CHAPTER SIX

The development and consequences of moral essentialism

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Contents

Abstract

Children report that many natural kinds, social groups, and psychological characteristics arise from an innate, internal "essence" that is rooted in biology and remains stable over time. These perceptions persist into adulthood, albeit often in weakened form. This chapter argues that in addition to the domains previously examined in the essentialism literature, children—and to some extent adults—also view moral characteristics in essentialist terms. This form of essentialism has important social consequences, including in the area of prosocial behavior and in the legal domain. The body of evidence reviewed here suggests that children's and adults' moral judgments depend not just on what people *do* but also on perceptions of who those people *are*, i.e., whether they are people of good or bad moral character.
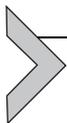
1. Introduction

If you are a child growing up in the United States, villains turn out to be nearly everywhere you look, at least while you are looking at books or television screens. You could observe the evil stepmothers in Cinderella,

Snow White, and an assortment of other stories that do not seem to favor men remarrying. You could also turn to witches who make it always winter, never Christmas (in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*) or who want to get you and your little dog too (in *The Wizard of Oz*). You could be taken by the antics of Gaston, who ceaselessly harasses Belle in *Beauty in the Beast*. Or you could simply turn to *101 Dalmatians*, which helpfully identifies the cruel devil of a villain by naming her Cruella De Ville.

These movies, and many others, present a clear-cut universe where one set of people is good and another set is bad. No one is confused about which person belongs to which group, and people do not go wandering from one group to the other. There is just something about bad people that makes them bad, and they stay that way forever.

Although neither filmmakers nor children are likely to use this term to describe what is occurring on the screen, villains are represented in an *essentialist* way. Essentialism refers to the view that some characteristics form a central component of a person's identity. Those characteristics make that person a particular type of person, distinct from other types of people (Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000; Medin & Ortony, 1989; Rothbart & Taylor, 1992). If those characteristics changed, that person would become someone else entirely (Christy, Schlegel, & Cimpian, 2019; De Freitas, Tobia, Newman, & Knobe, 2017; Heiphetz, Strohminger, & Young, 2017). Often, essentialized characteristics are also viewed as rooted in biology and unchanging over time (Gelman, 2003).

To date, the psychological literature has largely emphasized domains that need not be morally relevant. Both children and adults apply an essentialist lens to their understanding of natural kinds, such as species (Gelman & Wellman, 1991; Sousa, Atran, & Medin, 2002; though see Kalish, 2002, for an alternate view); social groups, such as race and gender (Diesendruck & Haber, 2009; Jayaratne et al., 2006; Pauker, Xu, Williams, & Biddle, 2016; Prentice & Miller, 2006); and psychological characteristics, such as shyness and curiosity (Gelman, Heyman, & Legare, 2007; Haslam, Bastian, & Bissett, 2004).

Although essentialism has emerged in each of these domains, it is typically strongest during the preschool and early elementary school years, with explicit reports of essentialism decreasing across development (Cimpian & Steinberg, 2014; Feeney, Dautel, Phillips, Leffers, & Coley, 2020, this volume; Heiphetz, Gelman, & Young, 2017; Taylor, Rhodes, & Gelman, 2009). This general pattern can vary somewhat across categories. For instance, one study (Diesendruck, Birnbaum, Deeb, & Segall, 2013) tested kindergarteners, second graders, and sixth graders.

Children learned about an adult with two characteristics and two children, each of whom shared only one characteristic with the adult. Subsequently, participants indicated which of the children grew into the adult. For instance, participants learned about a fat Arab man, a fat Jewish boy, and a thin Arab boy, and indicated which of the two boys grew into the man. Kindergartners did not appear to view any categories in more essentialist terms than any other categories. However, second and sixth graders privileged ethnicity (e.g., they reported more often than would be expected by chance that the thin Arab boy rather than the fat Jewish boy grew into the fat Arab man) and social status (e.g., they reported more often than would be expected by chance that a child who was thin and rich, rather than a child who was fat and poor, would grow into an adult who was fat and rich). In other words, older children in this study viewed ethnicity and social status as more likely to be inherited than did younger children. Using a similar paradigm, Kinzler and Dautel (2012) showed that 9- to 10-year-old White American children viewed race as more heritable than language (e.g., they reported more often than would be expected by chance that a White English speaking child, rather than a Black French speaking child, would grow into a White French speaking adult). In contrast, 5- to 6-year-old White American children exhibited the opposite view; they perceived language as more heritable than race. Of course, in such a forced-choice study, any significant result indicating an increase in essentialism regarding one category necessitates a decrease in essentialism regarding the contrasting category. Nevertheless, these studies importantly point to *which* categories are perceived in more vs less essentialist terms across age.

Research on children's and adults' essentialist perceptions, including all of the work described in this chapter, does not claim that there actually exist biological, unchanging essences that determine what type of person someone is. Indeed, essentialist claims are often scientifically inaccurate (Rhodes & Mandalaywala, 2017). Nevertheless, they are psychologically powerful. Viewing race in essentialist terms leads to greater acceptance of racial inequality (Williams & Eberhardt, 2008), and viewing gender in essentialist terms increases gender stereotyping (Brescoll & LaFrance, 2004). In a developmental line of work, children who were led to essentialize a novel group subsequently shared fewer resources with members of that group than did children who were not led to view that group in essentialist terms (Rhodes, Leslie, Saunders, Dunham, & Cimpian, 2018). Understanding essentialism can shed light on these consequences. For instance, providing individuals with information counteracting essentialism can reduce

prejudice (Williams & Eberhardt, 2008)—an intervention that would not have been developed if psychologists only studied domains where people's judgments accurately reflect reality.

Several important reviews have discussed essentialism in the areas where it is most typically studied—natural kinds, social groups, and psychological characteristics (e.g., Dar-Nimrod & Heine, 2011; Prentice & Miller, 2007). The goal of the current chapter is to synthesize research on essentialism regarding moral characteristics, about which psychologists know less. By bringing together the currently existing work, this chapter aims to build a coherent narrative of moral essentialism and stimulate future work in this area.
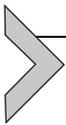
2. Moral essentialism in childhood and adulthood

The extant literature on moral cognition typically focuses on moral *behavior*, asking participants whether particular actions are good or bad, right or wrong (e.g., Conway, Goldstein-Greenwood, Polacek, & Greene, 2018; Dahl & Kim, 2014; Gray, Schein, & Ward, 2014; Hannikainen, Mauchery, & Cushman, 2018; Heiphetz, Spelke, & Young, 2015; Killen, Mulvey, Richardson, Jampol, & Woodward, 2011; Nichols, 2002). However, recent theories suggest that laypeople's moral judgments often focus on *character* (Uhlmann, Pizarro, & Diermeier, 2015). For instance, individuals often condemn harmless acts that nevertheless serve as a cue to poor moral character, such as financial crimes whose cost is relatively minor (Tannenbaum, Uhlmann, & Diermeier, 2011). Even when the ultimate decision is held constant, participants evaluate people who make immoral decisions quickly more harshly than people who make identical decisions more slowly, arguably because quick decisions provide a better cue to immoral character (Critcher, Inbar, & Pizarro, 2013).

Indeed, information about moral character appears more central to social judgment than information about other types of characteristics. In one study (Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014), adults rated a number of targets (e.g., a close friend, Barack Obama) on traits related to morality and warmth, another characteristic that prior research has emphasized as being important to evaluations of other people (e.g., Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). Participants also indicated their overall impression of each target. The main finding showed that morality trait ratings predicted overall impressions better than did warmth trait ratings. In a follow-up study, Goodwin et al. (2014) found that obituaries conveyed information about the moral character of the

person who had died to a greater extent than they communicated information about his or her warmth. Furthermore, the overall impression that readers formed of the person who had died after reading the obituaries was more strongly related to the morality-related content than to the warmth-related content. Because essentialist views about morality posit the existence of an internal, unchanging "essence" that underlies morally relevant behaviors, the framework of essentialism can provide greater insight into the ways in which moral judgments are based not just on morally relevant behaviors but also on perceptions of the people who perform those behaviors.

Some early work suggested that children do not make trait inferences until around age seven or later (Livesley & Bromley, 1973; Peevers & Secord, 1973; Rholes & Ruble, 1984). For instance, Rholes and Ruble (1984) compared 5- to 6-year-olds and 9- to 10-year-olds. Children heard short vignettes depicting behaviors, such as a story about a child who shared part of her lunch with a peer who had nothing to eat. They then indicated their expectations for how the character would behave in future situations relevant to the demonstrated trait. In the example above, participants answered whether the character would behave generously in the future (e.g., whether she would spend all of her play time helping another child perform a chore). Older children were more likely than younger children to report consistent behaviors (e.g., that a child who shared with a hungry peer would also behave generously with her time by helping a different peer perform a chore). Results such as these have been interpreted as indicating that younger children are less likely than older children to make a trait-based inference. Here, for instance, younger children appeared less likely to form the impression that the character was "generous" and use this impression to conclude that the character would therefore behave generously across a variety of situations.

If younger children do, indeed, experience difficulty drawing trait-based inferences, then they would not be expected to view morality in an essentialist way because they would not understand morally relevant behaviors as arising from internal, unchanging characteristics. However, more recent work using less complex methodologies has shown that even young children make trait inferences (see Heyman, 2009, for a review). For instance, children as young as four years old predict future behaviors on the basis of trait labels, despite the fact that they do not always predict future behaviors on the basis of past behaviors (Liu, Gelman, & Wellman, 2007). In this case, providing the label (e.g., "smart") may simplify the task for children, whereas

describing a past behavior (e.g., performing well on an exam) in the absence of a label may make the task more difficult.

These trait inferences extend to moral traits. In one project, children in elementary school reported that a change to moral characteristics—particularly moral beliefs that are shared with most other people, such as whether or not it is okay to hurt another person for no reason—would lead to greater changes in identity than changes to characteristics that were not morally relevant, such as preferences (Heiphetz, Strohminger, Gelman, & Young, 2018). In a separate line of work, children in elementary school completed a switched-at-birth task in which they learned about a baby who was birthed by one mother but subsequently raised by a different mother. Here, children predicted that targets would share the moral characteristics of their birth parent rather than their adoptive parent, despite lacking any social interaction with the birth parent (Heyman & Gelman, 2000). In a third series of studies, children as young as kindergarten age predicted that characters' future behaviors would match the valence of past behaviors (e.g., that a character who had behaved antisocially would continue to do so; Cain, Heyman, & Walker, 1997; Heller & Berndt, 1981). Children in these studies may have attributed the initial behavior to an antisocial "character" or "essence" that would cause the person to perform additional antisocial behaviors as well. Taken together, these studies indicate that children apply various components of essentialist thought (e.g., the notion that the relevant characteristic is central to identity, rooted in biology, and unchanging over time) to morality.

Although children appear to view moral characteristics in an essentialist way, they also appear to distinguish between differently valenced moral characteristics. Specifically, they typically view morally good characteristics in more essentialist terms than morally bad characteristics. For instance, in one study, children indicated which characteristics would transfer from donor to recipient in the case of a heart transplant. Four- to five-year-olds expected positive characteristics, such as niceness, to transfer more than negative characteristics, such as meanness (Meyer, Gelman, Roberts, & Leslie, 2017). In other words, preschoolers judged that positive characteristics were more connected to an internal, biological source (the heart) than were negative characteristics. In another study, children in elementary school viewed prosocial behaviors as more stable over time than anti-social behaviors (Heyman & Dweck, 1998). In a third line of work, 5- to 8-year-olds (as well as adults, in this project) were more likely to endorse essentialist views of moral goodness than of moral badness (Heiphetz, 2019).

This research is consistent with studies showing that children tend to be optimistic even in domains that are not morally relevant. For instance, 5- to 6-year-olds are more likely than older participants to expect negative characteristics, such as having poor vision or being a poor learner, to change over time; however, 5- to 6-year-olds, like older children and adults, expect positive traits to persist across a person's lifetime (Lockhart, Nakashima, Inagaki, & Keil, 2008; see also Boseovski, 2010; Diesendruck & Lindenbaum, 2009; Lockhart, Chang, & Story, 2002).

Although research on moral cognition often asks participants to judge behaviors, emerging evidence suggests that people may also attend to the internal characteristics of the people who perform those behaviors. Early evidence suggested that internally focused evaluations may be limited to older children and adults, as younger children appeared to experience difficulty drawing inferences based on internal traits. However, more recent research has shown that even children in early elementary school draw trait-based inferences under some circumstances (e.g., when the researcher explicitly provides the relevant label, such as referring to a particular person as "smart" or "good"). Of most relevance to work on moral essentialism, recent work at the intersection of cognitive development and moral psychology has suggested that even preschoolers and children in elementary school view morality in an essentialist way. In particular, children are especially likely to view moral *goodness* as arising from an internal, unchanging, biological "essence" that constitutes a person's identity.

Of course, moral essentialism does not constitute an isolated cognitive phenomenon. Rather, it is possible to ask both about its antecedents (e.g., what processes might give rise to essentialism regarding morality) and its consequences. Several possible answers to these questions are described below.
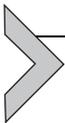
3. Why does moral essentialism occur?

Having obtained some evidence that children and adults view moral characteristics in essentialist terms, perhaps the next logical question for researchers is *why* this phenomenon might occur. At least two broad theoretical perspectives offer insight into this question: cognitive development and social learning.

From a cognitive developmental perspective, several scholars (e.g., Eidson & Coley, 2014; Gelman, 2003; Gil-White, 2001) have conceptualized essentialism as a cognitive bias or predisposition. A portion of the argument can be summarized as follows: Across evolutionary time, the

propensity to make essentialist attributions can offer advantages. For instance, suppose a person wandering in the wild comes upon an albino tiger. An essentialist understanding of tigers posits that they have an internal "essence" that makes them tigers regardless of their external appearance. Thus, a person with an essentialist view is likely to hide, run away, or take other steps to avoid the tiger, fearing that the tiger will harm her. A person whose understanding of tigers is based more on external properties such as the color of their fur may not appropriately categorize the albino tiger, fail to avoid him, and die. Because essentialism conferred an advantage, it may survive now as a predisposition to make internal, essence-based attributions. (Despite these advantages, essentialism can also have drawbacks, such as those reviewed later in this chapter.)

This predisposition to draw essentialist inferences may function as a default way of viewing a number of different characteristics. In other words, children may readily apply an essentialist framework to their understanding of the world around them. As they grow into adults, however, they may learn additional information that contradicts their essentialist intuitions, such as information about the important role that social learning and environmental influences can play in shaping many human characteristics. Adults may report less essentialism than do children because they have learned about such influences. However, some evidence suggests that initial essentialist intuitions persist at an implicit or unconscious level. For instance, adults show greater levels of gender essentialism when they are required to respond quickly as compared to conditions in which they can take their time and carefully consider their response (Eidson & Coley, 2014). Such evidence suggests that adults may harbor essentialist intuitions that they override when providing responses to which they have been able to give some thought. When their ability to think carefully about their answer is reduced (e.g., by requiring extremely fast answers that do not allow time for reflection), adults' essentialist intuitions come through to a greater extent.

According to this cognitive developmental account, essentialism is not specific to a particular domain, such as morality. Rather, it is expected to be pervasive across domains (Dar-Nimrod & Heine, 2011; Gelman, 2003; Medin & Ortony, 1989). However, a priori, morality could have been considered a potential boundary condition for this account. Starting relatively early in development, children can observe others—and themselves—behaving more morally in some situations than in others. They may notice that their sister hugged them in the morning and called them a mean name that afternoon, or that a classmate shared their snack

on Monday but not on Tuesday, or that they themselves shared their toys with one friend but not a different one. This evidence could counteract essentialism by suggesting that morality is variable across contexts and is not immutable. Further, individuals may have evidence that morality is not inherited. For example, children may hear their playmates' parents tell those playmates to share, an instance of the parent endorsing a moral belief (that sharing is good) that is apparently not held by their offspring. In this example, parents may even give their child's friend a different toy to play with; in other words, parents may share when their own children refuse to do so. Such differences between parents and their children could indicate to observers that morality is not inherited. Adults' explicit teaching of moral norms (e.g., parents and teachers telling children to share) can provide further evidence that morality is learned from others and does not arise from an internal source. Nevertheless, as demonstrated in the section above, individuals do view morality in essentialist terms. Moral essentialism can therefore provide particularly compelling evidence for the notion that essentialism may be a pervasive approach to understanding the world in general rather than a specific cognitive strategy limited to understanding a particular domain.

Nevertheless, the cognitive developmental account is not the only plausible explanation for moral essentialism. Another theoretical perspective, the social learning account, highlights the importance of social interaction in teaching essentialist perspectives. In line with this account, some evidence suggests that parents' speech is associated with their children's essentialism (see Ritchie & Knobe, 2020, this volume, for a theoretical perspective on connections between language and essentialism). In one study (Segall, Birnbaum, Deeb, & Diesendruck, 2015), researchers coded interactions in which Jewish Israeli parents read a book about Jewish and Arab characters to their 5-year-old children. The ways in which parents spontaneously discussed the characters in the story, particularly the Arab characters, predicted their children's essentialism about Jews and Arabs. Specifically, the more parents explicitly labeled categories (e.g., used the word "Arab") and made generic statements referencing the category as a whole (e.g., "Arabs do X") as opposed to specific statements about individuals (e.g., "this Arab is doing X"), the more essentialism their children exhibited.

Additional research has demonstrated causal links between both factors tested by Segall et al. (2015)—category labels and generic language—and essentialism. For instance, in one study (Gelman & Heyman, 1999), 5- and 7-year-olds heard information about another person presented with

category labels (e.g., "she is a carrot-eater") or without such labels (e.g., "she eats carrots whenever she can"). Children perceived characteristics as more stable after hearing noun labels than after hearing the same characteristic described without such labels. In another study (Rhodes, Leslie, & Tworek, 2012), adults read storybooks that manipulated the use of generic vs specific language about a novel group. For instance, some storybooks noted that "Zarpies are scared of ladybugs" (generic condition) while others stated that "this Zarpie is scared of the ladybug" (specific condition). Children who heard generic statements about Zarpies subsequently viewed this group in a more essentialist way than did children who heard specific statements.

This evidence supports the social learning account by showing that social input can shape the emergence of essentialism. Indeed, in the studies discussed above, adults did not need to teach essentialism explicitly. They did not need to say that Arabs and Jews are different sorts of people with different "essences" or that a carrot-eater would always eat carrots or that Zarpies have always been scared of ladybugs. The use of subtle linguistic markers, such as category labels and generic language, was sufficient to increase children's essentialism.

Although this work has not focused on examining moral essentialism directly, children in the United States are likely exposed both to category labels and to generic language about moral characteristics. As discussed in the introduction, children's media often portray "good" and "bad" characters without questioning why they have those moral characteristics, implying that something inside of the character creates "goodness" or "badness" and that the moral characteristic will never change. Children readily learn from fictional stories (Larsen, Lee, & Ganea, 2018; Walker & Lombrozo, 2017); thus, such messages in a fictional context could increase essentialism toward actual people. Further, children may hear generic statements about what "good" and "bad" people do. For instance, envision a parent trying to explain what prison is to a young child who has just heard this word from a news report. The parent may say something like "bad people go to prison" as a way to simplify a complex phenomenon. Parents who use this type of phrasing may also be seeking to reassure their children and help them understand the difference between different types of punishment; they may worry that an explanation like "people go to prison when they break rules that grown-ups make" will communicate that the child herself will go to prison if she breaks a rule. Parents and teachers may also use morally laden normative generics—generic statements that

may appear inaccurate but that seek to communicate norms and influence behaviors rather than to make descriptive claims about the world. The claim that "boys don't cry" is a normative generic: it is false, and in fact is sometimes spoken to a boy who is currently crying, thereby demonstrating its falseness immediately. At the same time, both speaker and listener typically understand that the speaker's goal is to make a normative statement (boys shouldn't cry) rather than a descriptive one. In the domain of morality, a teacher may say that "good kids share" or "good children help others," thereby potentially communicating essentialist notions of morality to children.

Work on the role that linguistic cues play in essentialism supports the social learning account at a micro level, by showing that children may learn to express essentialism based on the language they hear during interpersonal interactions. Additional research at the intersection of developmental psychology and cultural psychology supports the social learning account at a macro level by showing that cultural input can shape essentialism (Pauker, Tai, & Ansari, 2020, this volume). This research has found evidence of essentialism in diverse cultures; however, the categories that elicit essentialism, and the specific essentialist inferences that people make, vary across cultures. For instance, across various communities, both children and adults perceive animals' behavioral and physical properties as inherited. However, members of different cultural groups differ in their perceptions of how the inheritance works. In one line of work supporting this claim, Native American children and non-Native American children both viewed animal properties in an essentialist way, but Native American children were more likely than their non-Native counterparts to view the biological essence as contained in and transmitted through blood (Waxman, Medin, & Ross, 2007). Within one broader culture, members of different subcultures may also differ. For instance, in India, Brahmins hold asymmetrically essentialist views of social class; they are more likely to report that transferring a brain from a rich person to a poor person will affect the poor person's actions than that a change in the opposite direction (transferring a brain from a poor person to a rich person) will affect behavior. In contrast, Dalits do not show this asymmetry (Mahalingam, 2003). In the United States, Jewish adults sometimes exhibit more essentialist views of religion than do Christian adults (Chalik, Leslie, & Rhodes, 2017). Socio-cultural input may also shape the emergence and expression of moral essentialism. Although past work has not focused on this question, it remains a fruitful avenue for future research (see "Directions for Future Research," below).

Consistent with the social learning account is the proposal that essential-ism may be motivated (Diesendruck, 2020, this volume). People may learn essentialism from others, but they may also be motivated to continue using an essentialist framework for some groups and not others. In the context of morality, essentialism may permit individuals to feel good about themselves by creating social distance between themselves (presumably perceived as "good people") and others perceived as "bad people." One prediction that flows from this perspective is that moral essentialism may co-occur with moral threats. In other words, individuals may be particularly likely to view others as having "bad" essences immediately after transgressing or remem-bering a past transgression. Appeasing this type of moral threat—for instance, by giving people the opportunity to behave morally or reminding them of their past moral behaviors—may also decrease the extent to which they view "bad" people in essentialist terms.

As can be seen from the work reviewed in this section, research has uncovered evidence both for the cognitive developmental account and for the social learning account. These accounts need not be in competition with each other. Instead, it may be the case that the processes described by each account jointly contribute to the emergence of essentialism. Subtle lin-guistic cues may be particularly effective at increasing essentialism because children are already predisposed to view the world through an essentialist lens, and category labels as well as generic language could strengthen essen-tialist intuitions. If children were predisposed to attribute human character-istics to external causes, such cues may not be sufficient to shift their thinking toward a more essentialist approach. However, if a predisposition toward essentialism exists, the language children hear from others could reinforce their preexisting essentialist notions.

Regardless of why moral essentialism emerges, the ways in which people conceptualize morality can have important social consequences. The sections below outline such consequences for prosocial behavior and for law, two areas that are intertwined with moral cognition.
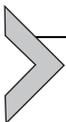
4. The consequences of moral essentialism in the domain of prosocial behavior

As shown above, researchers have obtained some evidence that children and adults view moral characteristics in essentialist terms. Scholars have also developed theories to explain why essentialism might emerge, and these general theories (which have not been applied specifically

to moral essentialism in prior work) could nevertheless shed light on the emergence of this form of essentialist thought. In addition to the antecedents of essentialism, scholarship has also focused on its consequences. In other words, do essentialist perceptions matter for social outcomes? If so, how?

It turns out that attributing morality to an internal, unchanging, biological "essence" shapes morally relevant behaviors across development. In one study (Heiphetz, 2019), 5- to 8-year-olds and adults learned about pairs of characters with identical moral characteristics. The only difference was whether the characteristic was described in an essentialist way, as arising from a biological source inside the character, or a nonessentialist way, as arising from social learning. Participants then distributed valued resources between the characters. Adults shared more resources than would be expected by chance with a character whose badness was attributed to social learning, and, consequently, fewer resources than would be expected by chance with a character whose badness was attributed to an internal cause. This result points to the power of essentialist explanations to shape generosity. In the context of moral transgression, highlighting internal badness as a cause of poor behavior may create worse outcomes for the person who transgressed than highlighting social factors.

In this work, children's generosity did not differ depending on whether characters were described in an essentialist way or a nonessentialist way. However, this result may have occurred because children of the age tested in this work (5- to 8-year-olds) typically share resources equally, particularly when they are distributing to third parties and do not have the opportunity to keep any resources for themselves (Chernyak, Sandham, Harris, & Cordes, 2016; Shaw & Olson, 2012). Other research, much of it focusing on noun labels, suggests that moral essentialism may influence children's responses.

The relevance of noun labels to essentialism is as follows: Using nouns communicates that the relevant feature is central to identity and relatively enduring. For instance, saying that "Keisha is an intellectual" appears to license the inference that intellectualism is an important aspect of Keisha's identity and that she will remain an intellectual for the foreseeable future, whereas noting that "Keisha is intellectual" leads to weaker inferences (Markman, 1989). In the language of essentialism, noun labels appear to license essentialist inferences to a greater extent than do other forms of speech.

Work described in the previous section showed that noun labels do, indeed, serve as an antecedent to the expression of essentialism

(e.g., Gelman & Heyman, 1999). Building on this work, some research has suggested that noun labels can be used to change behaviors by implicating the self. In other words, if nouns license the essentialist inference that the relevant characteristic is unchanging and central to identity, providing people with noun labels could encourage behaviors that they want to link with their identities for the foreseeable future and discourage other behaviors. In line with this logic, materials about "being a voter" increase voter turnout compared with materials about "voting" (Bryan, Walton, Rogers, & Dweck, 2011). Of greater direct relevance to morality, adults are less likely to cheat when they are instructed to not "be a cheater" than when they are instructed to not "cheat" (Bryan, Adams, & Monin, 2013), and 3- to 6-year-old children are more likely to behave prosocially when they hear about "being a helper" vs "helping" (Bryan, Master, & Walton, 2014).

Despite these positive outcomes, using noun labels also has drawbacks. For instance, while asking children to "be a helper" may lead to more prosocial behavior in the immediate aftermath, it may backfire when children experience difficulties: 4- to 5-year-olds who were asked to "be helpers" and then failed to successfully help subsequently showed more negative attitudes toward helping and less prosocial behavior than children who were asked to "help" and then experienced the same set-backs (Foster-Hanson, Cimpian, Leshin, & Rhodes, 2020). Connecting praise to a presumably enduring, identity-linked characteristic can also backfire. For instance, 3- to 5-year-olds are more likely to cheat when they receive global praise for being smart than when they receive specific praise for doing well on a particular task or when they receive no praise (Zhao, Heyman, Chen, & Lee, 2017).

Just as moral essentialism can have negative consequences for the self, it can also have negative consequences for others. For instance, preschoolers who perceive others' negative moral characteristics as stable over time also perform fewer prosocial behaviors, as rated by their teachers (Giles & Heyman, 2003). Similarly, children who view aggression as arising from an internal source that remains stable over time are more likely than their peers to support punitive means of dealing with aggression (Giles, 2003). Such consequences are not limited to children's evaluations of their peers. When educators attribute classroom misbehavior to factors internal to the student who is performing the behavior, they respond in a more punitive and controlling way than when they make external attributions (Scott-Little & Holloway, 1992; see below for additional research on how this tendency may contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline, which

brings Black students into contact with legal institutions to a far greater extent than White students). Overall, the view that others' negative characteristics are an unchanging part of their identity appears to hold consequences for judgments regarding appropriate consequences for negative behaviors, a topic particularly relevant to the legal system.
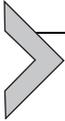
5. The consequences of moral essentialism in the domain of law

People are often optimistic about others. Children in elementary school view good behaviors as more stable over time than bad behaviors (Heyman & Dweck, 1998), and both children and adults are more likely to attribute goodness, rather than badness, to an internal, unchanging "essence" (Heiphetz, 2019). Adults also perceive their own and others' "true self" as morally good. For instance, they judge that people's good behaviors reflect their "true self" more than do their bad behaviors (Newman, Bloom, & Knobe, 2014), an effect that emerges even among misanthropic individuals (De Freitas et al., 2018). They also report that people would change more if their morally good characteristics changed into morally bad characteristics than the other way around, perhaps because the former type of change represents a move away from one's "true self" (Heiphetz et al., 2018; see also De Freitas, Tobia, et al., 2017, for a similar effect regarding non-human entities such as nations). These optimistic perceptions of the "true self" have been linked to essentialism. In other words, the idea that people have a morally good essence may stem from the more general idea that inside all people is an unchanging "essence" that makes them who they are and not someone else (Christy et al., 2019; De Freitas, Cikara, Grossman, & Schlegel, 2017).

Despite the prevalence of positive views regarding moral essences, these perceptions do have some boundary conditions. For instance, while adults judge that changes to moral characteristics would greatly alter themselves and their friends—more so than changes to other social characteristics, such as warmth and competence—they do not make this same distinction among characteristics for their enemies (Everett, Skorburg, Livingston, Chituc, & Crockett, under review). In another line of work, participants viewed people who had come into contact with the justice system as less human than high-status groups such as Americans and Whites, and also less human than stigmatized groups that have traditionally been studied in the dehumanization literature, such as Black people and Arab individuals (Heiphetz & Craig,

under review). Because morality is often perceived to be the purview of "greater" beings such as humans and God rather than "lesser" beings such as nonhuman animals (Brandt & Reyna, 2011), the denial of full humanity also implies the ascription of a nonmoral self.

Attributing a nonmoral self to people who are perceived to have committed transgressions, and who are known to have received punishment for those transgressions, is consistent with work showing that punishment increases harsh moral judgment. In one study, 5- to 8-year-olds learned about a character who stole from another character. In one version of this story, the thief received a time-out; in the other version, the thief was not punished. Children evaluated stealing as worse when they learned that the thief had been punished than when they learned that no punishment occurred (Bregant, Shaw, & Kinzler, 2016). In a related line of work, children learned about novel actions that harmed another character. Depending on the version of the story that participants heard, transgressors always received punishment or never did so. In a control condition, participants did not learn any punishment-related information. In this neutral control condition, children inferred that the novel behaviors were somewhat bad. Punishment-related information altered these judgments, increasing badness ratings when the perpetrator was always punished and decreasing these ratings when punishment never occurred (Arnold & Dunham, 2019). In other words, the presence of punishment seems to communicate that behaviors are particularly bad, whereas the absence of punishment may communicate that harmful behaviors are not as bad as they initially seemed.

Once people are willing to attribute badness to other people or to their behaviors, that attribution can be particularly sticky. Among both adults (Anderson, 1965; Ito, Larsen, Smith, & Cacioppo, 1998; Rozin & Royzman, 2001) and children (Baltazar, Shutts, & Kinzler, 2012; Hamlin, Wynn, & Bloom, 2010; Tottenham, Phuong, Flannery, Gabard-Durnam, & Goff, 2013; Vaish, Grossmann, & Woodward, 2008), negative information exerts a stronger influence on social judgment than does positive information. In line with this finding, adults perceive change to be effortful, judging that it is relatively difficult to stop performing negatively valenced behaviors such as abusing drugs and relatively easy to never begin these behaviors in the first place (Klein & O'Brien, 2017). Thus, once people have determined that another person is bad, they may perceive it to be difficult for that person to change. Further, adults are faster to conclude that a phenomenon has changed for the worse than that it has changed for the better, even when the quality of evidence is the same for both types of change

(Klein & O'Brien, 2016; O'Brien & Klein, 2017). In the moral domain, people may conclude that someone is a liar after hearing her lie once or twice, whereas they would likely be more hesitant to consider someone a truth-teller after only one or two instances of not lying. Taken together, these studies suggest that individuals may perceive moral worsening more readily than moral improvement and, once they have made this judgment, they may conclude that the person who has become bad is unlikely to become good again.

Some of the most pernicious consequences of this view arise in the legal context. In the modern United States, the legal system is ostensibly based on behaviors. People who come before the court are supposed to be convicted on the basis of what they did, not on the basis of who they are (Nadler & McDonnell, 2011). But the law is ambivalent on this point. Three strikes laws, which enact harsher punishments on the third offense than they would impose on that same behavior if it were a first or second offense, focus on behaviors. However, by considering prior bad actions, they seem to suggest that committing three offenses is indicative of bad moral character and that it is therefore acceptable, and in fact imperative, to punish the third offense especially harshly. As another example, laws that impose voting restrictions on people who have been convicted of particular crimes also seem to adopt the view that these crimes are indicative of poor moral character. On its face, disenfranchisement may seem to be a poor punishment for behavior. Its deterrence effect appears limited, as people are unlikely to consider their desire to vote in future elections when they are committing crimes. Further, disenfranchisement policies are associated with *increased* recidivism (Manza & Uggen, 2006); therefore, if the goal of punishment is to prevent the behavior from occurring again, prohibiting people from voting seems like exactly the wrong way to go about achieving that goal. However, disenfranchisement policies make a great deal of sense if the goal of punishment is to harm people and communities that are perceived as "bad" by removing their political power and creating additional stigma. Attempting to resolve this apparent contradiction between official legal doctrine (which posits that people should be punished for bad behavior) and human intuition (which often seeks to punish people for bad character), Yankah (2004) argues that the legal context encourages individuals to link bad acts to bad character. In this way, punishments that are supposedly meted out on the basis of behavior can become a way to punish people who are perceived to have an immoral internal "essence."

Perceived moral character helps individuals decide who should have contact with the legal system in the first place. In one line of work

(Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015), teachers of kindergarten through twelfth grade students indicated how severely Black and White students should be punished for the same transgression. Responses to Black and White students for the first transgression did not differ. However, for a second infraction, teachers responded more punitively to Black than to White students. This difference was mediated by teachers' greater perception that the Black, vs White, student was a "troublemaker"—that is, an attribution that placed the onus for the transgression on an internal moral characteristic. These findings extend to school principals, who are also more likely to perceive Black rather than White students as "troublemakers" and to respond more punitively to the misbehaviors of Black rather than White students (Jarvis & Okonofua, 2020). Such results can help to explain the disproportionate likelihood that the misbehaviors of Black students are criminalized, whereas the misbehaviors of White students are handled outside the legal system (Rocque & Paternoster, 2011).

Perceived moral character continues to be influential once people become involved in the legal system. For instance, probation officers are more likely to make internal attributions when describing the crimes committed by Black children, but they are more likely to make external attributions when describing White children's crimes (Bridges & Steen, 1998). Children themselves are not immune to such internal attributions. When asked to define the words "prison" and "jail," 6- to 8-year-olds focus on what type of person goes to those places, using definitions such as "a place where bad people go" and "a place where bad guys go in" (Dunlea & Heiphetz, 2020). Adults are far less likely than children to provide or endorse such definitions, focusing instead on behaviors. For instance, adults often define prisons and jails as "a place for people who have committed a crime" or a "place where people go to serve time for their wrong doings" (Dunlea & Heiphetz, 2020). However, they do endorse essentialist views to some extent. In some cases, adults are willing to agree with items like "criminals are born, not made" or "criminals will always be criminals; they can't change" (Martin & Heiphetz, under review).

The view that people break the law and become incarcerated because of some type of internal "badness" that will never change has important consequences for those individuals, their families and communities, and society at large. In the research described above investigating probation officers' attributions for Black and White children's behaviors, the internal attributions that more frequently arose in description of Black children's actions predicted greater punitiveness (Bridges & Steen, 1998). Further, recall the

research above in which children were more likely to define prison and jail in terms of the internal badness of the people who lived there, whereas adults were more likely to focus on changeable behaviors (Dunlea & Heiphetz, 2020). Following up on this work, Dunlea and Heiphetz (under review) recruited a different group of 6- to 8-year-olds and adults and presented them with characters who were said to be incarcerated "because [they were] a bad person" or "because [they did] something wrong." In other words, participants in this new work heard the explanations provided by participants in the prior work. Children and adults who heard the former explanations reported more negative attitudes toward incarcerated people than participants who heard the latter explanations. This project also included societal explanations, such as, "This person is in prison because he didn't have very much money when he was growing up." These types of explanations did not arise spontaneously when children and adults were asked to define incarceration-related terms, nor did participants endorse these types of explanations (Dunlea & Heiphetz, 2020). However, the scientific literature commonly points to societal inequalities based on factors such as race and socio-economic status when explaining mass incarceration and criminal justice contact (e.g., Alexander, 2012; Brunson, 2007; Jones, 2014; Travis, Western, & Redburn, 2014). Hearing about societal inequalities led to the least negative evaluations of incarcerated people among both children and adults (Dunlea & Heiphetz, under review).

The negative attitudes that essentialism engenders may be associated with the harsh punitiveness that is a hallmark of the United States criminal justice system. The more adults attribute criminal behavior to internal, unchanging "essences," the more negative are their attitudes toward people who have committed crimes, and, in turn, the more these adults endorse punitive policies such as the death penalty (Martin & Heiphetz, under review). In this work, essentialism regarding criminal behavior particularly drove a desire for punishments that harmed people who committed crimes rather than punishments that would prevent the behavior from reoccurring. This finding is consistent with prior work showing that although people may *say* they punish to rehabilitate, their actual punishment decisions are more sensitive to motives for retribution (Carlsmith, Darley, & Robinson, 2002; Darley, Carlsmith, & Robsinson, 2000).

Negativity toward people who have had contact with the justice system is harmful at multiple levels. Of course, it is difficult to navigate if one is currently incarcerated or trying to build a life after prison. Formerly incarcerated people encounter negative reactions at every turn, and these difficulties

are often exacerbated for members of the communities that disproportion-
ately suffer from incarceration. For instance, employers hesitate to hire for-
merly incarcerated individuals. Racial bias exacerbates this effect such that
White applicants with a criminal record face similar employment outcomes
as Black applicants without a criminal record, leaving Black applicants with a
criminal record to face the lowest likelihood of receiving offers of legal
employment (Pager, 2007). Housing presents another difficulty; landlords
are often unwilling to rent to formerly incarcerated individuals, and family
relationships may have become so strained that living with relatives is diffi-
cult or impossible (Alexander, 2012; Western, 2018). These difficulties rip-
ple out beyond the person navigating reentry. For instance, children of
incarcerated parents may hear others talk about their parents in a stigmatizing
way, an experience that can lead to feelings of loneliness, isolation, or anger
(Arditti, 2012; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008; Travis & Waul, 2003). Stigma
based on incarceration status also creates societal challenges. For instance,
people who cannot find legal employment may become homeless, leading
to charges of vagrancy, or turn to illegal means of making money and poten-
tially return to prison (e.g., Western, 2018). On a pragmatic level, this means
that people who are legally employed pay additional taxes to support the
prisons necessary to house people who cannot stay out of prison because
employers do not hire them and landlords do not rent to them. On a moral
level, this creates a situation where people are continually punished.
Ostensibly, they are done paying their debt to society at the conclusion
of their prison sentence—but if what they encounter on the outside is fur-
ther punishment based on the perception that they are irredeemable, their
debt can never be paid. The negativity that arises from moral essentialism can
thus allow society to give up on some "types" of people, treating them as
though their lives have less value than anyone else's life.

　　Although children and adults often view moral essences in positive terms
(e.g., De Freitas, Cikara, et al., 2017; Heiphetz, 2019), they appear to make
an exception for people who have experienced contact with the justice sys-
tem. In this context, participants—especially children—appear to emphasize
internal badness (Dunlea & Heiphetz, 2020; Martin & Heiphetz, under
review). Essentialist views of criminal justice contact lead to negative atti-
tudes toward people involved in this system and increase support for puni-
tive policies, especially those designed to harm people who have committed
crimes (rather than those designed to prevent future crimes; Dunlea &
Heiphetz, under review; Martin & Heiphetz, under review). These
individual-level processes can contribute to societal challenges such as the
difficulty of reentry (Travis, 2005).

6. Directions for future research

This chapter has argued that adults and, especially, children view morality in an essentialist way—as arising from an internal "essence" that is rooted in biology and remains stable over time. Future research can further investigate each main area outlined above—the presence of moral essentialism among children and adults as well as both the causes and consequences of this form of essentialism.

To further probe moral essentialism, future research can test the relation between this form of essentialism and other forms that are more commonly studied in the essentialism literature, such as other types of psychological characteristics, social groups, and natural kinds. It is possible that some people generally have a more essentialist orientation toward the world than others, in which case moral essentialism may be associated with essentialism in other areas. In this case, intervening on essentialism regarding morality may also reduce essentialism regarding other characteristics.

Future research can also examine *when* moral essentialism is particularly likely to arise. As described above, recent work indicates that goodness elicits more essentialism than does badness (Heiphetz, 2019). However, it is possible that this effect has boundary conditions—that extreme levels of perceived badness would elicit greater levels of essentialism. Work showing that individuals sometimes explain contact with the justice system by referencing internal badness (Dunlea & Heiphetz, 2020) supports this possibility. Future research can further probe contexts in which badness is perceived in essentialist terms and possible ways to mitigate this essentialism. Additionally, it is possible that observers use essentialist frameworks to different extents depending on the social groups to which targets belong. For instance, while goodness in general elicits more essentialism than badness, this effect may be mitigated for groups that are viewed as immoral. For instance, people may be more likely to essentialize badness when it is associated with Black people, who are often stereotyped as criminals (Eberhardt, Goff, Purdie, & Davies, 2004).

To further probe the causes of moral essentialism, future work can investigate how social and cultural input shapes this phenomenon. As discussed above, category labels and generic statement can license essentialist inferences. Similar processes may occur with moral essentialism. For instance, referring to "bad people" or using noun labels for categories of people perceived to be "bad" (e.g., "inmate," "offender") could increase essentialism as compared with instances in which non-essentialist language is used

(e.g., language that highlights behaviors rather than essences, such as talking about the specific transgression someone committed rather than referring to her as a "bad person," and/or language that emphasizes a person's humanity as opposed to her transgression, such as referring to someone as "a person who is incarcerated" rather than an "inmate"). Further, as discussed above, essentialism may be motivated (Diesendruck, 2020). In this case, individuals may view others' badness in particularly essentialist terms when they want to create social distance and convince themselves that they, unlike others, are "good" people. Thus, reducing the experience of moral threat—for instance, by allowing participants to perform prosocial behaviors or reminding them of times when they performed such behaviors in the past—could also decrease the extent to which they view others who have transgressed as unchangingly, irredeemably "bad." Such findings would support the role of social processes in the emergence, and reduction, of essentialism.

At a macro level, the extent to which children and adults view morality in essentialist terms could vary as a function of culture. For instance, the criminal justice system in the United States has a reach far beyond a person's incarceration. After leaving prison, individuals continue to experience obstacles when seeking financial aid to further their education (United States Department of Education, 2020), applying for jobs (Pager, 2007), finding a place to live (Alexander, 2012), participating in democracy (Manza & Uggen, 2006), and simply trying to live their lives. As discussed in the section on outcomes of essentialism in the legal domain, above, the fact that punishment continues long after people have ostensibly paid their debt to society can communicate that individuals who have been incarcerated are irredeemably "bad." Future research can investigate links between such cultural messages and moral essentialism. For instance, such projects could determine the extent to which altering messages about moral characteristics exerts downstream effects on essentialism. Future work can also probe moral essentialism in cultures that are less punitive; it is possible that in such environments, individuals are less prone to attribute transgressions to internal, unchanging badness.

To further probe the consequences of essentialism, future work can determine the extent to which this type of essentialism may have ripple effects beyond that individual. For instance, someone who views criminal justice contact in an essentialist way may believe that an incarcerated person has a "bad" or "criminal" essence that is inherited and unchanging. Within this worldview, it may seem logical to suppose that that person's children

would inherit that same essence. In other words, essentialism regarding people who are currently incarcerated may license the inference that their children are bad people with a "criminal essence" who will break the law themselves some day. Children with incarcerated parents often face stigma from others (Arditti, 2012; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008; Phillips & Gates, 2011), and future work can determine the extent to which intervening on essentialism may reduce this stigma.

In addition to these future directions for research on essentialism, the work reviewed here can set the stage for future work in moral psychology. As discussed in the section on the development of moral essentialism, above, current work on moral cognition typically focuses on behavior (e.g., Conway et al., 2018; Dahl & Kim, 2014; Gray et al., 2014; Hannikainen et al., 2018; Heiphetz et al., 2015; Killen, Mulvey, Richardson, Jampol, & Woodward, 2011; Nichols, 2002). However, laypeople's moral judgments also appear to take account of a person's essential moral character (e.g., Critcher et al., 2013; Dunlea & Heiphetz, 2020; Dunlea & Heiphetz, under review; Goodwin et al., 2014; Heiphetz, 2019; Tannenbaum et al., 2011; Uhlmann et al., 2015). Future work can therefore expand the current focus on behavior to include a greater emphasis on perceived "essences" and character. For instance, researchers could ask more questions regarding how children and adults draw inferences about their own and others' character, how these inferences influence behavior toward the target and other downstream consequences, and how—if at all—these inferences can change.
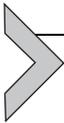
7. Conclusions

Children's stories often describe a morally unambiguous universe where some people are unchangingly good and others are irredeemably bad. Although children's actual lives take place in a social world that is decidedly more complex, they nevertheless appear to view morality in essentialist terms. In other words, children report that morality is central to identity and that it arises from an internal, unchanging, biologically-rooted "essence." Although this perception decreases somewhat over development, it does not disappear, as adults also report some degree of essentialism regarding moral characteristics. Several theories can account for the emergence of such essentialism, including perspectives that view essentialism as a cognitive bias or predisposition and complementary accounts that emphasize the role of social learning in the emergence of essentialist thought. Once they have emerged, essentialist perceptions have consequences for moral behavior

and for perceptions of, and responses toward, people involved in the justice system. Future work can further probe the existence, emergence, and consequences of moral essentialism. More broadly, future research may benefit from a greater focus on laypeople's judgments regarding moral character.

Acknowledgments

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