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RUNNING HEAD: ESSENTIALISM AND INTERCULTURAL PROCESSES

An Essentialism Perspective on Intercultural Processes

MELODY M. CHAO

Department of Management
School of Business and Management
Hong Kong University of Science & Technology
Clear Water Bay, Kowloon, Hong Kong SAR
Voice: + (852) 2358-7739
Fax: + (852) 2335-5325
E-mail: mchao@ust.hk

FRANKI Y. H. KUNG

Department of Psychology
University of Waterloo
200 University Avenue West
Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 3G1
Voice: +1 (519) 888 4567
E-mail: franki.kung@uwaterloo.ca

Authors' Note:

Melody Manchi Chao, Department of Management, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Hong Kong; Franki Y. H. Kung, Department of Psychology, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 3G1.

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Abstract

As our society is becoming increasingly diverse, it is not uncommon for us to be exposed to people from diverse ethnocultural background in our daily life. A growing amount of research has revealed the positive impact of multicultural exposure on such outcomes as creativity and prejudice reduction; however, individuals might construe and experience their multicultural world differently and might vary in the extent to which they harvest the benefits of multicultural exposure. The current review takes an essentialism perspective to discuss how the beliefs that social categories possess unique, immutable, underlying essences are developed and how such, often unspoken, assumptions continue to color individuals' psychological processes in multicultural contexts. Implications for the role of essentialism in intergroup research are also discussed to advance our understanding of intercultural dynamics.

Keywords: Essentialism, Lay theories, Intergroup relations, Intercultural processes, Multicultural Experience

An Essentialism Perspective on Intercultural Processes

Globalization brings people from diverse ethnocultural background together. In 2010, it has been estimated that over 215 million people lived in a country other than their place of birth (Migration Policy Institute, 2010). Trade in and with developing countries, including South Africa, India, and other Asian countries, contributed to almost 50% of world gross domestic product in 2010, compared to only 25% in 1980 (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2012). Global labor mobility and the rise of multinational corporations also brings diversity in workforce across nations in the past 50 years and the trend is expected to continue (Hays-Thomas, 2004). Exposure to a multicultural context has already become a natural part of our daily life. Research has shown that individuals have much to benefit from exposure to a culturally diverse environment. On an intrapersonal level, multicultural exposure enables people to acquire knowledge from different cultural traditions and apply their cultural knowledge flexibly (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000). In addition, being exposed to multiple cultures can also increase integrative complexity, empowering individuals to recognize and integrate multiple perspectives (e.g., Tadmor, Galinsky, & Maddux, 2012) and enhancing their creativity (e.g., Leung, Chen, & Chiu, 2010; Leung, Maddux, Galinsky, & Chiu, 2008; Leung & Chiu, 2008, 2010). Multicultural exposure has also been shown to benefit individuals on the interpersonal and intergroup levels, such as inducing higher collective creativity in multicultural teams (e.g., Janssens & Brett, 2006; Stahl, Maznevski, Voigt, & Jonsen, 2010; Tadmor, Galinsky, et al., 2012; Tadmor, Satterstrom, Jang, & Polzer, 2012), reducing prejudice and stereotypes against minority groups (e.g., Tadmor, Hong, Chao, Wiruchnipawan, & Wang, 2012), and enhancing cultural adjustment when living abroad (e.g., Yakunina, Weigold, Weigold, Hercegovac, & Elsayed, 2012). These findings, together, suggest that in the increasingly globalized world with surging opportunities for multicultural exposure, individuals should become more cognitively flexible,

more creative, more able to integrate different ideas, less prejudiced, and better adjusted in a culturally diverse environment. Despite these optimistic findings about multiculturalism, individuals construe and experience their multicultural world differently and might vary in the extent to which they can harvest from their experiences.

Drawing from research on lay theories (e.g., Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1997; Dweck, 2000; Molden & Dweck, 2006) and psychological essentialism (e.g., Medin & Ortony, 1989), the current paper focuses on how individuals' lay beliefs and assumptions about the social world shape their cognition and moderates the benefits they can attain from their multicultural experiences. In the following, we will review the literature to examine how the unspoken assumptions that we have can influence psychological processes on intrapersonal and interpersonal levels in multicultural contexts. We will also discuss their implications to intergroup relations and identify directions for future research.

An Essentialism Perspective

The early conceptualization of essentialism is rooted in philosophy. From the classic Aristotelian perspective, every object, including a human being, possesses inherent properties, *essences*, which characterize its being. Without the essences, the object ceases to be what it is: Essences are seen as natural and defining properties that reside in the object. Such Aristotelian views of essentialism have generated much discourse among scientists about whether there are *real* essential qualities that differentiate social groups and has remained to be a highly controversial issue (e.g., Cavalli-Sforza, Menozzi, & Piazza, 1994; Crow, 2002; Gelman & Wellman, 1991; Graves, 2004; King & Motulsky, 2002; Strevens, 2000). In the domain of race, for instance, Craig Venter, the founder of Celera and its then-CEO, touched off *the* alarm in the community in 2000 when he concluded that race is not a scientific concept and that it is

impossible to identify people's group membership at the level of the genome. He commented, "We all are essentially identical twins..." (BBC News, 2000). In response to Venter's conclusion, James Crow, a professor emeritus of medical genetics at the University of Washington, pointed out the achievement disparities in the athletic and academic domains across different racial groups, and argued that "whenever an institution or society singles out individuals who are exceptional or outstanding in some ways, racial differences will become more apparent (Crow, 2002, p. 85)".

Such theories about whether social groups possess underlying essences do not only appear in scientific discourse; they are also commonly found among lay people, although they might not always be well-articulated. Research has shown that lay beliefs about social group essences are indeed prevalent (e.g. Jayaratne et al., 2006; Kashima et al., 2005; Prentice & Miller, 2006, 2007) and that people have an innate tendency to infer essences underlying observed physical differences across social groups (Gelman & Hirschfeld, 1999; Gelman, 1988, 2003, 2004). The purpose of the current paper is *not* to discuss or debate the existence of social group essences from a scientific standpoint; rather, we seek to examine lay people's theories about essential group qualities and the implications of such beliefs to their social psychological processes in a multicultural environment.

Essentialism as Lay Theories

Lay theories are unspoken assumptions about the world that help individuals make sense of their environments (Gopnik & Wellman, 1994; Heider, 1958; Kelly, 1955; Rehder, 2007). Similar to the scientific discourse above, some people tend to view human attributes as reflecting underlying essence that is fixed and cannot be changed, whereas others see the attributes as malleable (Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995). Beliefs about the fixedness and malleability of human

attributes stand on the opposite ends of a continuum (Hong et al., 2004; Hong, Chao, & No, 2009; Levy, Stroessner, & Dweck, 1998). These unspoken assumptions have been shown to color individuals' understanding of the social world, guiding behaviors and shaping responses to social situations (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Hong, Levy, & Chiu, 2001). For instance, lay theories about the malleability of intelligence and abilities can influence individuals' responses in different academic and organizational achievement settings (e.g. Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007; Good, Rattan, & Dweck, 2012; Kray & Haselhuhn, 2007, 2009; Robins & Pals, 2002; Tasa, Celani, & Bell, 2013). Theories about the malleability of personality and moral character can influence individuals' social judgments and attributions (Chiu et al., 1997; Dweck et al., 1995; Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin, & Wan, 1999; Knowles, Morris, Chiu, & Hong, 2001; Norenzayan, Choi, & Nisbett, 1999). Theories about the malleability of social categories and interpersonal abilities can influence interpersonal perceptions (Finkel, Burnette, & Scissors, 2007; Hui, Bond, & Molden, 2012; Ruvolo & Rotondo, 1998) and stereotype endorsement in intergroup contexts (Bastian & Haslam, 2006; Halperin, Russell, Trzesniewski, Gross, & Dweck, 2011; Hamilton, Sherman, & Rodgers, 2004; Howell, Weikum, & Dyck, 2011; Keller, 2005; Rangel & Keller, 2011; Yzerbyt, Rocher, & Schadron, 1997; Yzerbyt, Rogier, & Fiske, 1998; Zagefka, Nigbur, Gonzalez, & Tip, 2013). Recent research has also shown that beliefs about obesity can influence consumer choices and health-related behaviors (McFerran & Mukhopadhyay, 2013; Mukhopadhyay, 2011). On a societal level, the folk theory of social change shapes individuals' perception about the past and their anticipation of the future (Kashima et al., 2011). These lay theories are usually domain-specific and have been shown to be associated with a wide range of unique psychological outcomes.

In multicultural contexts, individuals are often exposed to people and knowledge from different racial and ethnocultural groups; thus, their theories about the malleability of social group attributes would be of particular relevance. The beliefs that social groups possess underlying essences that give rise to immutable characteristics, are known as essentialism (Gelman & Hirschfeld, 1999). Essentialist thinking consists of two major psychological components: immutability and inductive potential (Rothbart & Taylor, 1992). Immutability refers to the understanding that differences between social groups are unalterable and they prevail over time. Inductive potential refers to the belief that a given social category label is informative; each category consists of a clear-cut boundary and reflects deep underlying qualities that enable perceivers to draw inferences about members of the given group based on partial information (Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000, 2002). Although people do not necessarily understand what the essences are or what they mean, they simply assume the presence of some underlying qualities that are definitive of the group membership (Ahn et al., 2001; Medin & Ortony, 1989). Such beliefs are unspoken assumptions that are fundamental to the sense-making process (Medin, 1989). They are observed from an early age (e.g. Gelman, 2003; Hirschfeld, 1995) and remain prevalent in adulthood, influencing judgments and perceptions in diverse social cultural contexts (Jayaratne et al., 2006; Williams & Eberhardt, 2008).

Formulation and Propagation of Essentialist Theories

Social aggregates are fundamental components of human society; therefore, people formulate theories about human categories at an early age to help them make sense of their environment (Gelman, 2003). Children actively derive theories about humankind along different dimensions, such as age (Fagen, 1972), sex (Katz, 1983), ethnicity (Birnbaum, Deeb, Segall, Ben-Eliyahu, & Diesendruck, 2010; Deeb, Segall, Birnbaum, Ben-Eliyahu, & Diesendruck,

2011), and occupation (Cordua, McGraw, & Drabman, 1979). They then revise their theories based on socio-environmental feedbacks, which may come from modeling the generic descriptions of social categories used during parent-child interactions (Rhodes, Leslie, & Tworek, 2012) and the normative use of social labels in daily life (Birnbaum et al., 2010; Brauer, Judd, & Thompson, 2004; Deeb et al., 2011; Hirschfeld, 1995; Mahalingam, 2007). For example, children tend to essentialize occupations at an early age and perceive occupational categories as having coherent underlying essences. They might see medical doctors as having distinct innate qualities and essences that differentiate doctors from firefighters or teachers. At later age, they might abandon these essentialist theories about occupations if their cultural environment fails to support their theories; yet, they would maintain these theories if their social environment reinforces the beliefs that there are deep occupational essences. For example, compared with children who live in societies with high job mobility, children who grow up in societies with low job mobility are more likely to maintain their essentialist theory about occupation (Hirschfeld, 1995, 2001). In short, individuals formulate theories to interpret their experiences. Their theories about humankind provide them with useful heuristics to process information quickly, because the theories impart individuals with a sense of coherence and enable individuals to go beyond the observables to make inferences about deeper qualities of a social category more easily (Medin & Ortony, 1989; Medin, 1989).

The tendency to derive essentialist theories about social categories is not only found among children, but also among adults. For example, when adults who had completed a dot-estimation task were told that they differed from a person of another gender group on a novel attribute (e.g., *underestimator* or *overestimator*; see Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971), they tended to infer that attribute to be a prevalent gender difference; they also essentialized their

representations of gender differences and behaved accordingly (Prentice & Miller, 2006).

Similarly, after taking part in a comprehensive intercultural training program that provided information and experiential exercises about how people from various cultures might behave and respond differently, the participants endorsed stronger essentialist beliefs towards cultural groups (Fischer, 2011). The explosion of genetic and biological research in the past decades have also drawn increasing concerns about whether and how the presentation of biomedical or genetic accounts of physical illnesses or mental disorders might inadvertently propagate essentialist beliefs (e.g., Claassen et al., 2010; Lebowitz, Ahn, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2013; Lebowitz & Ahn, 2012). A large scale survey experiment conducted among a nationally representative sample in the U.S. found that exposure to scientific reports of racial differences in diseases that are genetically based propagates essentialist beliefs about race (Phelan, Link, & Feldman, 2013). Besides being influenced by information and feedback from the environment, individuals also take an active role in constructing and reinforcing essentialist beliefs. For instance, when individuals were asked to talk about a social category elaborately, the mere act of communicating about a social category induced essentialist thinking (Kashima et al., 2010).

Taken together, these findings suggest that individuals have a tendency to formulate essentialist theories about social categories to make sense of their world, and infer inherent, natural, and immutable essences (e.g., genetic bases) underlying differences between social groups. Essentialist beliefs serve to structure individuals' experiences by organizing people into meaningful categories and facilitating inference-making. However, overreliance of essentialist theories in explaining the causes of certain phenomena can bias judgments, because individuals might fixate on the presumed essences and ignore other meaningful factors that could have

contributed to the phenomena (Dar-Nimrod & Heine, 2011). What are the implications of essentialist beliefs to multicultural exposure? We turn to this question next.

The Role of Essentialist Theories in a Multicultural Context

Although a person belongs to multiple social categories (male, teenager, student, pianist, Chinese, etc.), race and ethnicity are often the most prominent dimensions used in social categorization in a culturally diverse environment (Birnbaum et al., 2010; Deaux, 2006). The tendency to essentialize racial or ethnocultural differences is amplified in multicultural contexts, in which the category labels are particularly salient (see Birnbaum et al., 2010). The concept of race and ethnicity are differentiated in academic discourses; however, they are often conflated among lay people, especially in the American society (Okazaki & Sue, 1995; Omi, 2001). In the following, we will examine how beliefs in essentialism about racial and ethnocultural groups might shape lay people's psychological processes in a multicultural environment.

Intergroup and interpersonal Processes

In his seminal work, *The Nature of Prejudice*, Allport (1954) suggested that the prejudiced personality is characterized by the beliefs that there are underlying essential dispositions that shape people's behavior. In line with this idea, research has already shown that perceiving essential differences between social groups increases stereotypes and prejudices against outgroups (e.g., Bastian & Haslam, 2006, 2007; Halperin, Russell, Trzesniewski, Gross, & Dweck, 2011; Jayaratne et al., 2006; Keller, 2005; Levy, Plaks, Hong, Chiu, & Dweck, 2001; Pauker, Ambady, & Apfelbaum, 2010; Pehrson, Brown, & Zagefka, 2009; Plaks, Grant, & Dweck, 2005; Yzerbyt, Rocher, & Schadron, 1997; Zagefka, Nigbur, Gonzalez, & Tip, 2013).

In an experiment that examined the relationship between essentialist thinking and racial stereotyping (Pauker et al., 2010), for example, children were presented with positive and

negative behavioral episodes that were stereotypical of African Americans (e.g., acting aggressively, playing basketball well), Asian Americans (e.g., acting submissively, working hard), and European American (e.g., bragging, acting as leader). The children were then presented with photos of different children and were asked to indicate whether a given behavior was carried out by a child of a particular racial group by pointing to the photo of a child (African American, Asian American, vs. European American). Ingroup stereotyping and outgroup stereotyping scores were calculated if a child picked a photo that was stereotype-consistent. Their essentialist thinking was assessed by perceived stability and consistency of the racial group membership (e.g., whether a White child will look more like a White adult when he grows up; whether people can change their skin color, and why). The study revealed that children started to increase their utilization of essentialist thinking starting from age 6 and, more importantly, the emergence of essentialist thinking predicted the endorsement of outgroup stereotypes.

In a large scale phone-interview survey conducted in the US (Jayaratne et al., 2006), White respondents who essentialized racial differences tended to show more negative attitudes toward Blacks on both traditional racial prejudice measure (e.g., being bothered if their children married a Black person) and modern racial prejudice measure (e.g., Blacks only have themselves to blame if they do not do well in life). Another experiment conducted among German participants established the causal relationship between essentialist beliefs and prejudice (Keller, 2005). Specifically, compared with participants who read a neutral article about oil production, participants who read information that enforced essentialist beliefs (e.g., genetic heritage of European people) held more negative attitudes toward their outgroup – people from Eastern Europe (e.g., Bulgaria, Rumania), than their ingroup – people from Western Europe (e.g.,

Germany, Switzerland); this effect was particularly salient among those who chronically believed in the existence of group essences.

Another study conducted among White American students in the U.S. had shown that those who endorsed essentialist beliefs harbored more prejudice towards Blacks, felt stronger external pressure but lower internal motivation to be non-prejudiced, and had a relatively homogenous social network (Williams & Eberhardt, 2008). Furthermore, compared with individuals who were exposed to information that depicted race as a social construction, exposure to information about race as an essential biological construct reduced White Americans' emotional engagement toward inequity issues experienced by Blacks in society. They also showed less interest in interacting with a racial outgroup member (Williams & Eberhardt, 2008). In short, essentialism is associated with biases against outgroup members and greater avoidance in interacting with outgroup.

As demonstrated in the studies above, generally speaking, individuals tend to avoid intergroup situations that induce negative expectations. Avoiding intergroup encounter is possible when the individuals belong to the majority group (e.g., European Americans in the US); however for minority group members (e.g., Asian Americans living in the US) such avoidance is improbable because they are constantly submerged into an environment, in which the cultural standards are defined by the majority. The need to navigate within the majority culture could be threatening; it might be in conflict with the desire to avoid potential negative intercultural experiences (Morris, Mok, & Mor, 2011). Such conflicted push and pull forces might have important psychological ramifications for minority group members. An experiment conducted among Asian American participants found that reading an article that argued for the existence of racial essences lowered their American identification compared with those who read about race

as a social construction (No et al., 2008). Furthermore, essentialist theories had also been shown to elicit psychological reactivity among Asian Americans, both on the cognitive level and on the physiological level.

On the cognitive level, research on biculturalism suggested that individuals who have been exposed to two cultures acquired the cultural knowledge frames from both sides and would flexibly make use of the knowledge, depending on the situational cues (Chao & Hong, 2007; Hong et al., 2000). For example, Chinese-American biculturals would usually respond in manners that are more typical of American when they are reminded of the American culture, but more typical of Chinese when they are reminded of the Chinese culture. However, the biculturals who highly endorsed essentialism tended to respond in way that were consistent with their Asian cultural heritage after they were reminded of the American culture (No et al., 2008). For example, in a study of emotional projection (Cohen & Gunz, 2002), North Americans were found to be more likely to generalize self-emotions onto others (e.g., I feel angry and others are angry), whereas Asians tended to project emotions that complement self-emotions onto others (e.g., I feel angry and the others feel fearful). These are known as egocentric projection and relational projection, respectively. According to the research on biculturalism, Asian Americans should have acquired both cultural mindsets; thus, they should display more egocentric projection when they were reminded of the American culture and more relational projection when they were reminded of the Asian culture. However, Asian Americans who endorsed essentialist beliefs more strongly showed psychological reactivity. Specifically, when they were reminded of the American culture, they showed more relational projection, a response pattern that was more typical of Asians (No et al., 2008).

More importantly, such psychological reactivity was also found in their physiological responses. In another study, Chinese American participants were interviewed about their experiences with Chinese and American cultures. The interview consisted of a baseline rest period, a warm-up discussion (e.g., what is your job/major?), a cultural experience discussion (e.g., how do you feel about Chinese/American culture?), and a final rest period. Their physiological responses were monitored throughout the interview. The endorsement of essentialist beliefs was correlated with heightened skin conductance level only during the cultural experience discussion (when the participants were sharing their personal experiences in Chinese and American cultures), but not during the baseline rest period, the warm-up discussion, and the final rest period. As heightened electrodermal reactivity usually signifies physiological preparation for action in response to anxiety or stress (Fowles, 1988), the results suggested that discussing and integrating cultural experiences in Chinese and American cultures could be stressful for individuals who endorsed essentialist beliefs more strongly.

Taken together, research that investigated the intergroup and interpersonal implications of essentialist theories in a multicultural environment has shown that the beliefs in underlying group essences are associated with biases against outgroup members and the motivation to avoid interacting with outgroup if such avoidance is possible. However, when avoidance is not an option, individuals might show heightened psychological reactivity. They adhere even more strongly to their ingroup practices when being reminded of the outgroup and show more anxiety responses when integrating their multicultural experiences. In the next section, we will investigate what might be the intrapersonal processes that shape such intergroup and interpersonal dynamics.

Intrapersonal Processes

Essentialist thinking sets up a social categorization mindset (e.g., Chao, Hong, & Chiu, 2013; Medin, 1989; Medin & Ortony, 1989). It leads individuals to conceptualize social groups as distinct categories with unique and non-overlapping attributes (Kalish, 2002) and perceive discrete boundaries between the groups (Plaks, Malahy, Sedlins, & Shoda, 2011). In a study that adopted the method of constant stimuli and the method of difference in psychophysics to assess racial categorization towards both Black and White faces, participants were presented with morphed faces of Black and White. The morphed faces varied in terms of their Black:White proportion, from 100% Black: 0% White to 0% Black: 100% White. The participants were asked to indicate whether given faces belonged to “White” or “Black” category. The results revealed that essentialism was associated with heightened sensitivity to subtle phenotypic racial differences and the exclusion of racially ambiguous figures from a racial category (Chao et al., 2013). This finding is also consistent with studies that examined essentialist beliefs and memory of racially ambiguous faces among adult and children (e.g., Gaither et al., 2013; Pauker & Ambady, 2009; Plaks et al., 2011). These studies demonstrated that higher endorsement of essentialism was associated with a poorer memory of racially ambiguous faces and clearly outgroup faces, but a superior memory for ingroup faces. Conversely, weaker endorsement of essentialist thinking was associated with a better memory of ingroup and racially ambiguous faces, but poorer memories of faces that are clearly outgroup (Gaither et al., 2013). In another experiment, participants were presented with a racially ambiguous target face with either a “Black” or “White” racial label. Participants who endorsed high essentialist beliefs recalled the target face to be consistent with the racial label given and relied more on the racial label to identify the target face from two novel faces (Eberhardt, Dasgupta, & Banaszynski, 2003). It appears that essentialism is associated with an exclusive definition of group membership, a

stronger reliance on category membership label, and a perceived rigid and distinctive group boundary. More importantly, regardless of their own group membership (e.g., Asian, Black, or White), individuals who endorse essentialist theories apply such exclusive membership definitions equally to both the majority and minority groups, as well as their ingroup and outgroup; the overall finding again supports the idea that essentialist theories set up a general tendency to rely on discrete social categories to structure their multicultural environment (Chao et al., 2013).

The perceived group distinctiveness associated with essentialism does not only influence judgments that are based on observable phenotypic and physical features, but also shapes individuals' viewpoint about social group qualities on a deeper level, such as personality. In a study that examined how people perceived Asian and White Americans (No et al., 2008), participants were presented with the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI; Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann Jr., 2003) and were asked to indicate how a typical Asian American and a typical White American were along ten pairs of personality traits, such as “sympathetic, warm” and “anxious, easily upset”. Dissimilarity indices (i.e., absolute difference, distinctive profile similarity score, and profile similarity score) were computed to assess the extent to which a participant attributed the various traits to a typical Asian American and White American differently. Results showed that stronger essentialist beliefs were associated with more perceived personality dissimilarity between a typical Asian American and a typical White American. Moving beyond the perceived personality differences towards the members between two groups, essentialist theories also shaped the representation of core values endorsed by the groups. In a cultural priming study (Chao et al., 2007), Chinese American participants were presented with pictorial cultural icons (e.g., The Great Wall, Statue of Liberty) and values terms (e.g., collective, individuality) that

were seen as central to Chinese or American cultures. The Chinese and American pictorial icons served as primes to activate the particular cultural representation (see Hong et al., 2000). The extent to which the pictorial icons facilitated or inhibited the subsequent identification of core Chinese versus American cultural value words was assessed. The result revealed that essentialism predicted discrete representations toward American and Chinese cultures, such that activation of one cultural representation (e.g., American cultural icons) inhibited the identification of cultural value words associated with another culture (e.g., Chinese value words) among those who endorsed essentialist beliefs strongly.

In sum, essentialist theories reinforce a social categorization mindset in a multicultural environment, leading individuals to perceive social groups as discrete categories, with clear-cut boundaries. Importantly, individuals who endorse essentialist beliefs ascribe unique surface level attributes, such as phenotypic traits, as well as deep level characteristics, such as personality traits and values to each group. Uncovering these intrapersonal processes has important implications to our understanding of the intergroup and interpersonal dynamics in multicultural contexts.

Connecting intrapersonal processes to intergroup and interpersonal experiences

The discrete categorical representations serve to provide individuals with a sense of structure, predictability, and control, especially in a diverse society in which people from different racial or ethnocultural backgrounds come into contact. It enables individuals to form quick social judgments and facilitate inference making through categorization (Chiu, Morris, Hong, & Menon, 2000; Knowles et al., 2001; Levy, Chiu, & Hong, 2006; Sommers & Norton, 2006). However, such categorical mindset hinders memory and recognition of faces of outgroup members; it homogenizes the representations of the different others. Furthermore, the reliance on

existing category information and the perception of clear-cut boundary between categories could exaggerate the perceived incompatibility between groups. This can heighten psychological reactivity in the face of the different others, reinforce stereotype of an outgroup, and hamper integration of ideas across the presumably rigid group boundaries (see Tadmor, Chao, Hong, & Polzer, 2013). Do the poorer memory, the rigid group boundary, the psychological reactivity, the tendency to stereotype, the avoidance of intergroup contact, and the lack of integration across categories reflect: (a) a cognitive shortcoming; that is, an inability to encode and integrate information that involves outgroups, (b) a self-protective mechanism to maintain group membership purity and enhance group coherence, (c) a motivated system justification process that serves to maintain existing social hierarchy, or (d) a combination of the various factors?

Scholars that focus on the cognitive underpinning and developmental trajectory of essentialism from children to adults conceptualize essentialist beliefs as natural theories of mind that serve to structure individuals' subjective experiences. Scholars from a critical theory perspective conceive essentialism as a motivated social construction that serves to legitimize the power of oppressors by reinforcing the beliefs that the status differential between groups as immutable. Others further conceptualize essentialism as an empowerment tool appealed by the oppressed to resist domination (see Hirschfeld, 1997; Mahalingam, 2003)

Arguably, perceived clear-cut social boundaries, unfamiliar faces, and dissimilarities in personality and value attributes might be sufficient to induce the need to rely on stereotypes to make sense of the social environment in order to reduce the sense of uncertainty (Roets & Van Hiel, 2011). The sense of uncertainty towards the dissimilar others might also increase the desire to avoid interactions, because of the potential psychological discomforts resulted from the uncertainty anticipated (Levy et al., 2006; Levy & Karafantis, 2008). Thus, viewing essentialism

from an information processing perspective, the intergroup and interpersonal dynamics observed can simply be attributed to limitations in cognitive processes; system justification motivation is not an essential component for such processes to occur. However, researchers taking a system approach pointed out that we cannot comprehend social psychological processes of essentialism without taking the larger societal context and power differential between groups into consideration (Mahalingam, 2007). Consistent with this perspective, a series of studies have demonstrated how essentialist beliefs can be used as status legitimization ideology by the majority group (e.g., Morton, Hornsey, & Postmes, 2009; Morton, Postmes, Alexander, & Hornsey, 2009) or adopted by the minority group as a strategic tool to fight against social marginalization (Morton & Postmes, 2009). One experiment demonstrated that exposure to essentialist arguments increased the perceived legitimacy of existing social inequality and support for discriminatory practices; it also lowered the perceived possibility of social change. Apparently, essentialism can be used to justify and propagate established social order. Furthermore, leveraging the status maintenance function of essentialism, when the status of the dominant group was being challenged by potential social change, essentialist theories were invoked in an attempt to reinforce existing status quo (Morton, Hornsey, et al., 2009). At the same time, the minority group can also strategically evoke an essentialist account to resist domination, promote group cohesion, and enhance ingroup identification (Morton & Postmes, 2009).

On the one hand, essentialism has been shown to be a natural theory of mind derived to make sense of our social world. From this cognitive perspective, essentialist beliefs and their associated correlates are natural psychological constructions in a diverse social environment; the intergroup and interpersonal dynamics are the byproducts of the sense-making process. It

remains silent about the role social structure and power struggle play in shaping intergroup outcomes. On the other hand, taking a system approach, essentialism has been shown to serve as a socially constructed tool exploited by interested parties for two opposing purposes: To propagate and maintain existing social dominance by high status group and to promote identification of the oppressed in order to resist domination. The intergroup outcomes, tensions, or even animosity resulted from essentialized perceptions, are seen as intended consequences that serve to maintain or defy existing social structure. This approach remains quiet about the cognitive basis of the social construction (Mahalingam, 2007). What is social about the theory of mind? What role does the person play in constructing the essentialized social representation in a multicultural society?

We submit that the society and the psyche mutually constitute each other. How might the natural theory of mind be influenced by the larger societal context in which it is embedded? When do such natural psychological constructions as essentialist theories formulated by individual members of a society become ideological tools that shape intergroup dynamics in a diverse society? In order to maintain existing system structure or to mobilize people to strike for social change, the ideological representations of individuals cannot exist in a social vacuum; they need to be shared by a critical mass to serve their function. An idea becomes a shared reality when people assume the idea to be widely known and accepted in a community (Chao et al., 2013; Hardin & Higgins, 1996). Such idea, once turned into a shared reality, can shape individuals attitude and behavior (Brescoll & LaFrance, 2004; Chao, Chiu, & Lee, 2010; Tam, Lee, Kim, Li, & Chao, 2012) and can be used to manipulate intergroup perceptions (Chou & Feagin, 2008; Takaki, 1998) regardless of whether there is objective evidence that validates the idea. Future studies could examine the interplay between the cognitive basis of essentialism and

the intergroup power dynamics in a multicultural society to understand how the societal context might shape the experience and manifestation of individual psychological processes and how the psyche might influence the construction of the social reality.

Conclusion

Although some studies have suggested that exposure to culturally diverse environment can benefit individuals by exposing them to different ideas, increasing their ability to integrate different perspectives, and reducing intergroup biases (e.g. Leung et al., 2010; Tadmor, Hong, et al., 2012; Tadmor, Satterstrom, et al., 2012) research on essentialism suggests that the benefits of multicultural exposure might be bounded by individuals' subjective construction and interpretation of their social world. By examining how lay theories about social group essences influence psychological processes and how they can be used to shape intergroup dynamics, the current paper aims to advance our understanding of intercultural processes.

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