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Research article

The effect of essentialism in settings of historic intergroup atrocities†

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Abstract

Three studies tested the effects of essentialist beliefs regarding the national ingroup in situations where a perpetrator group has inflicted harm on a victim group. For members of the perpetrator group, it was hypothesised that 'essentialism' has a direct positive association with 'collective guilt' felt as a result of misdeeds conducted by other ingroup members in the past. Simultaneously, it was hypothesised to have an indirect negative association with collective guilt, mediated by perceived threat to the ingroup. Considering these indirect and direct effects jointly, it was hypothesised that the negative indirect effect suppresses the direct positive effect, and that the latter would only emerge if perceived 'ingroup threat' was controlled for. This was tested in a survey conducted in Latvia among Russians ($N = 70$) and their feelings toward how Russians had treated ethnic Latvians during the Soviet occupation; and in a survey in Germany among Germans ($N = 84$), focussing on their feelings toward the Holocaust. For members of the victim group, it was hypothesised that essentialism would be associated with more anger and reluctance to forgive past events inflicted on other ingroup members. It was proposed that this effect would be mediated by feeling connected to the ingroup victims. This was tested in a survey conducted among Hong Kong Chinese and their feelings toward the Japanese and the Nanjing massacre ($N = 56$). Results from all three studies supported the hypotheses.
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Group-based atrocities are all too common: the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide and the conflict in Sudan's region of Darfur, to name but a few. After such events, the descendants of both perpetrators and victims face the task of coming to terms with the past. They can respond to such events, in which they are only implicated because of their group membership and in which they were not personally involved, in a number of ways. The present research highlights the importance of essentialist beliefs about the ingroup in determining what shape their responses take.

The perpetrators' children and grandchildren might feel vicarious guilt and accept some kind of 'inherited' responsibility, or they might instead decide that they have nothing to do with events in which they were not directly involved. Descendants of the perpetrator group can differ with regards to just how guilty they feel. Whether or not feelings of guilt will be present can have important implications, because feelings of guilt (or the lack thereof) have been linked to attitudes towards members of the victim group (Zimmermann, Abrams, & Eller, 2005), to the propensity to make an apology (Iyer, Leach, & Pedersen, 2004) and to attitudes towards affirmative action and other types of reparations to make good past wrongdoings (Barkan, 2000; Brown & Cehajic, 2008; Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 1998; Lickel,

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Schmader, & Barquissau, 2004; Swim & Miller, 1999; but see Harvey & Oswald, 2000). Because of this, studying predictors of collective guilt is not only of theoretical but also of applied importance.

The victims' children and grandchildren might still feel very angry about past events, or their anger might have dissipated. They might have forgiven the perpetrator group, or might still be very reluctant to forgive the wrongdoings. The levels of anger and forgiveness have, of course, important consequences for the quality of intergroup relations (Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008), and studying their predictors is therefore also of both academic and practical importance. We suggest that the emotional responses of members of both the perpetrator and victim groups will be shaped by the extent to which they see the ingroup as defined in essentialist terms.

ESSENTIALIST BELIEFS

'Once a bitch always a bitch'; this is what William Faulkner's (1929) character of Jason says about Caddy, not because she engages in sexually deviant behaviour (not yet anyway, although she arguably does so later as a result of a self-fulfilling prophecy), but because her mother was purported to have done so. This illustrates nicely some important aspects of essentialism, namely a belief that certain characteristics are inherited and therefore must have a natural (genetic or other biological) basis, are unchangeable and stable and are informative, because one only needs to know about the character of one category member to be able to make meaningful inferences about the character of other category members. We would argue, as others have, that social research should avoid advancing primordial accounts of ethnic or national categories (Suny, 2001; Verkuyten, 2004). Nonetheless, we do see essentialist beliefs about group memberships to be an important object of study. Specifically, in this paper, we suggest that such beliefs are implicated in the way people relate to and feel about historic intergroup atrocities.

In the psychological literature, essentialism has been conceptualised in various ways. Yzerbyt, Rocher, and Schadron (1997) define it as a belief that all members of a social category have an essential feature in common, that category memberships are immutable, that inferences about members of the category can be easily made, that features of category members can be interpreted in light of a unifying theme and that category membership is exclusive. For Medin (1989, see also Medin & Ortony, 1989), psychological essentialism is a belief that things have essences or underlying natures that make them what they are. Similarly, Rothbart and Taylor (1992) and Hirschfeld (1996) argue that social categories are often treated as if they were natural kinds. They are assumed to be discrete, homogeneous with deep inherent intra-category similarities, mutually exclusive, unalterable and to have and rich inductive potential.

A major area of discussion in the literature has concerned the relationship between essentialism and entitativity. Haslam, Rothschild, and Ernst (2000, 2002) see entitativity as one dimension of essentialism, with natural kinds as another. For Kashima and colleagues (2005), essentialism is a component of entitativity. Others propose that essentialist beliefs are distinct from (Yzerbyt, Corneille, & Estrada, 2001; Yzerbyt, Estrada, Corneille, Seron, & Demoulin, 2004; Yzerbyt & Rogier, 2001) and predicted by (Demoulin, Leyens, & Yzerbyt, 2006) the natural kinds and entitativity dimensions. Denson, Lickel, Curtis, Stenstrom, and Ames (2006), meanwhile, use the term 'essentialism' to refer only to beliefs about natural kinds with strong biological connotations and not to beliefs about entitativity.

Like Denson et al. (2006), we employ the term 'essentialism' to refer to beliefs about natural kinds. We are interested in the biological component of psychological essentialism, as expressed in lay theories of genetic determinism (for a similar focus, see Keller, 2005). Further, we are interested in such beliefs applied to nationality. Ethnic representations of nationality, whereby national groups are defined in terms of a supposed shared ancestral origin, are a particular case of essentialism (Pehrson, Brown, & Zagefka, 2009). Ethnic nationalism presents national group membership as something immutable, given by nature, and based on quasi-biological connections between members of the national group (Connor, 1994; Smith, 2001). Membership of ethnically defined national categories can be obtained only by birth, and the symbolism of shared 'blood' is often important (Ignatieff, 1993). In other words, by 'essentialism' we mean a belief that membership of a national category as well as the nature and character of this category are determined by biological, genetic and hereditary factors. Substantially, it is a belief in the triumph of nature over nurture; it is the belief that group membership is 'written in the blood', and that the ingroup's 'essence' which defines its character is passed on through some unspecified biological or genetic process. It is this particular case

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of essentialism that interests us here, although other ways of representing groups can certainly also be described as essentialist, and might also be of interest in other contexts.

Representing social category membership in terms of ancestry has a particular relevance to the current studies for two main reasons. Firstly, because we were interested in feelings about intergroup atrocities committed and suffered by previous generations, group memberships that are seen as inherited and linked to blood become especially interesting. Secondly, while non-biological forms of essentialism also exist, biological forms seem to be particularly important in shaping motivated intergroup cognitions (Keller, 2005; see also Morton & Postmes, in press), and it is hence reasonable to assume that they might also have powerful effects on group-based emotions. For these reasons, we operationalise essentialism in a specifically biological way in the present context.

INTERGROUP EMOTIONS

Although the concept essentialism has been explored in studies of prejudice and intergroup relations, its impact on collective emotions has not been studied, and this is a novel aspect of the present research. We are interested in collective rather than personal emotions in the sense that they are experienced because of someone's shared group membership with a perpetrator/victim, without having personally participated in or suffered from the violence (Branscombe & Doosje, 2004; Smith, 1993). As such, the focus is on vicarious emotions (Schmader & Lickel, 2006). One can distinguish between emotions felt by an individual because of actions by the ingroup ('I feel guilty because of what we have done'; e.g. Brown, Gonzalez, Zagefka, Manzi, & Cehajic, 2008) and emotions ascribed to the ingroup because of ingroup actions ('We should feel guilty because of what we have done'; e.g. Wohl & Branscombe, 2008). Both these emotions are commonly called 'collective guilt', and it is the former type that was assessed here. In parallel, for the victims we assessed their feelings of anger because of what happened to other ingroup members, and their reluctance to forgive the perpetrators.

What, then, is the relationship between essentialism and guilt for the descendants of the perpetrators? On the basis of existing literature, it is possible to make two contradictory predictions: There is reason to expect a negative association, and at the same time there is also reason to expect a positive association. One aim of this paper was to resolve this apparent contradiction.

ESSENTIALISM DECREASING GUILT

Essentialism has been linked to several beliefs which tend to vary systematically among the conservative-liberal or rightwing–leftwing political spectrum. It is linked positively to a rejection of multiculturalism (Verkuyten & Brug, 2004; see also No, Hong, Liao, Lee, Wood, & Chao, 2008), stereotyping (Hoffman & Hurst, 1990; Levy, Stoessner, & Dweck, 1998; Martin & Parker, 1995), prejudice against ethnic outgroup members (Allport, 1954; Epstein Jayaratne et al., 2006; Keller, 2005, but see Haslam et al., 2002; Verkuyten, 2003), accentuation of differences between social groups (Yzerbyt et al., 2001), social dominance orientation (SDO, Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994; Keller, 2005) and rightwing authoritarianism (Haslam & Levy, 2006). Essentialist arguments can be and often are used to justify and preserve existing and promote desired social inequalities, by presenting them as natural and inevitable (Epstein Jayaratne et al., 2006; Haslam et al., 2002; Keller, 2005; Williams & Eberhardt, 2008; Yzerbyt et al., 1997). An example would be the use of essentialist theories by Hitler to promote the ill treatment of Jews who were presented as 'naturally inferior' (Lerner, 1992).

Essentialism has also been linked directly to conservatism (Haslam & Levy, 2006; Keller, 2005; Lewontin, Rose, & Kamin, 1984). This is to be expected, given that political conservatism and essentialism are arguably motivated by similar psychological needs (Keller, 2005). Both conservatism (Duckitt, 2001; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, &Sulloway, 2003) and essentialism (Keller, 2005) can be thought of as motivated by trying to manage perceived threats to one's existence or privilege.

The link between essentialism and threat discussed by Keller (2005) is likely to be bidirectional. On the one hand, those who feel threatened might start endorsing essentialist beliefs to psychologically manage this perceived threat. On

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the other hand, those who define their ingroup in essentialist terms will perceive group boundaries to be more clear-cut, rigid and less permeable, and they will also defend the idea that group boundaries should be so. In other words, ethnic nationalist beliefs are both descriptive and normative. Therefore, essentialists should be more concerned with trespassing and contamination of the ingroups' essence by outsiders. They should also be more concerned with protecting the ingroup from outside threats and threatened changes to the ingroup due to alien influences. They should be more sensitive to perceived symbolic threat (Stephan & Stephan, 2000) to the ingroup's values, beliefs and traditions.

Further, those who are preoccupied with perceived threats to the ingroup and ingroup protection should be more inclined to justify the ingroup's behaviour and to interpret it as defensible even if this behaviour harms a relevant outgroup. A focus on protecting the ingroup against potential threats should reduce concerns for the well being of other groups. People who feel threatened should be motivationally less inclined to attend to injustices inflicted on groups other than their own, and they should also have fewer emotional resources to consider outgroup needs due to their preoccupation with their own needs. More straightforward even, those who feel threatened should be less likely to admit and report feelings of guilt, both privately and in front of others, because admitting ingroup culpability would directly defeat the object of protecting the ingroup's image and potentially also the ingroup's resources (because admitting culpability might lead to demands for compensation). In line with this reasoning, Wohl and Branscombe (2008) recently demonstrated that salience of threats to the ingroup decreases collective guilt experienced because of atrocities committed by the ingroup.

In sum, one might expect essentialism to be linked negatively and indirectly to feelings of guilt about the ingroup's behaviour, because essentialism is likely to be bound up with a tendency to see the ingroup as threatened. This perceived threat, in turn, is likely to be negatively associated with feelings of guilt about past wrongdoings.

ESSENTIALISM INCREASING GUILT

Nonewithstanding, one might just as well derive exactly the opposite prediction, and expect a positive effect of essentialism on feelings of guilt. At the very core of the notion of essentialism is the proposition that all members of an essential social category share certain traits. These traits might be related to appearance (e.g. blue eyes) or to character (e.g. being impulsive). Most crucially, these traits are seen to have deep and unobservable foundations, which lend them their immutable, stable 'essence'. This essence is perceived to be too elementary, too fundamental to ever be exterminated. High essentialists believe that an essence might be masked, but that it cannot be eradicated. They would argue that a person born to German parents is German even if this person was adopted and moved to the UK when only 1 week old, even if this person has never been to Germany, even if this person does not speak German and even if this person is not even aware of their German origin.

Because of this, one might expect that high essentialists feel a more immutable, stable connection to other ingroup members, be they past, present or future. After all, they perceive all group members to be linked to each other by a shared 'essence' which exists on the deepest, most fundamental level possible. In this sense, high essentialists should feel that they are more implicated in the behaviour of fellow ingroup members than low essentialists. Hence, if ingroup members commit a deed which is wrong and which therefore should trigger feelings of guilt, high essentialists should actually feel *more* guilty than low essentialists, because they perceive themselves to be more fundamentally connected to the perpetrators, and therefore more strongly implicated in their actions (for a similar argument, see Johns, Schmader, & Lickel, 2005; Schmader & Lickel, 2006).

High essentialists are also likely to feel more interchangeable with other group members due to the perceived commonalities on the most fundamental level. They might also assume that the negative behaviour was driven, at least partially, by the shared 'essence' which informs all group members' characters. This might lead to a feeling that they could have displayed the negative behaviour themselves, which is another reason why high essentialists might feel more guilty. In contrast, low essentialists might not feel interchangeable with the perpetrators, and they might be more inclined to explain past misdeeds by historic and cultural circumstances (which are seen to be more prone to change and which the contemporary person need not necessarily share with the perpetrators). Low essentialists will therefore feel less guilty. Hence, although we do not propose that essentialism is the only variable affecting levels of guilt (see e.g. Miron, Branscombe, & Schmitt, 2006; Roccas, Klar, & Liviatan, 2006), we propose that it is an important factor.

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RESOLVING THE CONTRADICTION

In short, we argue that the positive and negative effects of essentialism on guilt might exist simultaneously. Essentialism will be positively related to perceived ingroup threats and concerns for ingroup protection. This, in turn, it will be linked negatively to feelings of guilt about the ingroup's behaviour. However, due to the nature of the belief, high essentialists are also likely to feel more linked to other ingroup members, and more implicated in their behaviour. Hence, essentialism should be linked positively to feelings of guilt.

This positive link, however, will only emerge if one controls for perceived threats with which essentialism is usually part and parcel. If one statistically controls for and partials out this threat component, what otherwise would look like a zero effect of essentialism on guilt should turn into a positive effect. In statistical terms, we would expect a direct positive effect of essentialism on guilt, and an indirect negative effect, mediated by ingroup threat. Since we hypothesise that the indirect negative effect is so strong that it will wipe out the direct positive effect unless it is controlled for, statistically speaking this is a hypothesised suppression effect. The proposed mechanisms are summarised in Figure 1.

ESSENTIALISM AFFECTING ANGER AND FORGIVENESS

As outlined above, another aim of this research was to explore the effect of essentialist beliefs on how the descendants of the victims, not only the perpetrators, respond to past atrocities. Essentialist beliefs can be assumed to have important consequences for the way the descendants of the victim group make sense of the past. Just as high essentialists in the perpetrator group might feel more connected to those ingroup members who committed the negative acts, high essentialists in the victim group might feel more connected to the ingroup victims. They will perceive themselves to be linked to the victims on a deep, very fundamental level. Hence, high essentialists will feel that the experiences of other ingroup members concern them more personally than low essentialists. Because high essentialists will feel more implicated in the experiences of other ingroup members, they are more likely to feel angry and unwilling to forgive bad events that happened in the past. This, then, constitutes a mediation hypothesis: Essentialism among members of the victim group will lead to more anger and greater reluctance to forgive past events, *because* essentialism leads to more feelings of connectedness with the ingroup victims.

Three studies were conducted to test these hypotheses. The effects of essentialism on guilt among members of a perpetrator group were tested with Russians in Latvia and their feelings about how Russians had treated ethnic Latvians during the Soviet occupation. A study conducted in Germany among Germans and their feelings toward the Holocaust also tested the effects of essentialism among members of a perpetrator group. The effects of essentialism on anger and forgiveness among members of a victim group were tested in a study conducted among Hong Kong Chinese and their feelings toward the Nanjing massacre.

LATVIAN STUDY

The effect of essentialism on guilt was first tested in Latvia. Latvia is located between the Baltic Sea and Russia. It was invaded by Soviet troops during WWII and absorbed into the Soviet Union, where it remained (with a brief interlude in

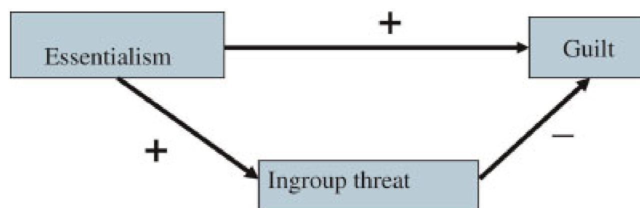

Figure 1. Hypothesised effects of essentialism and ingroup threat on guilt

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1941 when the Nazis invaded) for almost half a century. The Soviet social engineering project introduced in 1941 resulted in the expulsion, deportation and murder of national elites, the confiscation of private property and the banning of religious worship and cultural manifestations of Latvian nationalism. Soviet nationality policy led to the deportation of tens of thousands of ethnic Latvians, collectivisation, purges, Russification, political violence, economic stagnation and environmental pollution (Smith, Aasland, & Mole, 1994). Latvia finally regained independence in 1991. Due to the encouragement of Soviet migration to Latvia during the occupation, today over one-third of the Latvian population is Russian-speaking. For most Latvians, this sizable minority is associated with the former occupying power, and is held responsible for events that occurred during the occupation. At the same time, many Russian speakers in Latvia today feel themselves unjustly oppressed (for instance, the use of the Russian language has been restricted since 2004). The present study focussed on Russian speakers in Latvia, and their feelings about the way Latvians were treated during the occupation.

Method

Participants

An opportunity sample of 70 Russian speakers participated in the study. Their age varied between 12 and 75, with a mean age of 30 years. There were 46 females and 22 males (two participants did not indicate their gender).

Procedure and Measures

Participants filled out a questionnaire which contained the measures in Russian. They had been carefully translated and back-translated from English. Drawing on existing measures of essentialism (e.g. Demoulin et al., 2006; Haslam et al., 2000, 2002; Pehrson et al., 2009; Verkuyten & Brug, 2004) and related constructs such as genetic lay theories (Epstein Jayaratne et al., 2006) and 'belief in genetic determinism' (Keller, 2005), we generated a 7-item scale of *essentialism* (1 = totally disagree to 7 = totally agree). The items were 'It is our Russian blood that basically makes us who we are throughout our lives'; 'It is largely our Russian biological heritage which determines who and how we are'; 'The Russian character is largely determined by genetic factors'; 'Something in the blood has defined the Russian character throughout history'; 'Russians prefer to stick together because of their shared blood'; 'What makes a Russian a Russian isn't in the blood' (reversed); 'If someone has Russian parents then this person is automatically Russian too, even if he/she has never been to Russia and if he/she doesn't speak any Russian'; $\alpha = .71$.

To measure perceived *ingroup threat*, a 4-item measure was devised (1 = totally disagree to 7 = totally agree). Items express a conviction that the ingroup is threatened in important ways and that it needs to be defended against this threat. Items were 'I am concerned that we Russians are losing our identity'; 'We should make sure the Russian way of life is preserved'; 'We should defend our distinctiveness' and 'It would be unfortunate if the Russian culture changed too much due to influences from outside'; $\alpha = .81$.

Guilt was measured with a 4-item scale modelled on Brown et al. (2008, 1 = totally disagree to 7 = totally agree). Items were: 'I feel guilty for the way that Russians treated the Latvians under Stalin'; 'Even though I was not personally involved, I feel guilty when I think about the treatment that Latvians received from us Russians under Stalin'; 'When I think about how we Russians suppressed the Latvian language and culture during the Soviet era, I feel guilty' and 'Although I was not involved personally, I feel guilty as a Russian when I think about how Latvians were deported to Siberia during the Soviet period'; $\alpha = .84$.

The questionnaire also contained some additional items, such as a 1-item measure of *dispositional guilt* ('In general, I don't often feel guilty because of the things I've done' (reversed)) inspired by Doosje et al. (1998), and a 2-item measure of *perceived complicity* of the civil population inspired by Rozin (2003, example item 'What happened to the Latvians under Stalin was mainly the responsibility of the Russian politicians, and not of the Russian people' (reversed), $r = .87$). Such items can be usefully employed as control variables (Doosje et al., 1998). The questionnaire ended with some demographic questions. Upon completion of the study, participants were thanked and debriefed.

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Results

Preliminary Analyses

First, a factor analysis with Varimax rotation was performed with all essentialism and threat items to confirm that these two constructs were indeed empirically as well as conceptually distinct. As expected, all essentialism items loaded on one factor and all threat items loaded on a second factor (loading for essentialism items ranging from .48 to .77 on the first factor and .05 to .41 on the second factor; loadings for threat items ranging from .60 to .85 on the second factor and .09 to .27 on the first factor).

The means and standard deviations (in parentheses) on the measures were 3.97 (1.03) for essentialism; 1.93 (1.22) for guilt and 5.26 (1.94) for threat. To test for mean differences between the younger and the older participants on key variables, the sample was median split (median = 25 years). There were no significant differences on any of the variables, and age and other demographic variables did not moderate any of the effects reported below.

Does Ingroup Threat Mediate the Relationship Between Essentialism and Guilt?

According to the hypothesis, we expected a direct positive effect of essentialism on guilt, and an indirect negative effect, mediated by ingroup threat. Moreover, the direct positive effect was predicted *only* to emerge if ingroup threat was controlled for. The bi-variate correlations between the three constructs are displayed in Figure 2 (correlation coefficients not in parentheses). As hypothesised, the direct effect of essentialism on guilt was not significant.

To test whether a positive effect of essentialism on guilt would emerge if ingroup threat is controlled for, guilt was regressed simultaneously from essentialism and ingroup threat. *Dispositional guilt* and *complicity* of the civilian population were also entered in the regression as additional control variables ($\beta = .22$, ns for guilt; $\beta = -.03$, ns for complicity). The model explained 12% of the variance in guilt, $F(4, 65) = 2.26, p < .07$. The β values are displayed in Figure 2 (values in parentheses). In line with the hypothesis, there was an indirect negative path from essentialism to guilt via ingroup threat, and controlling for ingroup threat made it possible for the direct positive effect of essentialism on guilt to emerge.

Alternative Models

In spite of the fact that no *a priori* hypotheses were held about opposite causal directions, alternative models were tested to find somewhat stronger support for the proposed causal direction of effects, given the correlational nature of the data.

Specifically, two alternative mediation models were tested. According to Baron and Kenny (1986), three conditions need to be fulfilled for mediation to be present: (1) The independent variable has to significantly predict the mediator; (2) the independent variable has to significantly predict the dependent variable and (3) when independent variable and mediator predict the dependent variable simultaneously, the effect of the independent variable must be significantly reduced and the mediator must still exert a significant effect.

It was first tested whether the effect of guilt on essentialism might be mediated by threat. As indicated above, no *a priori* hypothesis was held about this, but it is nonetheless conceivable that guilt would reduce threat because those who feel guilty see the ingroup as less worth defending, and they might therefore be less acutely aware of and bothered by potential threats. Threat, in turn, might be expected to be associated with more essentialism, because—as outlined earlier—essentialist beliefs might precisely arise as a psychological response to cope with perceived threat. However, mediation was clearly not present, because—as evinced by the correlation coefficients in Figure 2—the data did not match Baron

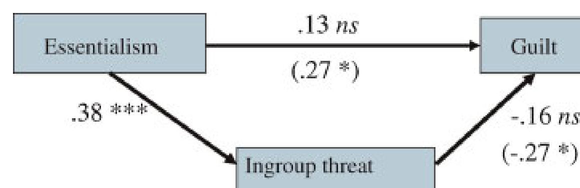

Figure 2. The effect of essentialism and ingroup threat on guilt in study 1 (Latvia) (bi-variate correlations outside parentheses, standardised β values inside parentheses)
Note: $^{*}p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{***}p < .001$.

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and Kenny's (1986) first condition (there was no significant correlation between the independent variable and the mediator) or second condition (there was no significant correlation between the independent variable and dependent variable).

Second, although it is hard to conceive of a hypothesis why the effect of guilt on threat might be mediated by essentialism, this was also examined and rejected on the grounds that Baron and Kenny's first and second conditions were violated (see correlation coefficients in Figure 2). Hence, it was concluded that, as hypothesised, the suppression model was the one to best account for the data.

Discussion

Some clear evidence was found for the hypotheses. There was an indirect negative path from essentialism to guilt via ingroup threat. Further, a direct positive path from essentialism to guilt emerged only when controlling for the negative indirect effect. Alternative mediation models were ruled out. Hence, as expected, ingroup threat clearly acted as a suppressor of the effect of essentialism on guilt. In spite of these encouraging findings, it should be noted that the joint effects of essentialism and ingroup threat on guilt were not overly strong, with the R^2 being only marginally significant. Hence, in a next step we endeavoured to test the hypothesis in a different national context, to test for the replicability and generalisability of the effects.

GERMAN STUDY

The Nazi regime in Germany, which was in power from 1933 to 1945, killed millions of people whom it saw as belonging to an inferior form of life. Among them were Roma and disabled people, but the biggest victim group were 6 million Jews. This atrocity is what the current study focussed on by asking contemporary German participants about their feelings about these events (for more information on collective guilt in Germany, see Buruma, 1994; Kempe, 1999; Rensmann, 2004).

Method

Participants

An opportunity sample of 84 people participated in the study. Their age varied between 13 and 78, with a mean age of 35 years. Seven participants had been excluded from the analyses, because according to self-reports they were not white German nationals. There were 55 females and 29 males.

Procedure and Measures

Participants filled out a questionnaire in German which contained the measures as translated below. Questionnaires had been translated and back-translated from/to English. *Essentialism* was measured with a 6-item scale (1 = totally disagree to 7 = totally agree). The items were very similar to the ones used in the Latvian study. However, some items were toned down or reversed, because they otherwise would have sounded too much like Nazi propaganda, and we feared reactance effects. In particular, we avoid the word 'blood' as much as possible. The items were 'It is largely our German biological heritage which determines who and how we are'; 'Something in our heritage influences the German character, and this will always be that way'; 'The German character is largely determined by genetic factors'; 'If someone has German parents then this person is automatically German too, even if he/she has never been to Germany and if he/she doesn't speak any German'; 'Our German heritage means that all Germans somehow belong to each other' and 'Someone can be German even if his/her parents come from another country and are not German (reverse coded)'; $\alpha = .72$.

However, even with this adjusted version of the essentialism scale, we were not sure whether the scale would yield meaningful results. We feared that its content might be too sensitive and cause reaction effects in Germany due to genetic ideas having been such a prominent component of the Nazi rhetoric. Indeed, there was anecdotal evidence, supported by

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the pattern of responses in many questionnaires, that participants filled in the items quite randomly because they did not want to answer the questions. Anticipating this, we included another *general essentialism* scale, which seemed somewhat less controversial. This alternative scale was adapted from Rozin (2003, see also Rozin et al., 2008). It consisted of six items (1 = totally disagree to 7 = totally agree), all following the same format: 'Someone who was born as an X will necessarily always be an X throughout his/her life'. The target categories were Bavarian, Woman, German, Jew, Muslim and Turk. The items correlated well with each other; $\alpha = .89$. They also correlated well with the original essentialism scale, $r = .49$, $p < .001$, confirming their relatedness.

Indeed, anecdotal evidence in the form of oral and written comments suggested that the German participants took great offence to the original essentialism scale. As expected, they seemed to feel considerably less reluctant to fill out the general scale. Hence, it was decided that the *general essentialism* scale might be a more useful measurement tool than then *original essentialism* scale in the German context.

Ingroup threat was measured with the same four items as in the Latvian study, plus an additional two items (1 = totally disagree to 7 = totally agree). These were 'It is natural for the country's character to change' (reversed); and 'It is good if our national character changes over time' (reversed); $\alpha = .88$.

Guilt was measured with a 4-item scale (1 = totally disagree to 7 = totally agree). The gist of the items was very similar to the items in the Latvian study, although of course items were adapted to fit the German setting. The items were 'I feel guilty when I think about what we Germans did to the Jews during the Nazi era'; 'When I think about what we did to the Jews during the Nazi era I feel really bad'; 'Even though I did not personally do anything bad to the Jews, I feel guilty for what other Germans have done' and 'Although I personally have done no harm to the Jews, I feel guilty because I am German'; $\alpha = .94$. Note that many of the items are somewhat 'evasive' in their wording, i.e. they talk about 'what we did to the Jews' rather than 'how we murdered the Jews'. This was done deliberately to avoid possible reactance effects.

The questionnaire also contained some additional items, such as a 2-item scale of *dispositional guilt* (example item 'In general, I don't often feel guilty because of the things I've done', $r = .35$) inspired by Doosje et al. (1998), and a 2-item scale of *perceived complicity* of the civil population in the Holocaust inspired by Rozin (2003, example item 'What happened to the Jews in the Nazi era was mainly the responsibility of the leading Nazis and not of the civil population' (reversed), $r = .35$). Again, following the logic of Doosje and colleagues (1998), these items were included for use as additional control variables. The questionnaire ended with some demographic items. Upon completion of the study, participants were thanked and debriefed.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Again, a factor analysis with Varimax rotation was performed with all essentialism and threat items to confirm that these two constructs were empirically distinct. As expected, all essentialism items loaded on one factor and all threat items loaded on a second factor (loading for essentialism items ranging from .58 to .91 on the first factor and .05 to .37 on the second factor; loadings for threat items ranging from .71 to .85 on the second factor and .11 to .31 on the first factor).

The means and standard deviations (in parentheses) for the main constructs were 2.86 (1.45) for the general essentialism, 3.54 (1.97) for guilt and 3.14 (1.20) for threat. The sample was median split (median = 31 years) to test for mean differences between the younger and the older participants on key variables. The only significant difference emerged for 'guilt'. Curiously, young people felt more guilty than older people, $t\ (73) = 2.05$; $p < .05$; Ms = 4.00, 3.08. However, age or other demographic variables did not moderate any of the effects reported below.

Does Ingroup Threat Mediate the Relationship Between Essentialism and Guilt?

According to the hypotheses, we expected an indirect negative effect of essentialism on guilt, mediated by ingroup threat. We also expected a direct positive effect, which was hypothesised to emerge only after the indirect negative effect was controlled for. Given the reactance caused by the original essentialism scale, the essentialism measure used in the analyses is the *general essentialism* scale adopted from Rozin. The bi-variate correlations between the three constructs are displayed in Figure 3 (correlations coefficients not in parentheses).

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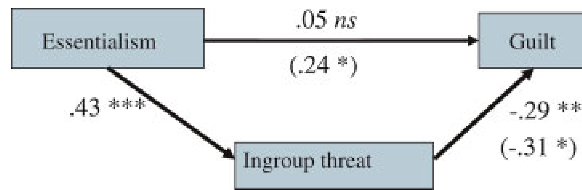

Figure 3. The effect of essentialism and ingroup threat on guilt in study 2 (Germany) (bi-variate correlations outside parentheses, standardised β values inside parentheses)
Note: $^{*}p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{***}p < .001$

As hypothesised, the overall effect of essentialism on guilt was not significant. To test whether a positive effect of essentialism on guilt would emerge if ingroup threat is controlled for, guilt was regressed simultaneously from essentialism and ingroup threat. *Dispositional guilt* and *complicity* in the Holocaust were also entered in the regression as additional control variables ($\beta = -.11$, ns for guilt; $\beta = .26$, $p < .05$ for complicity). The model explained 20% of the variance in guilt, $F\,(4, 70) = 4.49$, $p < .003$. The β values are displayed in Figure 3 (values in parentheses). In line with the hypotheses, controlling for ingroup threat made it possible for the direct positive effect of essentialism on guilt to emerge.

Alternative Models

As in the previous study, it was first tested whether the effect of guilt on essentialism might be mediated by threat. Mediation was clearly not present, because Baron and Kenny's second condition was not met (see correlation coefficients in Figure 3).

Second, it was examined whether the effect of guilt on threat might be mediated by essentialism. This was rejected because Baron and Kenny's first condition was violated (see correlation coefficients in Figure 3). Hence, again alternative models could be ruled out, providing further corroborating evidence for the hypothesised effects.

Discussion

As in study 1, clear evidence was found in support of the hypotheses. Essentialism clearly had the predicted indirect negative effect on guilt. What is more, when controlling for this indirect effect, the hypothesised direct positive effect of essentialism on guilt emerged. Of course, studying the effects of essentialism in Germany was encumbered by the fact that essentialist ideas were drawn on heavily by Nazi propaganda, and that German participants were very reluctant to answer our items, leading to reactance effects of our essentialism scale. However, to our mind this actually led to a significant advantage, because anticipating this meant that we included and could demonstrate the effects of a more generalised essentialism belief scale. Rozin's (2003) scale is more generalised in the sense that it assesses inalterability with regards to a number of different groups, and it is noteworthy that this more generalised essentialism measure still exerted the same effects on guilt as the more specific measure of study 1. With Rozin's measure, the effects of an essentialist mindset were even stronger than that found in the Latvian context, and undeniably in the hypothesised direction. Having obtained this corroborating evidence, in a next step we turned to the victim group, to explore the effects of essentialism on the other side of the divide.

HONG KONG STUDY

The massacre of Nanjing refers to the events that took place after this Chinese town fell into the hands of the Japanese in 1937. Japanese soldiers behaved very brutally towards the Chinese population during acts of looting, arson and the execution of prisoners of war and civilians. It is estimated that around 300 000 Chinese were killed, and many more raped or harmed otherwise. To date, differential preferences for portraying the events still cause tensions between China and Japan, with many Chinese feeling that the Japanese do not properly acknowledge what happened. However, today many individuals in each nation recognise the events as the horrific war crimes they were.

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This is the historic setting in which we endeavoured to explore the effects of essentialist beliefs for members of the victim group. Crucially, it was expected that essentialism would be positively associated with feelings of anger and a reluctance to forgive past events, and that this effect would be mediated by feeling connected with the victims. Those who are high in essentialism would feel that they share a deep, meaningful substance with ingroup victims, and would hence feel more connected to them. Feeling connected to the victims would in turn exacerbate the emotional responses to their suffering, and hence impact on anger and reluctance to forgive.

Method

Participants

56 Hong Kong Chinese participated in the study (mean age 27.32; 24 males, 32 females).

Procedure and Measures

Participants filled out a questionnaire in Cantonese which contained the measures as translated below. Questionnaires had been translated and back-translated from/to English by independent bilinguals.

Essentialism was measured with an abbreviated 4-item scale very similar to the one used in the Latvian study (1 = low essentialism to 7 = high essentialism); $\alpha = .78$.

Anger was measured with a 4-item scale (1 = totally disagree to 7 = totally agree). Items were ‘I feel angry for the way that the Japanese treated the Chinese in the Nanjing Massacre’; ‘Even though I was not personally involved, I still feel angry when I think about how the Japanese have treated the Chinese in the Nanjing Massacre’; ‘When I think about how the Japanese have raped Nanjing during the war, I still feel angry’; ‘Although I was not involved personally, I still feel angry as a Chinese when I think about how many Chinese were killed in the Nanjing Massacre’; $\alpha = .96$.

Reluctance to forgive was measured with a 7-item scale (1 = totally disagree to 7 = totally agree). Items were ‘I feel it is hard to forgive the Japanese for what they did to the Chinese during the Nanjing Massacre’; ‘I think the Japanese should feel ashamed for what they did to the Chinese’; ‘I think the Chinese should ask for compensation from the Japanese for what happened’; ‘I have difficulties in treating the Japanese equally to other people due to the previous offences carried out by them’; ‘It is hard for Chinese people to have Japanese friends due to what the Japanese did to the Chinese’; ‘I believe some apology from the Japanese should be made for their treatment of the Chinese in the past’; ‘I think the Japanese owe something to the Chinese because of their behaviour in the past’; $\alpha = .86$.

Feeling connected with the victims was measured with one item: ‘To what extent would you use the word ‘we’ to describe your relations with the victims of Nanjing’? (1 = not at all to 7 = very much). The questionnaire also included some items on demographics. Upon conclusion of the study, participants were thanked and debriefed.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

The means and standard deviations (in parentheses) on the variables were as follows: 4.17 (1.36) for essentialism, 3.98 (1.63) for connectedness with the victims, 5.72 (1.23) for anger and 4.57 (1.19) for reluctance to forgive. The sample was median split (median = 22 years) to test for mean differences between the younger and the older participants on all variables. Significant differences emerged for ‘connectedness with the victims’ (F (1, 51) = 4.78, $p < .05$), with older participants feeling more connectedness with the victims (Ms = 4.42, 3.48). However, age or other demographic variables did not moderate any of the effects reported below.

Is essentialism positively associated with more anger and greater reluctance to forgive, and is this effect mediated by perceived connectedness with the victims?

To test whether the effect of essentialism on reluctance to forgive was mediated by connectedness with the victims, again Baron and Kenny’s (1986) three-step method was used.

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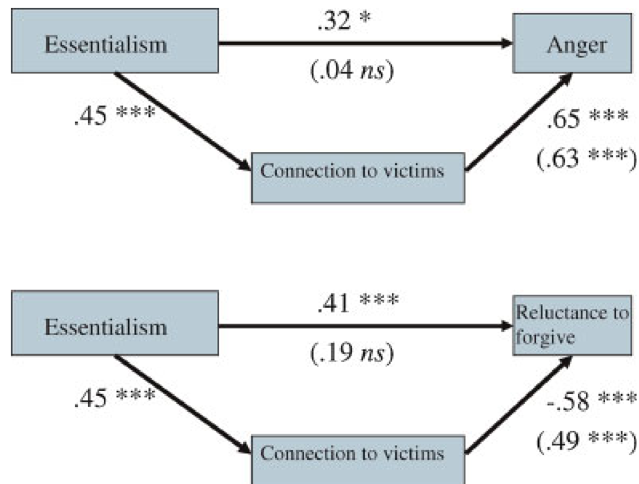

Figure 4. The effect of essentialism and anger and reluctance to forgive in study 3 (Hong Kong) (bi-variate correlations outside parentheses, standardised β values inside parentheses)

Anger as DV As can be seen in the top half of Figure 4, essentialism significantly predicted connection to the victims (correlation coefficient outside parentheses), fulfilling the first condition stipulated by Baron and Kenny (1986). Essentialism also significantly predicted anger, fulfilling the second condition. Finally, when anger was regressed simultaneously from essentialism and connectedness (see β values in parentheses), the β for connectedness was significant, while the β for essentialism was not. The R^2 for this model was .43, $p < .001$. Hence, the effect was indeed mediated.

Reluctance to Forgive as DV As can be seen in the lower half of Figure 4, essentialism significantly predicted connectedness (correlation coefficient outside parentheses), fulfilling the first condition. As indicated above, essentialism also significantly predicted reluctance to forgive, fulfilling the second condition. Finally, when reluctance to forgive was regressed simultaneously from essentialism and connectedness (see β values in parentheses), the β for connectedness was significant, while the β for essentialism was not. The R^2 square for this model was .37, $p < .001$. Hence, the effect was indeed mediated.

Alternative Models

Again, although no alternative hypotheses had been held *a priori*, a couple of other mediation models were tested to yield corroborating evidence for the hypothesised effects. First, it was examined whether the effect of connectedness on anger was mediated by essentialism. This was ruled out because Baron and Kenny's third condition was violated: When predicting anger simultaneously from connectedness and essentialism, the β for the proposed mediator was not significant, $\beta = .04$, ns. Second, it was tested whether the effect of connectedness on reluctance to forgive is mediated by essentialism. This was ruled out because again Baron and Kenny's third condition was violated: When predicting reluctance simultaneously from connectedness and essentialism, the β for the proposed mediator was not significant, $\beta = .19$, ns. In short, the hypothesised mediation model was confirmed by the data while some unhypothesised alternative models were not, yielding further evidence for the expected effects.

Discussion

Clear evidence was found in support of the hypotheses. Essentialism was positively associated with anger and reluctance to forgive past events for members of the victim group, and these effects were mediated by feeling connected to the victims. Having a single-item measure for connectedness was less than optimal, because it can be assumed to increase random measurement errors. However, because random measurement errors effectively lead to more conservative testing (Schmidt & Hunter, 1996), it should be noted that a more reliable (multi-item) measure would be likely to reveal an even stronger mediated effect rather than a weaker one.

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GENERAL DISCUSSION

Some clear evidence was found in support of the predictions. Two studies, conducted in very different national settings, supported the idea that essentialist beliefs are both positively and negatively linked to feelings of collective guilt among members of the perpetrator group, and that the negative indirect effect suppresses the direct positive effect unless controlled for. A further study, broadening the scope by focussing on yet another national setting, confirmed that essentialist beliefs also inform responses to past atrocities by members of the victim group. Essentialism was positively related to anger and a reluctance to forgive past actions, and these effects were mediated by feeling connected with the victims.

Heretofore, the literatures on group characteristics like perceived essentialism on the one hand and intergroup emotions like guilt on the other have been developing relatively separately (although, see Denson et al., 2006). This paper draws on both, and in this hopefully demonstrates that considering both types of concepts can lead to research of both applied and theoretical importance. It also underscores that although essentialism has been linked to negative intergroup outcomes, it can also be associated with positive outcomes. This supports the position of others who have demonstrated that the effects of essentialism depend on the situation, and cannot be assumed to be all bad or all good (Epstein Jayaratne et al., 2006; Haslam, Bastian, Bain, & Kashima, 2006; Haslam & Levy, 2006; Verkuyten, 2003).

What, then, are the strength and weaknesses of the present research? In terms of weaknesses, one obvious shortcoming of the present work is that it is correlational by nature. Stronger evidence for the proposed causal direction of effects could, of course, have been obtained using an experimental method. Although it is assumed that important concepts like essentialist beliefs are not easily manipulated, and although there are considerable ethical complications in attempting to manipulate them, achieving this might not be impossible and could usefully be attempted in the future. In terms of strengths, we believe the current work benefits from investigating the effects of essentialism in three very different national settings, and among members of both sides of the intergroup events. This makes it possible to draw more generalised conclusions than if the focus had been on one setting, or one group, only.

There are a few issues worthy of future exploration. First of all, readers might recall that the hypothesis for a direct positive effect of essentialism on guilt among members of the perpetrator group was based on the argument that essentialism would increase feeling connected to the perpetrators, and feeling implicated in their behaviours. Although a reasonable assumption, the present research did not measure these additional mediators, and future research could usefully include such measures. Secondly, psychological research on intergroup emotions has often focussed jointly on two similar but nonetheless qualitatively different emotions, namely shame and guilt (e.g. Lickel, Schmader, Curtis, Scarnier, & Ames, 2005). The present research focussed on only one of these emotions, but future research could usefully extend this contribution by including both. Last but not least, future work could study simultaneously the effects of shared essence with victims and perpetrators. In many settings, people will be inclined to feel a certain connection to members of both groups, and it would be very interesting to explore how these perceived associations come into play together to affect responses to historic intergroup injustices.

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