction of participant's gender, condition, and target gender, $F(2, 112) = 4.80$, $p_{rep} = .95$, $\eta^2 = .08$. The means for this interaction are shown in Figure 1. Simple-effects analyses of each condition showed that the Participant's Gender × Target Gender interaction was highly significant in the different-style condition, $F(1, 112) = 24.13$, $p_{rep} = .99$, $\eta^2 = .18$; significant in the alone condition, $F(1, 112) = 6.06$, $p_{rep} = .94$, $\eta^2 = .05$; and nonsignificant in the same-style condition, $F(1, 112) = 1.36$, $p_{rep} = .69$, $\eta^2 = .01$. Moreover, although the interaction was significant in both the different-style and the alone conditions, it was significantly larger in the different-style condition, $F(1, 112) = 4.74$, $p_{rep} = .91$, $\eta^2 = .04$. The magnitude of the interaction did not differ reliably between the alone and same-style conditions ($F < 1$, $\eta^2 = .008$). These results support our expectation that participants would make stronger inductive inferences about the prevalence of a trait within a gender category when the trait differed across the gender boundary.

The next set of studies tested the stability hypothesis: that people would infer the stability of an attribute that differentiated between a man and a woman. To test this hypothesis, we adapted the dot-estimation paradigm used in Study 1 to provide a measure of inferred stability. Specifically, we told participants that we were studying whether dot estimation reflected a stable and consistent perceptual style by examining its test-retest reliability. We then administered the dot-estimation task twice, once before providing participants with feedback about their perceptual style and then again afterward. Our measure of stability was the change in the number of dots they estimated from Test 1 to Test 2.

To understand the logic of this measure, consider the task from a participant's perspective. The participant is instructed to estimate the number of dots on each of 10 slides as accurately as she can. The slides are presented so briefly that she can only make the vaguest guess about how many dots there are on each one. She is then told that she systematically underestimated the number of dots on each slide and is given an opportunity to take the test again. What will she do in the second round? We would expect her to adjust her estimates up a little bit, to compensate for her tendency to underestimate. Similarly, if a participant were told that he systematically overestimated the number of

dots on each slide on the first test, we would expect him to adjust his estimates down a little bit in the second round. In other words, participants should try to correct for their perceptual style in order to increase their accuracy on the test.

But what if the first test reveals a difference in style between a male and a female participant? In this case, both participants are likely to believe that dot estimation does, in fact, tap into a stable and consistent way of perceiving the world, a trait that is linked to their gender. As a consequence, we would expect significantly less correction in the second round. The association of the two perceptual styles with essentialized categories should lead participants to see—and to treat—these traits as more stable, as less likely to change. This expectation should blunt their efforts at correction.

We explored these hypotheses in the remaining studies. Study 2a tested our assumption that people would correct for their perceptual style during a second administration of the dot-estimation task. Study 2b tested the hypothesis that the magnitude of this correction would depend on whether participants learned they were similar to or different from a member of the other gender after the first test. Study 2c controlled for the possibility that any experience of difference produces an expectation of stability.

STUDY 2A

Method

Twenty-one Princeton undergraduates (11 women, 10 men) participated in this experiment for pay.

Participants were run individually by an experimenter who was blind to the hypotheses of the study. She explained at the outset that the goal of the study was "to establish whether dot estimation reflects a perceptual style." The procedure was identical to the procedure in the alone condition of Study 1, up through the feedback manipulation. After telling the participant that he or she was either an overestimator or an underestimator, the experimenter handed out a second dot-estimation form and asked the participant to check a box indicating how he or she had scored on the first test (i.e., as an overestimator or an underestimator). Then, she administered the test a second time, ostensibly to establish the test-retest reliability of the measure. The participant estimated the number of dots on the same 10 slides shown in the first round, with the slides presented in a different order and reoriented to avoid recognition. The experimenter reminded participants to be accurate in their estimations just before presenting the first slide.

Results and Discussion

For each participant, we calculated the average number of dots estimated across the 10 slides in the first test and the average number of dots estimated across the 10 slides in the second test. We analyzed these data using a 2 (participant's gender) × 2 (style: overestimator or underestimator) × 2 (test: Test 1 or Test 2) mixed-model ANOVA, with participant's gender and perceptual style as between-participants variables and test as a within-participants variable. We expected to find a Style × Test interaction, with overestimators providing lower estimates on Test 2 than on Test 1 and underestimators providing higher estimates on Test 2 than on Test 1. The analysis revealed a significant main effect of test, $F(1, 17) = 5.74$, $p_{rep} = .91$, $\eta^2 = .25$, qualified by the predicted Style × Test interaction, $F(1, 17) = 27.12$, $p_{rep} = .99$, $\eta^2 = .61$. Overall, participants tended to give lower estimates on Test 2 than on Test 1, probably because they took a more cautious approach to the estimation task the second time around. However, they also tended to adjust for their perceptual style. Participants who learned they were underestimators increased their estimates on Test 2 ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 5.20$), whereas those who learned they were overestimators decreased their estimates on Test 2 ($M = -8.37$, $SD = 3.88$). These results provide strong evidence for our assumption that participants would correct for their perceptual style on the second test. There were no other significant effects.

STUDY 2B

In Study 2b, we tested our key prediction about the moderating effect of introducing a difference between a male and a female participant on the tendency to correct for one's perceptual style. Participants were run in male-female pairs, who learned after Test 1 that they had either the same perceptual style or different perceptual styles. Reasoning from the stability hypothesis, we predicted that participants in the same-style condition would correct for their style on Test 2, whereas participants in the different-style condition would not.

Method

Forty-two Princeton undergraduates (21 women, 21 men) participated in this experiment for pay.

The procedure was identical to that of Study 2a, except that participants were run in male-female pairs, each of which was randomly assigned to the same-style or different-style condition. After Test 1, participants in the same-style condition learned that they were both overestimators or both underestimators; participants in the different-style condition learned that one was an overestimator and one was an underestimator. In all other respects, the procedure followed that of Study 2a.

Results and Discussion

For each participant, we averaged the number of dots estimated across the 10 slides in the first test and the number of dots estimated across the 10 slides in the second test, and analyzed these data using a 2 (participant's gender) × 2 (condition: same-style or different-style) × 2 (style) × 2 (test) mixed-model ANOVA. The analysis revealed a main effect of test, $F(1, 34) =$

23.76, $p_{rep} = .99$, $\eta^2 = .41$; a two-way Style × Test interaction, $F(1, 34) = 7.82$, $p_{rep} = .95$, $\eta^2 = .19$; and the predicted three-way Condition × Style × Test interaction, $F(1, 34) = 12.07$, $p_{rep} = .98$, $\eta^2 = .26$. As in Study 2a, participants tended to give lower estimates on Test 2 than on Test 1, but this tendency was moderated by style and condition. The same-style condition replicated the Style × Test interaction found in Study 2a, $F(1, 34) = 21.01$, $p_{rep} = .99$, $\eta^2 = .38$. Participants in this condition corrected for their perceptual style, with underestimators tending to raise their estimates on Test 2, and overestimators tending to lower their estimates on Test 2. Participants in the different-style condition did not show this correction pattern ($F < 1$, $\eta^2 = .006$). Differences in estimates from Test 1 to Test 2, corrected for the main effect of test, are shown in the top panel of Figure 2. There were no other significant effects.

STUDY 2C

Study 2b provided clear evidence in support of the stability hypothesis. Unlike participants in the same-style condition and those run alone in Study 2a, participants in the different-style condition treated their perceptual style as if it were stable: They showed no tendency to correct for it in order to be more accurate on the second test. We take this as evidence that an interpersonal difference that crosses a boundary between essentialized categories is seen as stable. But there is an alternative explanation for the finding: Perhaps any interpersonal difference, regardless of whether it crosses such a category boundary, is seen as stable. Study 2c was designed to test this alternative account by introducing a similarity or a difference between two women.

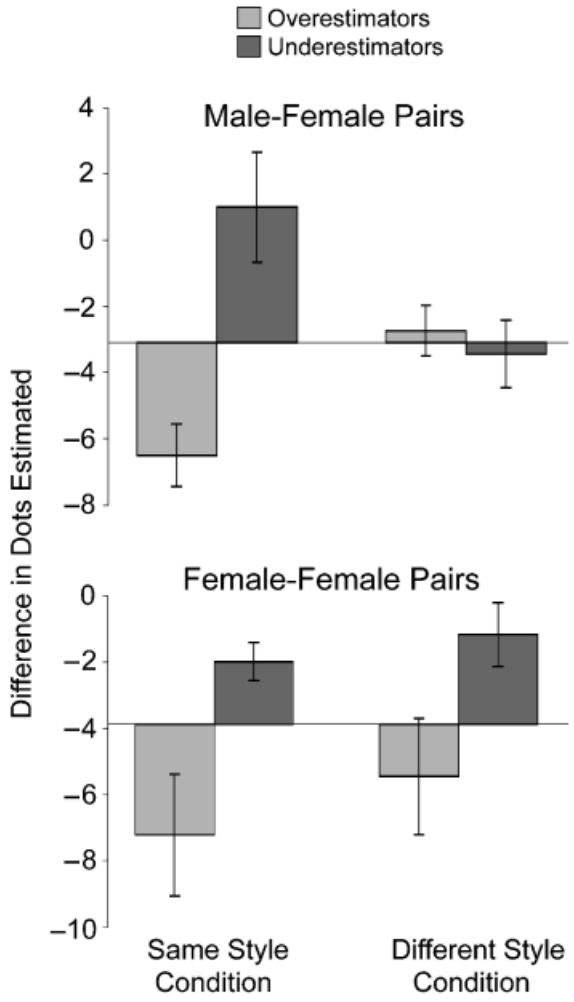

Fig. 2. Results from Studies 2b and 2c: difference in the number of dots estimated from Test 1 to Test 2 for participants run in male-female pairs (top panel) and in female-female pairs (bottom panel).

Method

Forty-two female Princeton undergraduates participated in this experiment for pay. The procedure was identical to that of Study 2b, except that participants were run in female-female pairs.

Results and Discussion

For each participant, we averaged the number of dots estimated across the 10 slides in the first test and the number of dots estimated across the 10 slides in the second test, and analyzed these data using a 2 (condition) × 2 (style) × 2 (test) ANOVA. The analysis revealed a main effect of test, $F(1, 38) = 23.68$, $p_{rep} = .99$, $\eta^2 = .38$, and a two-way Style × Test interaction, $F(1, 38) = 8.58$, $p_{rep} = .96$, $\eta^2 = .18$; however, the three-way Condition × Style × Test interaction was nowhere near significant ($F < 1$, $\eta^2 = .002$). Differences in estimates from Test 1 to Test 2, corrected for the main effect of test, are shown in the bottom panel of Figure 2. There was no evidence for differential correction across experimental conditions; participants in the same-style and the different-style conditions showed an equivalent tendency to correct for their perceptual style. There were no other significant effects.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Essentialism may have dubious validity in the eyes of most philosophers and social scientists, but it captures well the way ordinary people represent natural and, in some cases, social categories. The present research explored the consequences of this mode of representation for social inference processes. Two sets of studies demonstrated that people made inductive inferences about the novel attribute of perceptual style when it distinguished between individuals from two different categories—in this case, gender categories. Note that these inferences did not simply constitute the familiar tendency of people to assimilate male-female differences to gender stereotypes. Participants came to the experiment with no knowledge about perceptual style and certainly no knowledge about how women and men might differ in this domain. However, they did come to the experiment with a strong a priori belief that women and men differ fundamentally in a multitude of ways, some of which they

know about but many of which they do not (Fuss, 1989; Martin & Parker, 1995; Taylor, 1996). Thus, rather than demonstrating people's tendency to assimilate novel social information to existing gender stereotypes, these findings demonstrate people's tendency to accommodate their incomplete representations of gender categories to novel social information.

The present research has implications for how people represent social categories and draw inferences about the attributes and behaviors of category members. Consider, for example, people's representations of the attributes on which members of essentialized groups differ. The present research suggests that these attributes may take on a heightened significance more generally. Those abilities or skills that vary across essentialized category boundaries achieve the status of essence markers. For example, the status that math proficiency has attained in the pantheon of cognitive aptitudes may be due, at least to some extent, to the fact that there are apparent gender differences on this skill. If math proficiency—or, as in the present studies, perceptual style—is linked to something as deep and profound as gender essence, then it must capture a very important human quality indeed.

In addition, our research has implications for interpersonal dynamics within and across category boundaries. Specifically, it suggests that interpersonal differences will be treated as more immutable and more unbridgeable when they occur between members of different essentialized categories than when they occur between members of the same category (Miller & Prentice, 1999). Thus, when a woman and a man hold different opinions on an issue, (a) they will be inclined to conclude that their difference of opinion is gendered, irrespective of whether or not this is true, and (b) they will see the difference as entrenched, and therefore will be neither curious about one another's thinking nor optimistic that they can change each other's minds. When a woman describes a distinctive behavior of her male partner as a "guy thing," she is marking it as something she can accept, and perhaps even respect, but not something she can understand or hope to change.

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