Construction and Deconstruction of Essence in Representing Social Groups: 
Identity Projects, Stereotyping, and Racism*

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* This paper is dedicated to the late Gerard Duveen, who’s critical comments were 
enormously inspiring.

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Abstract

Projecting essence onto a social category means to think, talk, and act as if the category were a discrete natural kind and as if its members were all endowed with the same immutable attributes determined by the category’s essence. Essentializing may happen implicitly or on purpose in representing ingroups and outgroups. We argue that essentializing is a versatile representational tool (a) that is used to create identity in groups with chosen membership in order to make the group appear as a unitary entity, (b) that outsiders often draw on a group’s essentialist self-construal in their judgements about the groups, (c) that judgements about members of forced social categories are often informed by essentialist thinking that easily switches to discrimination and racism, and (d) that under certain historical and political conditions members of social categories and groups may contest their essentialized identity, such as parts of the feminist movement, or that they may attempt to reconstruct an essentialized identity, such as parts of the homosexual movement or the largely defunct European nobility. Besides explicit political and power interests, we see communication processes and language use as a tacit force driving essentialization of social categories.
Constructing and Deconstructing Essence in Representations of Social Groups: Identity Projects, Stereotyping, and Racism

1 Spring in Tallinn

In April 2007 the Estonian government relocated a formerly Soviet Bronze Soldier monument that commemorates the liberation of Estonia from German Nazi rule by Soviet troops, from a square right in the centre of Tallinn to a soldiers’ cemetery at the outskirts of the city. Immediately after the plans for relocation had leaked to the public, an emotional storm carried by parts of the large Russian population, many of which had been living in Estonia for decades, swept Tallinn in protest against the desecration of “their” monument. This protest met intense resistance from parts of the naturalized Estonians who were strongly in favour of removing this memento of Soviet occupation from the very city centre. For a few days violence between these groups loomed and had to be contained by the police.

It comes as no surprise that a fierce debate between the Estonian and the Russian factions of the population accompanied these events. In this debate one type of topic popped up over and over again: What constitutes a real Estonian and what is a real Russian. The debate raged about ingroup and outgroup definitions using terms such as our versus their “blood”, language, and nationality, in other words, what constitutes each group’s essence and what can be inferred from that (Raudsepp & Wagner, forthcoming).

These discourses are an exemplary illustration of the interplay between, and interdependence of representing outgroups and the juxtaposed construction of ingroup identities. Members of both sides thought, talked and acted as if their own and the other group were a natural kind by explicitly attributing or tacitly implying an essence
to the categories. The mechanism common to both, representations of the in- and of the outgroup, is the use of essentializing tools that allow one’s own and the other group being perceived as well-defined entities with a nature of their own constitutes a severe obstacle to dialogue.

In the present paper we investigate this “essence-tool” and its use in representational processes related to groups. In so doing, we argue that essentializing—use of essence-tools in representational processes and discourse—is fundamental to the construction and reconstruction of the intergroup relationship between the essentializer and the essentialized. It has a bearing on racism, xenophobia and dehumanization as well as on self-construed social identity. Hence, central to an understanding of these processes is the concept of essence.

2 Essentializing

2.1 The long history of the term essence

Essence originally refers to the Latin word “essentia”, which is a nominalization of the verb ‘esse’ meaning to be. In Latin translations of Plato’s works, essentia is a literal translation of the Greek term ‘ousia’ (ουσια), which is also a direct nominalization of the Greek verb ‘einai’ (ειναι) also meaning “to be”. In the context of Plato’s works, ousia is referring to the perpetual and characterizing features of a thing, which it acquires merely by being itself and which it cannot shed without quitting to be what it is (Sachs, 2006). These essences, in contrast to its carriers, are unchangeable and eternal. They represent a deeper and unchangeable level of reality than our everyday perception of the world’s changing and ephemeral objects.

During the next two and a half millennia, an engaged discussion prevailed in the field of philosophy on the true nature or essence of ”universals”, i.e. all kinds of
characteristics or qualities, which can apply to more than one thing, in contrast to individual names. The nominalists deny that such universals have a real existence in the way particulars like you, me, and this text have a real existence. Universals are just names, which can be applied to a more or less well defined set of particulars. Common names do not presuppose a common underlying truth or essence between and within particulars sharing a name. On the other hand, a multitude of realist schools claimed throughout the centuries that universals do have a real existence independent of the particulars, to which they apply. In all these approaches any kind of “deeper truth” or essence underlying universals is presupposed (Klima, 2008).

The concept of realism raises some difficult problems. How can one universal (like humanness) be the same thing in so many different individuals? Another class of problems arises from the fact that every individual is the carrier of a multitude of different universals—especially given that the essences underlying the universals are supposed to determine an individual’s surface characteristics. Other problems are imposed by the changeability of all individual things on the one hand and by the supposed stability and eternalness of universals on the other hand. With nominalist approaches these problems can easily be solved. Nominalism appears to be a simpler and more elegant solution to the problem of universals than realist approaches but, in a way, realist approaches may share more similarities with our “naïve” view of reality. The late medieval scholar Domingo Soto came to the conclusion that whereas realist doctrines are more difficult to understand, nominalist doctrines are more difficult to believe (Soto, D. in Klima, 2008).

In the 1970s, several philosophers of language broke new grounds for more social theories of meaning (Putnam, 1975). According to Putnam the meaning of a term refers to our causal interactions with instances of the kind. As a result of these
interactions a stereotype, a “… conventional (frequently malicious) idea (which may be wildly inaccurate) of what an X looks like or acts like or is” (p. 169) emerges. To use the term X correctly within a society, one must refer to the societal stereotype of X, which does not necessarily have to be true. Even though somebody may falsely believe that tigers are the fastest cats, he or she can use the term correctly in conversation. This view of knowledge as a societal phenomenon—that is, Putnam’s ‘shared linguistic labour’—gave rise to pragmatism.

Putnam (1975) uses natural-kind terms in most of his examples. On one hand “… the use of natural-kind words reflects an important fact about our relation to the world: we know that there are kinds of things with common hidden structure, but we don’t yet have the knowledge to describe all those hidden structures” (p. 163). On the other hand one and the same thing, e.g. a pencil, may either be considered to be a natural kind or an artefact. Which category is used, depends on our theories about underlying hidden structures. Hence, the users of a natural language endow natural kind categories with an underlying essence. Artefact categories are not endowed with an underlying essence. Such “arbitrary” groupings of objects can only be imagined in the context of their creators, such as a chair, a sweater, or a house. Identifying hidden structure with essence makes an object a natural kind.

A bit earlier than Putnam’s work on essence, W. V. Quine (1969) discussed the term natural kind. Quine dealt with the question what “… tends to confirm an induction?” (p. 114), that is, what mechanism allows us to gain knowledge about an event from the observation of another? According to Quine induction is possible if events are perceived as similar or as belonging to the same kind. He found that, in spite of being central to our intuitive thinking, resemblance is near impossible to capture in logical or mathematical terms. Consequently, Quine postulates an innate,
but malleable, intuition of similarity, which undergoes typical changes with scientific
development. In this sense a branch of science can be considered mature “if it no
longer needs an irreducible notion of similarity and kind.” (p. 138) Quine’s claim of
an innate and spontaneous mechanism working via judgements of similarity and
perception of kinds is crucial for everyday cognition and communication.

2.2 Explicating essentialization
The findings of “psychological essentialism” (Medin & Ortony, 1989) in
developmental and cognitive psychology mirror the philosophical history of the idea
of essence. Projecting essence upon—or into—natural kinds and their exemplars
appears to be a spontaneous tendency in everyday thinking of children and adults
alike. Children, for example, believe in an innate potential of living beings, which is
fixed at birth. In a study children learned about an animal that it was separated from
his or her biological parents just after birth, and was raised by members of a different
species. Children insisted that not only physical attributes will resemble an animal’s
biological parents, but also behavioural characteristics (Gelman & Wellman, 1991).
These findings also hold with human social categories such as language group where
5-year-olds believe that an adopted child will maintain the language of its biological
parents (Hirschfeld & Gelman, 1997). Gelman (2003) presented evidence that
children provide consistent, domain-specific causal explanations for characteristics
shared by members of a category. Studies by Keil (1989) show that children by the
age of 4 to 5 believe that an animal can not be transformed into another by physical
manipulation. Other authors connected this line of research with the psychology of
prejudice. They found that children as well as adults were more susceptible to
stereotyping, if they believed in lay theories about a fixed rather than a malleable human nature (Levy & Dweck, 1999).

To see how this works, it is useful to see what it means to essentialize a category. When a category is essentialized, it is assumed that there exists an essence of the category which determines a category membership. That is, if an object possesses the essence, then it is a member of the category. Conversely, if an object is a member of the category, then it must possess the essence. In other words, it is a necessary and sufficient criterion for category membership in the classical Aristotelian sense.

An essence is presupposed to possess two fundamental properties. First, it is unalterable by human intervention (Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000; Kronberger & Wagner, 2008; Rothbart & Taylor, 1992). That is, humans are supposed to be unable to create, modify, or destroy an essence because it is supposed to belong to nature as opposed to culture. If human culture—the realm of artefacts—is something that humans can create, modify, and destroy at will, an essence is in the realm of the natural order of things which lies beyond human culture, defying and denying arbitrary human alteration. Second, an essence is supposed to cause the appearances of a category exemplar (Rothbart & Taylor, 1992; Haslam et al., 2000). Exemplars of a category, despite their similarities, are not identical, and do vary in their appearances. However, they are presupposed to possess the same underlying essence, which gives rise to variable appearances. In other words, to essentialize a category is to presuppose the distinction between the appearance and the reality, to presume the causal primacy of the essence in determining the appearance, and to take it for granted that there exists the underlying unalterable reality despite the variable and changeable appearances of the exemplars of a category.
Attribution of an unalterable and causal essence that determines category membership has at least four consequences. First, an essentialized category is assumed to be discrete and to have an impermeable category boundary. This is because its essence is a criterial feature of category membership and it has an all or none character. Objects either do or do not have the respective essence; those which have it belong in the category, and those which do not lie outside its boundary. This implies that an exemplar of the essentialized category cannot change its membership because the essence that the exemplar possesses cannot be changed. Second, the essentialized category is assumed to be homogeneous. That is, all exemplars are supposed to have the same essence, and therefore, they are “essentially” the same and can be treated in the same way without differentiating among them. Third, surface characteristics of an exemplar of the essentialized category can be explained and predicted in terms of its essence because the essence of the essentialized category is supposed to cause its exemplar’s surface characteristics. Thus, an exemplar’s past or current appearance can be explained and understood in terms of its presumed essence, and even if an exemplar does not currently exhibit an expected characteristic, it is predicted to show the expected characteristic eventually in the future. This is called inductive potential of essence. Finally, the essentialized category is naturalized, that is, treated as if it were part of the natural order that lies beyond human construal, argumentation, and negotiation. It is treated as an ontological existence independent of human thought and action, as a foundation and a “given” in reasoning, and therefore acts as an argument stopper and gives a closure to cognition. This is because the essence is regarded as part of the unchangeable reality and the natural order of things.
Extending these considerations to social categories, it follows that the social group that an essentialized social category refers to is maximally differentiated from other groups and individuals by its well-defined boundary, its members are homogenized, its members’ behaviour is explained and predicted by their underlying essence, and therefore any treatment of its members—thoughts, feelings, and actions directed toward them—justified on the basis of their underlying essence is legitimized as natural. Thus, in a single stroke, essentialization of a social category can serve an epistemic function to simplify and to make complex social phenomena comprehensible in cognition and communication, and a moral function to justify and legitimize resolute thoughts, feelings, and actions directed towards it. In other words, it “enhances” a social representation’s epistemic and pragmatic function in crafting a social world (Jovchelovitch, 2007; Moscovici & Hewstone, 1983; Wagner & Hayes, 2005) by sharpening its contours and permitting quick inference and “adequate” reaction in social encounters.

2.3 Essence as a representational tool

What are representational tools that allow to craft essentialized social categories? One subtle, and yet common, tool is to use a nominalised category label as John Locke (1689/1975), among others, recognized. Placing an arbitrary category label along a continuous dimension is sufficient to induce clear category boundaries. In Rothbart, Davis-Stitt, and Hill’s (1997) experiments, people were told to evaluate similarities between job applicants who were given scores on a composite job suitability measure. Some applicants were described by the same label (e.g., Acceptable) whereas others were described by different labels (Ideal vs. Acceptable). Although the numerical values were held constant, when the applicants were described by different labels,
they were evaluated to be more different from each other than when they were described by the same label. In addition, Yamauchi (2005; Yamauchi & Yu, 2008) showed that the existence of even a nonsense category label is sufficient to lead people to believe the category is more inductively potent, that is, to assist them with making inferences about other exemplars on the basis of the observation of one exemplar. Furthermore, when these category labels are nominalised (Gelman & Heyman, 1999; Carnaghi, Maas, Gresta, Bianchi et al., 2008) these categories are seen to be less alterable (Gelman & Heyman, 1999) and become even more inductively potent. Indeed, when people essentialize a social category, they tend to use a nominalized label to describe it (Carnaghi et al., 2008).

Another tool is *attributing a natural basis* or a *real*—as opposed to a nominal—*essence* to membership in a social category (Locke, 1689/1975). The folk theory of a natural kind, and especially of a biological kind or species, is that membership of a species is determined by its “blood” or—in modern parlance—by its “genes”. That is, if a being has raccoon genes, no matter what it looks like or no matter what humans do to it by surgical means, it is a raccoon (Keil, 1989). Likewise, a social category that is described to have a genetic basis for its membership is treated as if it were a natural kind with an unchangeable essence. For instance, when people believe gender groups or racial groups having a genetic bases, they tend to regard gender and racial categories as possessing clear boundaries. They believe that gender or racial differences are greater and gender or racial groups are more homogeneous (Martin & Parker, 1995). When groups are described as natural, implying genetic bases, they are attributed more stable and homogeneous characteristics on the basis of their pervasive behavioural patterns (Hoffman & Hurst, 1990). Thus, to speak of the “blood” as a basis of a social category (e.g., “Russian” vs. “Estonian blood”) can act as a
representational tool to invite people to act as if the social category were a natural kind by attributing an essence to the social category.

Essentializing tools can be used for one’s ingroups as well as for outgroups. Either way, essentializers specify and legitimize their relationships with the essentialized by implying the existence of an unalterable essence. In the case of ingroup essentialization, essentializers attempt to define their ingroup and legitimate their group’s existence. In the case of outgroup essentialization, essentializers attempt to define the outgroup in relation to their ingroup, and in so doing, legitimize their treatment of the outgroup. Finally, people do not only passively contemplate their own identity and that of others; instead they actively shape and re-shape their social world according to social change. The issue of “essence dynamics” in ingroup identity construction, the inter-relationship between ingroup identity and outgroup perception and, finally, racism, are dealt with in the next section.

3 Constructing essence

3.1 Groups and identity projects

Whatever the driving force behind group formation might be, self esteem and status attached to a dominant group, action efficiency by collective behaviour, or whatever else one can think of, many people seem to feel an overwhelming desire of social belonging and attachment (Brewer, 1991; Deaux, 1996). The result is that societies are patterned into numerous groups and associations that may or may not play a big role in social life. In the majority of cases these groups are defined by professions, interests, political convictions, leisure time activities, etc. It needs no mention that falling into any of these categories is not imposed but the result of preference and consent; they are chosen social memberships.
Membership in chosen social categories is often signalled by more or less conspicuous attributes. Life styles, sociolects, ways of thinking, of dressing, and of greeting, to name but a few, allow the initiated member and often also the outsider to infer group membership. In the majority of cases the attributes defining a social group are not accidental but the result of an attempt to distinguish members of the ingroup from others. They are the result of social positioning and identity construction (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; Reicher, 2004; Reicher, Cassidy, Wolpert, Hopkins, & Levine, 2006). Groups are maintained as a social unit by group specific interaction patterns that may be face to face communication (McIntyre, Lyons, Clark, Kashima, et al, 2004) and, in the case of larger groups, additionally by mass media. These interaction and communication patterns as well as occasional rituals reflect group specific representations that frequently take the form of an ideological foundation of the group’s reason of existence (Liu & Hilton, 2005).

Social groups exist as long as there are members willing to engage in the labour of identity construction and identity confirmation. Constructing and enacting identity has the implicit purpose of strengthening the bonds between a group’s members as well as to let the group appear as an entity with a reason to exist, an ideology, an agenda, and a series of distinguishing attributes. The attributes of social groups are attributes for a purpose (Bourdieu, 1979; Duveen, 2001; Duveen & Lloyd, 1986). The purpose is to appeal to a certain notion of essence: Their standing as a group is bolstered if they are successful in creating the impression of a shared group-specific essence, particularly if this essence is intended to convey the message of superiority to outsiders.

Good examples are military units, which are keen to maintain an appearance of unity by uniform dress and behavioural drill. Elite military units, like the US-Marine
Corps, explicitly describe the essence underlying membership in those units: The USMC recruitment page comments on the Marine Corps’ motto *Semper Fidelis* (always faithful): “Becoming a Marine is a transformation that cannot be undone, and *Semper Fi* reminds us of that. Once made, a Marine will live forever by the ethics and values of the corps. There is no such thing as an ex-Marine!”

The result of identity projects is the same for members and non-members: representing the group as an intended entity with a sense of unity and a shared background to oneself and to others.

A series of experimental studies show how homogeneity and the degree of group identification go hand in hand. The more members perceive their ingroup as homogeneous—that is, as more entitative—the more they feel attached to it and vice versa, the more they identify with their ingroup, the more they see it as homogeneous (Yzerbyt, Castano, Leyens, & Paladino, 2000; Yzerbyt, Corneille & Estrada, 2001). Ingroup members seem to perceive a high level of homogeneity of their group as attractive because it seems to enhance its efficiency (Castano & Yzerbyt, 1998).

However, this “two-sided causality” (Yzerbyt, et al., 2000, p. 281) from identification to homogeneity and vice versa apparently showing up in experimental studies, is for us a sure sign of a “causality problem” because it violates the definition that cause should precede effect. Instead of conceiving such findings as indicating a contingent “bi-causal” relationship, it indicates a cultural logical (Smedslund, 1979), a representational (Wagner, 1994) and a rational structure (Greve, 2001) that unites ideas about identity, group homogeneity, efficiency, and group goals. In other words, group homogeneity is a desired outcome of identity work by and through essence.

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construction and its enactment in practice, and not the causal effect of some pre-existing identity.

3.2 Forced social categories and the outgroup

Experimental studies on essentializing perception have mostly been done either with arbitrary minimal groups or with existing “chosen” groups, to the exclusion of forced social categories. Although there are certain commonalities with chosen groups, in many cases forced categories do show a distinct dynamics when it comes to identity and group formation.

The example of Estonians and Russians living in Estonia related in the introduction shows an intricate relationship between mutual ascriptions of essence and self-definition based on language and citizenship. Language and citizenship are easily detectable attributes of forced social categories that may be perceived as ranging from natural to cultural. It is a matter of split-seconds to determine whether somebody is a woman or a man, whether somebody is of African, Asian, or Caucasian origin and listening to speech immediately reveals whether somebody pertains to the listener’s maternal language group or not (Hewstone, Hantzi, & Johnston, 1991; Kurzban, Tooby, & Cosmides, 2001). As a rule, forced categories embrace many more individuals than groups with chosen membership, which implies that their members’ feeling of belonging is based rather on long-term tradition, a shared habitus or shared biological body features that are given to them instead of deliberately enacted. Whether the features distinguishing the categories are seen as biological, as in the case of the two sexes or race, or whether they are socially constructed in the course of many generations, as in the case of culture and ethnicities, does not make much difference for the individual. Biology is inescapable and culture is unavoidable
as long as a child lived within its ethnic “ecology” long enough for cultural imprinting to occur. Both appear as a natural given not by “nature’s doings” but by conditions falling outside of an individual’s sphere of influence. Such categories are spontaneously represented as natural kinds or as entities justified by a divine will.

An extensive study by Caroline Howarth (2002) shows how being judged by others impacts on the formation of identity in a forced social category. Brixton is a suburb of London with a mixed African and Caribbean population, which outsiders know as a notorious place of racial turmoil. The author shows how young inhabitants of Brixton convert their negative outside representation into an identity that makes their belonging to a geographic and racial category a group that allows them to collectively resist the essentializing stigma of otherness (Howarth, 2006). These studies highlight the close rapport between outgroup and ingroup representations where a group’s identity project is triggered and directed by the outgroup’s derogation.

3.3 Racism and prejudice

Despite overwhelming biological evidence showing that apparent differences between geographically defined human subgroups are no more than “skin deep” (e.g. Wells, 2007), a considerable number of people around the world continue to believe in the behaviourial importance and „value“ of races (Gil-White, 2001) and racism drives a great number of ethnic conflicts around the world. On one hand thinking in terms of “race” seems to be a spontaneous and widespread human characteristic that can be found in all historic periods and in all regions. On the other hand, racial conflicts and racial thinking always occurs before the background of certain historical cultural and societal conditions. Especially the justification of power differences between ethnic
groups which, by the way of racial thinking are being naturalized and thereby legitimized (Hirschfeld, 1996).

Being a way of categorizing humanity into distinct natural groups, racial thinking is thinking in deeply essentialized terms. Taking physical features such as skin colour as indicating an underlying essence that simultaneously allows inferring other traits and forms of behaviour, is an easy cognitive feat: For example, in south Asian cultures (e.g. in the Indian caste system: Mahalingam, 2003) and among children to the age of 3 a person’s occupation allows to infer an intrinsic essence which is stable and immutable over the lifetime and which is passed from parents to their children. Children in the West skip the concept of occupation as an essentialized feature by the age of five (Hirschfeld, 1995). Racially constructed natural kinds and taking physical features of humans to infer an underlying biological essence that is causally related to a person’s character become prominent at this age and continue to shape, for example, Western adults’ self-ascription of self-control as opposed to Black people (Joffe & Staerklé, 2007). Obviously, our folk-biology and folk-sociology results from a complex interplay between universal cognitive processes that provide the distinction between categories and cultural and historical factors that provide their evaluative status.

A more dramatic expression of essentialized thinking with regard to ethnicity, race, immigration and genocide as well as sexual orientation, pornography and disability are dehumanization (Haslam, 2006) and delegitimization (Bar-Tal, 1997). Attributing non-humanness to disliked outgroups serves to justify “sanctioned massacres” like the Nazi Holocaust or the My Lai massacre committed by a US-unit during the Vietnam War (Kelman, 1976). Kelman’s concept found a continuation in Bandura’s works on moral disengagement where the author emphasizes the role of
dehumanization in the justification of inhumanity (Bandura, 2002). Such tendencies are instigated, made possible and maintained by ideological factors and social myths (Billig, 2002; Tajfel, 1984; Wetherell & Potter, 1992).

It should be noted that neither Kelman, nor Bandura employ the term essentialism in their models. However, by referring to the concept of “human nature” as guiding those ideologies implies that there is something invisible which all normal human beings have in common and which causes them to be human: that is, a kind of human essence. This argument was taken up in the concept of “infra-humanization” and the emotional side of prejudice (Leyens, Paladino, Rodriguez-Torres, Vaes, et al, 2000). The researchers found that people commonly attribute more uniquely human “secondary”—that is: complex—emotions like for example love and embarrassment to ingroup members than to outgroup members, but equally attribute primary emotions that we share with other animals like anger or amusement. Infra-humanization occurs in the perception of high and low status groups and even in the absence of conflict. It can be prevented, when the target is individualized by addressing him or her with a complete name. Human essence in this context is “…the ‘something’ necessary at the time to be part of humanity […] This ‘something’ may be language, biology, religion, etc.” (Leyens, Cortes, Demoulin, Dovidio, et al, 2003).

A study of extreme right-wing internet postings shows a particularly strong example of biologically based essentialism (Holtz & Wagner, forthcoming). The discourse developing in the postings shows a strong tendency to essentialize the categories of Jews and Africans/Blacks and to ascribe them immutable attributes, an essence, that effectively make them “natural kinds”. The group of Jews appears as a kind of their own with super-human powers and influence that is an outcome of their group’s essence. Africans and Blacks are despised, firstly, because—even with
German citizenship—their African origin prohibits them to be labelled as Germans due to their incompatible essence, and secondly to procreate with Whites. Such procreation produces “bastards”—or “monsters”—that the posters meet with disgust. Procreation between different “natural kinds” appears impossible due to their incompatible essences that make the offspring a hybrid without “natural” identity. Consequently, Brazilians tend to attribute the often lamentable state of their public life to their being “racially mixed” (Jovchelovitch, 2000). Very similar effects with genetically mixed animal kind exemplars being perceived as impure have been shown for adults in general (Wagner, Kronberger, Berg, & Torgersen, 2006; Wagner, Kronberger, Nagata, & Sen, 2007).

Essentializing social categories and personality traits comes in degrees and results in two essence-related effects: naturalization and entitativity: Attributing discreteness, naturalness, immutability, stability, and necessity make the target being perceived as a natural kind such as race and gender and applies to forced social categories. Perceiving uniformity, informativeness, inherence, and exclusivity tend to make the target group to a unitary entity such as homosexual, religious, and political groups. This applies to groups where membership is thought to be freely chosen (Demoulin, Leyens, & Yzerbyt, 2006; Haslam, et al, 2005; Haslam, Bastian, & Bissett, 2004). In both cases, the social categories are being essentialized in the general sense that beyond superficial differences group members are basically the same according to some deeply embedded characteristic (Demoulin, et al., 2006, p. 36).
4 Negotiating change

So far we have shown that essentialist ways of thinking underlie not only simple outgroup stereotyping (Allport, 1954), but also identity construction for one’s own ingroup irrespective of its membership being chosen or forced. However, motivated by wider societal and historical developments, there have also always been groups engaged in discourses that attempt to change cultural patterns of perception and received social order. Essentialized identities can become a boon or a bane, depending on political conditions that either foster or hamper a group’s standing relative to others.

Societies are no static units but subject to change and so are mentalities, ideologies, and representational systems. While groups of chosen membership frequently tend to naturalize their reason of existence, it is sometimes politically advantageous to denaturalize what was forced upon individuals by birth. Hence, the relative stability of natural categories does not preclude that they are the result of discursive construction in the long run and that they might undergo change in the course of history and societal development.

One of the more prominent changes being driven by a vociferous political movement in modern times is feminism. This movement has the goal to introduce equality between men and women on all socially relevant levels. It faces an age old representation of men and women being naturally different not only in biology but also in mentality, behaviour preferences, and identity, in fact being two different natural kinds. The movement is engaged in replacing this representation with the representation of a socially defined system of gender differences, which would allow women and men to indiscriminately occupy all social roles and professions in society.
on equal terms. In this case societal progress is seen in de-essentializing a presently natural category.

In their struggle, large parts of the feminist movement engage in heated debates about the role of essence versus constructionism in their theorizing that perfectly highlights the political consequences of essentializing or de-essentializing the social category of women (Fuss, 1989; Irigaray, 1974; Mahalingam & Leu, 2005; Wittig, 1981). In these discourses it becomes clear that projecting or self-attributing essence to a category or social group has severe political consequences. On one hand it impedes social change particularly in favour of groups whose members want to shed perceived discrimination, on the other hand it is pivotal of one wants to create groups, to give them identity and visibility in political struggles (e.g. Bjornsdottir & Kristmundsdottir, 1995). This tension between perceived essence as an impediment and essence as a representational tool underlines the centrality that this notion seems to be deeply ingrained in humankind’s intuitive cognitive functioning; it can hardly be overcome, as Fuss (1989, p. 2) states: “Essentialism emerges perhaps most strongly within the very discourse of feminism, a discourse which presumes upon the unity of its object of inquiry (women) even when it is at pains to demonstrate the differences within this admittedly generalizing and imprecise category.”

Similar to the aforementioned example, recent politics in the USA campaigned in favour of using the “politically correct” term “African American” instead of the term “Black”. By referring to geographic origins instead of skin colour the proponents of this movement attempted to denaturalize the public representation of a part of the population (Philogène, 1999). By doing so, the essence of ethnic or geographic origin returns through the backdoor and replaces the supposedly naturalizing essence of “race”.
Another case in point is aristocracy and its abolishment or decline in various parts of Europe. Traditionally, the self-representation of nobility and its outgroup representation converge in attributing this category of people an exceptional position in society. It encompasses political dominance, wealth, elitism, distinguished manners and separation from the general population. The core of this representation is the belief in “blue blood” being shared among such European dynasties, where blue blood is just another term for essence and relationship by common descent, the consequences of which attracted some scientific interest at the beginning of the 20th century (e.g. Woods, 1928, 1936). It was only a matter of time until aristocracy, which exercised its power “if not with brutality at least with a good deal of ‘graceful and complacent callousness’” (Johnston, 1972/1983, p. 43), and its blood-related and feudal self-definition collided with the evolution of democratic rule and human equality.

In Austria, for example, the emperor of Austro-Hungary, Charles I abdicated on the same day as the armistice ended WWI and a democratic republic was formed 1920. In the course of these events not only the monarchy was abolished but also aristocracy and the use of aristocratic titles became prohibited by constitution. Since the 19th century republican politics, hence, attempted to de-essentialize this category of people, while aristocracy’s representatives tried to maintain their traditional image as being essentially different from common man; and with some success as testified by the un-ending reporting in the yellow media. The ways of achieving this were different in various parts of Europe, but the goal was the same: for example, by replacing nobility by blood through so-called state elites in France (cf. Charle, 1997; Doyle, 2007), by maintaining a remarkable degree of homogamy as in Germany or by more exogamy in an attempt to merge feudal and post-feudal nobility as in the
Netherlands (Dronkers, 2008), by cultivating a strong tradition of collective memory as in Germany (Funck, Malinowski, Confino, & Fritzsche, 2002), or by taking up the modern nationalist cause that originally was not part of feudal interest as in Bohemia during the first half of the 19th century (Reznik, 2008). Most of these attempts were at least successful, if not in maintaining the spirit of blue-bloodedness, then in replacing the essence of biological descent by the essence of money and wealth (Dronkers, 2008; Mahalingam, 2003).

An opposite interest in representational change can be seen in certain circles of gay men and lesbian women. Their movement faces a widespread representation of homosexuality being a chosen sexual preference that stands in the way of achieving full equality before the law in terms of marriage and child adoption. There have been findings of genetic correlates of homosexuality that were eagerly taken up by parts of the movement with the aim of representing gay people as being forced to their sexual behaviour by nature instead of by personal preference (e.g. Bailey, Pillard, Dawood, Miller, et al., 1999; Conrad & Markens, 2001; Epstein, 1987). These examples illustrate that the definition of what can be considered as imposed and what as chosen is in constant flux in societies and subject to discursive negotiation.

It becomes clear from these examples that social and political struggles to some extent are being fuelled by the back and forth of the groups’ self-definition, the ascription of essentialized identities to outgroups, and the politically opportune changes in these definitions and identities when required or enforced by the historical situation. In these struggles essentialist thinking is the invisible hand that guides everyday judgments for, or against naturalizing representations of social groups. In contemporary history in particular we observe an outspoken and strong tendency to de-naturalize, that is to de-essentialize social categories that lead to impressive
symbolic and political exercises without, at the end, being able to abolish the core of essentialist thinking. Despite international efforts to endow “all members of the human family” with the essence of “reason and conscience” and “inalienable rights”—as expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—mental segregation re-occurs in yet different guises (cf. Liu & Mills, 2006; Wetherell & Potter, 1992).

5 Psychological essentialism: Whence and whither

Representations of groups are always and necessarily embedded in the wider cultural system of local meanings and social relationships. Cultural meaning systems, as we know, have a remarkable inertia that is maintained by communication on the interpersonal and mass-media level. There is, for example, a strong tendency in interpersonal communication about groups to maintain and even increase cultural stereotypes (Kashima, 2000; Lyons & Kashima, 2001). The longer a chain of communication is, the more stereotype inconsistent content is being withered out and stereotype consistent information retained, leading to a relatively stable representational system over time (McIntyre, et al., 2004). A crucial and, in the present context, relevant effect of communication chains and networks is the tendency of communicators to perceive an increased entitativity of groups and homogeneity among their members (Kashima, Kashima, Bain, Lyons, et al, in press; Kashima, 2004). It appears that at least a part of essentialization processes happen as a by-product of language use and stereotype maintaining communication. One may presume that languages differ with regard to their essentializing power, such that languages with a strong emphasis on substantival speech are more prone to this effect than languages with an emphasis on the verb; or cultures where groups are addressed
in singular might be more prone than cultures where groups and categories are addressed in plural, hence speaking about a plurality of members instead of a unitary group. To our knowledge this remains an open question.

While we accept that a general tendency towards essentializing may be an unavoidable side-effect of language use per se, we think our foregoing sections have shown that there is often a political interest involved, and equally, a lack of attention in language use. This addresses the question of the where-and-to-what-purpose do people essentialize. As an instrument to naturalize attributes of groups and social categories and thereby homogenizing the individual variability of their members essentialized representations imply stability and status quo. What appears as more stable and immutable to the occasional observer than nature? Hence, representing social categories as natural and endowed with an unalienable essence makes them largely immutable attributes its members a unique identity. Neither the term “natural” nor the term “essence” can be thought of independent of the other; being natural implies having an essence by necessity in the eyes of the perceiver.

We can be pretty sure that essentializing strategies applied in a group’s identity project are meant to enhance the standing, power and social value of the group. Homogeneous groups are the intended constructions of social actors where members as much as non-members participate in a process of confirming the group’s representation irrespective of whether outsiders accept or challenge the group’s existence. Social groups are not contingent but necessary given the respective status of a social system (Reicher, Haslam, Postmes, & Jetten, 2006). This co-construction of social categories does indeed signal that the group is an entity, a unit that sets itself apart from others, and that exhibits uniformity, informativeness, inherence and exclusivity, that is exactly those attributes that define entitative groups; this
entitativity is not a passive perceptual feature as insinuated in experimental studies, but first and foremost intended and perceived as such from the outside.

On one hand, naturalization legitimizes a category’s standing in society as we know from the example of aristocracy. On the other hand naturalizing a social category in terms of stigma and deprecative status legitimizes exclusion, discrimination and inequality of its members; it embodies the difference and fosters stigmatization (Howarth, 2006). Assigning the members of a social category a “natural” status comes with a host of symbolic and behavioural consequences: Nature, as opposed to culture, is truculent and barely controllable (Joffe & Staerklé, 2007); a “natural” difference cannot be done away with by education. Educating the naturally different appears as a moot exercise and leads to educational disadvantages, for example in the case of race (Crozier, 2005). These consequences can be negative for the essentialized outgroup as in the case of ethnic or racial non-dominant minorities or positive, as in the case of aristocracy as long as its members constitute a dominant minority in some countries. When children problematize the stigma of skin colour as being not the fault of the bearers (Howarth, 2007), they highlight the volatility and discursive character of essences, allowing to hope for a more enlightened societal discourse about groups and essences in the future.

6 Conclusion

Identities of, and stereotypes about groups are not a constant as we showed in the foregoing sections. Depending on the political interests of the involved groups and their members, essentializing the auto- and hetero-representations may appear as attractive or as obstructive. In every case, however, the concept of essence being
employed or contested is represented as a naturalizing label and in its cognitive consequences is akin to Plato’s *ousia*.

The history of violent conflict between groups and nations is replete with political rhetoric bearing on projecting essence and “nature” onto the opponent group, and justificatory discourse about socio-political structure and group dominance is ubiquitous. As an epistemic device, essentialism simplifies the social world in reducing ambiguity and providing easy cognitive closure (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Keller & Bless, 2004). Studying prejudice without taking account of the political interests and of the representations underlying essentialist judgments is in danger of missing the social dynamics that is at the core of rhetoric, thinking and group formation (Billig & Sabucedo, 1990). The particular efficiency of a naturalizing rhetoric in politics would not work, however, if there were no widespread cognitive tendency in the human mind that the rhetoric can appeal to. However, even if essentialization plays such a central role in our everyday understanding there may be ways of overcoming its derogatory effects in stereotyping. This will be a matter of everybody’s insight into language use and the often illegitimate inferences drawn from labels and names.
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