

The Extent to Which Essentialist Reasoning Explains Xenophobia in Adults

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Abstract

This essay outlines the connection between essentialist reasoning and xenophobia in adults. I will start by looking at what both essentialist reasoning and xenophobia are, before investigating how both concepts develop as we age.

In turn, I will investigate how essentialism, labelling and encoding lead to an 'us vs them' mentality, which then leads to xenophobic attitudes. I will then look at the strength of these and how other labelling or encoding methods could hack this 'integral' essentialist behaviour, overriding it with other less harmful factors.

Essentialism

It is estimated that roughly half of all adopted people search for a birth parent at some point in their lives ¹. Proving people believe that there is something innate, integral and essential to their being, this is a form of essentialist thinking. Essentialist thinking also describes the inherent value placed on original pieces of memorabilia or art.

Essentialism, the driver of essentialist thinking is a complex and often controversial concept, the definition by Gelman, that, "Essentialism is the view that certain categories (e.g., women, racial groups, dinosaurs, original Picasso artwork) have

an underlying reality or true nature that one cannot observe directly. Furthermore, this underlying reality (or "essence") is thought to give objects their identity, and to be responsible for similarities that category members share"² to be very useful particularly in relation to further describing essentialist reasoning, or the way of thinking with an embedded essentialist view.

"Just as being told that there are 'dolphins' and 'fish' leads children to encode otherwise, similar-looking fishy creatures as members of two different natural kinds, being told that there are 'black people', and 'white people' leads children to encode otherwise similar-

looking people as members of two different natural kinds"³. This encoding can be applied to nations or cultures, leading to hostility towards individuals from other races, countries or cultures. Thus, creating a feedback loop, as reduced cross-cultural communication, further reinforces the essentialist beliefs and xenophobic attitudes which originally led to the phenomena.

Xenophobia,

the (irrational) dislike, distrust or prejudice for people 'from' another country was 'coined by late-nineteenth-century doctors and political commentators, [and] emerged alongside Western nationalism,

¹ Ulrich Müller & Barbara Perry (2001) Adopted Persons' Search for and Contact with Their Birth Parents I, *Adoption Quarterly*, 4:3, 5-37, DOI: 10.1300/J145v04n03_02

² Gelman, S. A. (2005, May 1). Essentialism in everyday thought. *Psychological Science Agenda*. <https://www.apa.org/science/about/psa/2005/05/gelman>

³ Cosmides, Leda & Tooby, John & Kurzban, Robert. (2003). Perceptions of Race. *Trends in cognitive sciences*. 7. 173-179. 10.1016/S1364-6613(03)00057-3. P.176

colonialism, mass migration, and genocide⁴. It is conceptually separate to both nativism and racism and often shrouded by them⁵ (Ronald R. Sundstrom and David Haekwon Kim).

Essentialism, and the reasoning using it "emerges as children actively attempt to make sense of their environment by relying on several basic representational and explanatory biases. These developmental processes give rise to the widespread emergence of social essentialist views in early childhood but allow for vast variability across development and cultural contexts in the precise nature of these beliefs"⁶. These essentialist views lead to people who "prefer to associate with those who are similar to us over those who are different, preferentially allocate resources to similar others, and hold more positive beliefs about similar others"⁷.

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Essentialism can lead to many forms of thinking which

are overtly or more loosely related to xenophobia such as people's tendency to over-generalise and stereotype. Generalisation can be a useful tool, allowing people to make practical assumptions. For example, avoiding some people at night or assuming who be better suited to answer a topic specific question. However, over-generalisation quickly leads to embarrassing, inaccurate and/or offensive assumptions such as a news reporter mistaking Samuel L. Jackson and another well-known African American actor.

Learned behaviour can be the difference between intolerance / prejudice and practicality / preference. Information fed to children has a huge influence on how they use their inbuilt essentialist tendencies, "when new evidence conflicts with the child's current understanding, this can lead the child gradually to construct new representations. Indeed, targeted interventions that introduce a non-obvious similarity between dissimilar

things can lead to dramatic change in children's concepts."⁸

Xenophobia manifests differently in adults and children. Like adults, infants "prefer those who share even trivial similarities with themselves, and these preferences appear to reflect a cognitive comparison process"⁹, unlike adults, infants "do not appear to prefer others with an utterly arbitrary similarity to themselves"¹⁰. The ability in children to engage and shift their beliefs based on interaction with new evidence is likely far greater than the ability for adults to reach the same shifts in their fundamental views.

Polarisation

The link between essentialism, intolerance, polarisation and 'in group love – out group hate' are integral when considering essentialism's role in xenophobia.

Polarisation or the distinct and definite separation of two of

4 Joseph O. Baker (2022) Of fear and strangers: a history of xenophobia, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2022.2098154

5 Sundstrom, R.R. and Kim, D.H., 2014. Xenophobia and racism. *Critical philosophy of race*, 2(1), pp.20-45.

6 Rhodes, Marjorie & Mandalaywala, Tara. (2017). The development and developmental consequences of social essentialism. *Wiley interdisciplinary reviews. Cognitive science*. 8. 10.1002/wcs.1437.

7 Mahajan N, Wynn K. Origins of "us" versus "them": prelinguistic infants prefer similar others. *Cognition*. 2012 Aug;124(2):227-33. doi: 10.1016/j.cognition.2012.05.003. Epub 2012 Jun 4. PMID: 22668879.

8 Gelman, S. A. (2005, May 1). Essentialism in everyday thought. *Psychological Science Agenda*. <https://www.apa.org/science/about/psa/2005/05/gelman>

9 Mahajan N, Wynn K. Origins of "us" versus "them": prelinguistic infants prefer similar others. *Cognition*. 2012 Aug;124(2):227-33. doi: 10.1016/j.cognition.2012.05.003. Epub 2012 Jun 4. PMID: 22668879.

10 Mahajan N, Wynn K. Origins of "us" versus "them": prelinguistic infants prefer similar others. *Cognition*. 2012 Aug;124(2):227-33. doi: 10.1016/j.cognition.2012.05.003. Epub 2012 Jun 4. PMID: 22668879.

more groups is well exemplified through berries, knowing one red berry is poisonous does not lead you to think that all red berries are poisonous. People selecting a group with a seemingly arbitrary connection such as supporting a football team, then use this factor to make sweeping assumptions about others based purely on whether they are fans of the same club.

This phenomenon is particularly clear when looking at xenophobic tendencies. People stop seeing complexities. Leading assumptions and decisions based on whether a person is from their country or not.

Essentialism leading to Xenophobia

Some examples of specifically strong xenophobic action are the treatment of migrants (Windrush generation experiencing a lack of acceptance into society). External factors such as exposing existing anti-Asian xenophobia after COVID, popularised by figures such as Donald Trump referring to it as the 'Wuhan Flu'¹¹. Or the idea

of ethic 'superiority' manifested in the well-known cases of the KKK and Nazism.

Nations are an easy category for us to see similarities and differences in, they allow for a mass, surface level generalisation. It is potentially the reason why borders are so fiercely disputed. There are many other ties with symbolism such as the importance of uniforms, jerseys, symbols and colours in the formation, continuation and recognition of polarisation. The uniform serves several functions: it acts as a totem, reveals and conceals statuses, certifies legitimacy, and suppresses individuality. The interaction of these components and the

acceptance or rejection of the uniform and its associated status by the wearer are described.¹²

When does this start

Essentialism can be a very useful tool in enabling people to see differences between one another, however learned behaviour can lead to essentialist beliefs manifesting in harmful, biased or prejudiced views such as xenophobia. Learned behaviours are impossible to shut out, and generally people grow up to prefer people who are alike to themselves, "We showed that children, as has been claimed for adults, prefer similar others based on a subconscious assessment of similarity in



fig.1 <https://www.guggenheim.org/blogs/checklist/responding-to-anti-asian-xenophobia-during-the-pandemic-part-one>

11 XIAOYU WENG, Responding to Anti-Asian Xenophobia during the Pandemic: Part 1, MAY 7, 2020

12 Joseph, N., & Alex, N. (1972). The Uniform: A Sociological Perspective. *American Journal of Sociology*, 77(4), 719–730. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2776756>

13 Social Preference in Preschoolers: Effects of Morphological Self-Similarity and Familiarity Nadja Richter, Bernard Tiddeman, Daniel B. M. Haun, Published: January 4, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0145443>

14 Bar-Haim, Y., Ziv, T., Lamy, D., & Hodes, R. M. (2006). Nature and Nurture in Own-Race Face Processing. *Psychological Science*, 17(2), 159–163. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2006.01679.x>

15 The Development of Social Essentialism: The Case of Israeli Children's Inferences About Jews and Arabs Article in *Child Development* · May 2010, *Child Development*, May/June 2010, Volume 81, Number 3, Pages 773

facial features"¹³ or people who they see as alike to their parents (based on their limited ability to assign traits).

Some of the first ways in which children are through auditory as well as visual differences. As well as preferring self-similar faces "studies have found that infants prefer speakers of their native language (Kinzler, Dupoux, & Spelke, 2007), and, when raised in a racially homogeneous environment, prefer to look at faces of their own race"¹⁴. This preference in infants plays out as shown that "even under conditions of arbitrary social classification, pre-schoolers manifest ingroup favoritism, thus corroborating the notion that processes of social categorization have significant implications very early on in development (Patterson & Bigler, 2006)."¹⁵ This means that initially encoded information such as language or race (which often associate with nationality) may currently be prominent in decision making, however do not need to be. "Perhaps race encoding is simply a (mistaken) by-product of coalition encoding, and when you give our brains another feature by which to infer coalition [in this case jersey colour], then race [and potentially nationality] falls away as being the critical/

most salient way of 'sorting' people. (Cosmides et al.)"¹⁶

Can Learned Prejudice be Prevented or Reversed

This importance on learned behaviour, and the essential nature of provided input begs the question what people, parents or governments can do about breeding xenophobia? France have introduced policy to 'hack' this process of prejudice by eliminating religious symbols in schools. Attempting to reduce the obviousness of the 'Us vs. Them'. However, this raises a plethora of questions¹⁷ such as whether pretending cultural differences don't exist is going to be more useful than accepting religious and cultural differences as things which are there but are not significant when making social decisions.

People recurrently and willingly drop essentialist xenophobic beliefs when facing a common enemy, exemplified by the war in Ukraine, COVID, Climate Change or through figureheads such as Muhammed Ali¹⁸ or Malcom X who changed many people's perceptions on what nationality means and whether similarities between yourself

and people of Middle Eastern or Asian descent are stronger than those within 'their' country.

Conclusion

This essay argues that without essentialism, xenophobia in adults would not exist. It also brings forward that essentialism alone does not create xenophobia; it merely enables it, provided the subject is provided enough input to prioritise the view that nationality is a defining characteristic.

Therefore, essentialism alone is unlikely to explain adult xenophobia, but allows for a belief that people are inherently and unchangeably different from people from other countries, however if this sense of difference does is not connected to negative associations or conceptions then essentialism alone will not lead to xenophobic tendencies, particularly not in the extremities they can be seen at present and through history.

Without the ability and seemingly unavoidable tendency to 'essentialise' or employ essentialist thinking frequently and unconsciously we would be far less likely to have developed into a people with such strong xenophobic tendencies. [1,488 words]

¹³ Social Preference in Preschoolers: Effects of Morphological Self-Similarity and Familiarity Nadja Richter, Bernard Tiddeman, Daniel B. M. Haun, Published: January 4, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0145443>

¹⁴ Bar-Haim, Y., Ziv, T., Lamy, D., & Hodes, R. M. (2006). Nature and Nurture in Own-Race Face Processing. *Psychological Science*, 17(2), 159–163. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2006.01679.x>

¹⁵ The Development of Social Essentialism: The Case of Israeli Children's Inferences About Jews and Arabs Article in *Child Development* · May 2010, *Child Development*, May/June 2010, Volume 81, Number 3, Pages 773

¹⁶ Bronwyn Tar, in Tiyasha Dutta Paul's comment, 'Race Profiling', February 2nd 2023, Accessed Feb 24 23'

¹⁷ United States Department of State. (n.d.). France. [online] Available at: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/france/>

¹⁸ Saito, N. T. (2021). Why Xenophobia?. *Berkeley La Raza LJ*, 31, 1.