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Subjective Essentialism in Action

Self-Anchoring and Social Control as Consequences of Fundamental Social Divides

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INTRODUCTION

*A*re you a Muslim or a Christian? Are you a Serb or a Bosnian? Are you a Catholic or a Protestant? Are you a Flemish or a Walloon? Quite often, questions such as these may come across as casual requests aimed at better knowing another person. After all, the various groups to which we belong shape a myriad of characteristics that contribute to making us the persons we are. We can think of such aspects as musical tastes, culinary preferences, or fashion favorites. We may also allude to somewhat more serious features such as political opinions or philosophical references. In most contexts, we are happy to provide the necessary information as knowledge about the likes and dislikes associated to various social groups will likely make the discussion more instructive. In some cases, however, the answer to inquiries of this kind may involve

more dramatic costs. Depending on your membership in certain groups, you are likely to be discriminated against at work, denied full access to certain social services, confronted with restrictions on visits to certain countries, and so on. In extreme situations group membership means life or death for the person being asked. Clearly, the world may well be a global village, but cultural divides of all sorts continue to play a most important role in our everyday life. People not only regulate their feelings, beliefs, and behaviors in accordance with their membership in racial, sexual, ethnic, religious, or ideological groups, and the consequences of this "strategy" are far from trivial.

In this chapter, we examine some of the consequences of the belief that the members of a group, and members of our own group in particular, share fundamental characteristics that others do not possess. Indeed, we claim that a series of important phenomena emerge upon the evocation of the fact that we and our group members may enjoy the presence of some inherent feature, of an underlying essence, that distinguishes us from other groups. In short, we consider the intragroup consequences of the belief that there is a fundamental partition of the world into us and them.

The perspective we adopt departs from currently available work on homogeneity, entitativity, and essentialism in several ways. First, our own research on this front has generally examined the causal path flowing from homogeneity through entitativity to essentialism. This is true for our work showing the impact of similarity and homogeneity on the facilitation of dispositional inferences regarding social units (Rogier & Yzerbyt, 1999; Yzerbyt & Rogier, 2001; Yzerbyt, Rogier, & Fiske, 1998) or on the emergence of identification (Castano, this volume; Castano, Yzerbyt, & Bourguignon, in press; for a review, see Yzerbyt, Castano, Leyens, & Paladino, 2000). Other researchers tended to adopt the same perspective to show, for instance, that similarity (Brewer, Weber, & Carini, 1995) or interdependence (L. Gaertner & Schopler, 1998), two factors thought to be antecedents of entitativity, provoked an increase in the level of ingroup favoritism. A similar message can be found in the work by Abelson and colleagues (Abelson, Dasgupta, Park, & Banaji, 1998; Dasgupta, Banaji, & Abelson, 1999) in that greater similarity among group members evokes the presence of shared underlying psychological characteristics. In the present contribution, we review some evidence that entitativity influences subjective essentialism, but we also propose that the reverse causal flow deserves close attention. We thus present new data that speak to the issue of the impact of subjective essentialism on entitativity (Yzerbyt, Corneille & Estrada, 2001).

A second distinctive message of the present chapter concerns the specific role of the self. There has been a revival of interest in the role of the self in intergroup processes (Cadinu & Rothbart, 1996; Otten & Wentura, 2001; Sedikides & Brewer, 2001). Indeed, we would like to argue that the self stands out as a key factor in the events that follow the evocation of some shared es-

sence with fellow ingroup members. Thus, although current wisdom has it that the self very much fades away when social divides become contextually salient (Turner, 1987b), our data suggest instead that the group may well be seen as even more an extension of the self whenever some fundamental characteristic is thought to be shared by all group members.

A third important characteristic of this chapter is the variety of dependent variables that are being examined. Indeed, contemporary research on entitativity and essentialism has tended to look at a rather limited range of perceptual and cognitive consequences of the belief in ingroup entitativity and essentialism. In the various studies reviewed below, we intend to show that beliefs regarding the existence of a group essence exert their impact on diverse and yet unexplored dimensions of intragroup relations. In particular, we will concentrate on issues of self-anchoring and social control.

Before we turn to the heart of the matter, a first section will provide a reminder of the way we see the various concepts to be used in the rest of the chapter as well as how we conceive of their relationships. In a second section, we will turn our attention to the impact of essentialist beliefs on the emergence of entitativity. In particular, we will show that the conviction that group members share the same underlying properties leads to the exacerbation of the well-known accentuation effect (Tajfel & Wilkes, 1963).

Having provided empirical evidence for the idea that people are amazingly skilled at generating homogeneity and similarity whenever essentialist beliefs are present, the two following sections will be devoted to a series of recent studies aimed at showing how subjective essentialism directly affects intragroup processes. Indeed, we will argue that group members holding essentialist beliefs about their ingroup will be very much inclined to rely on self-anchoring. Specifically, in a series of experiments relying on the group polarization paradigm, we will show that even indirect indications of the essential nature of group membership seem to lead people to view their self as a point of reference.

In a fourth section, we will present preliminary evidence that people's beliefs about the nature of group membership also has direct consequences on the reactions that group members manifest toward their fellow group members. A reference to the existence of essential features would seem to alter the way people map the positions of the different members of the group. This is true for all group members but in particular for the most deviant ones.

We will conclude by elaborating a bit on the role of discrimination in triggering the impression that people share the same underlying essence as some others. As we see it, discrimination is a key factor leading victims to construe the social world in discrete categories. By invoking some inherent characteristics that account for the differential treatment they undergo, victims may regain some sense of control over the situation. Hopefully, we will have built a case for the importance of essentialist beliefs in social life.

ENTITATIVITY AND ESSENTIALISM

As the various chapters of the present volume demonstrate, recent years have witnessed a growing interest in such concepts as entitativity or essentialism. Contemporary research efforts focusing on entitativity, a notion first proposed by D. T. Campbell (1958), started to penetrate social psychology journals and edited books (Abelson, Dasgupta, Park, & Banaji, 1998; Brewer & Harasty, 1996; Dasgupta, Banaji & Abelson, 1999; Hamilton & Sherman, 1996; McGarty, Haslam, Hutchinson, & Grace, 1995; Wilder & Simon, 1998; Yzerbyt, Rogier, & Fiske, 1998) at about the same time that a series of authors, intrigued by Rothbart and Taylor's (1992) fascinating ideas that some social categories are responded to as if they were natural kinds, presented their initial empirical work on the role of essentialism in social perception (N. Haslam, 1998; Haslam, Rothschild & Ernst, 2000; Yzerbyt, Corneille, & Estrada, 2001; Yzerbyt, Rocher, & Schadron, 1997; see also, Hirschfeld, 1995, 1999). The joint emergence of these concepts is by no means coincidental. Indeed, there are a number of reasons to believe that they are related. Still, we agree with Hamilton et al. (this volume) when they suggest that "we are dealing with quite different and at least somewhat independent concepts." In other words, entitativity and essentialism should by no means be seen as synonyms. As to the potential confusion resulting from the constant association of these two terms, it may be useful to spell out a few guiding ideas that underlie our research program.

When D. T. Campbell (1958) created the neologism *entitativity*, he defined it as the degree of having the nature of an entity. A more constructive definitional effort came from the Campbell's provision of a series of cues that he thought was playing a major role in the perception of entitativity. These perceptual cues have since been examined by a variety of researchers (Gaertner & Schopler, 1998; Lickel et al., 2000) and seem to point in two directions. The first covers a series of group characteristics classically associated with work on social categories and stereotyping (e.g., similarity, proximity, group boundaries, etc.). The second set of group features seems more at home in the context of small group research (e.g., coordination in action, common fate, common goals, etc.).

Similarly, social psychological work on essentialism has been associated with the close inspection of a series of defining dimensions supposed to be associated with essentialism (N. Haslam, 1998; Rothbart & Taylor, 1992; Yzerbyt, Rocher, & Schadron, 1997). For instance, N. Haslam, Rothschild, and Ernst (2000) asked their participants to evaluate a series of social categories using eight features such as immutability, inherence, and uniformity, among others. These authors identified two dimensions organizing laypeople's essentialist beliefs. A first dimension corresponded closely to the philosophical concept of natural kind and included beliefs that a social category is natural, has a sharp boundary, immutability, historical invariance, and necessary features. The sec-

ond dimension, which Haslam et al. (2000) called reification, indicates the extent to which a social category is though to be a meaningful unit with deep commonalties. Loading highly on this factor were beliefs about the uniformity of the category, its inherent basis, and the inductive potential of category membership.

We applaud Haslam and colleagues' (2000) endeavor to sort out various features that have generally been associated with essentialism. However, there are also a number of limitations in this work. As a result, we think that finer distinctions within the reification factor may have been obscured. For instance, we suspect that the specific set of characteristics used in their work along with a series of methodological limitations of the study may have contributed to putting the distinction between the two dimensions of natural kind and reification at the forefront. A second problem is that a great deal of research suggests it is quite a different thing to assess the presence of a given characteristic of a target group, say, by asking people to evaluate the overall similarity of the group members and to rely on judgments that are less explicitly related to this same characteristic, by directly requesting evaluations of a series of group members on several personality traits, and only then computing the perceived homogeneity of the group members (for an illustration, see Linville and Fischer, this volume). At a third level, some degree of caution may be needed about respondents' ability and willingness to express an opinion about sensitive aspects of essentialism regarding a vast series of groups at the same time. In contrast, settings in which perceivers are led to provide rather concrete evaluations about one relevant target group may be more helpful in the study of relationships between various essentialist beliefs. Finally, the contemplation of several characteristics in what appears to be a decontextualized setting tells us little about the dynamic aspects of group perception. Clearly, the impression that people could or could not easily give up their membership in a given group and become member of another group, to take but one example, may be greatly affected by transient structural factors.

In order to try and discriminate between the two concepts of entitativity and essentialism (Yzerbyt, Corneille, & Estrada, 2001), we proposed a distinction between the phenotypic and genotypic levels of perception. The phenotype directly refers to the more perceptual aspects generally associated with entitativity. That is, we can talk of entitativity as mainly dealing with surface features of the group members and the group, all aspects that are thought to be easily perceived and judged by an external observer (D. T. Campbell, 1958). In contrast, the reference to genotype allows evoking the more inferential level of social perception, a level usually associated with the idea of essence. To be sure, the word *genotype* does *not* mean that we are building on a strict version of biological essentialism, and one can probably get a better grasp of the difference we propose between the genotypic and the phenotypic aspects of group perception by relying on similar distinctions in personality and social psychology.

Indeed, when talking about such constructs as traits or attitudes, observers are generally assuming that something deep inside people underlies their behaviors, opinions, and feelings. For instance, when people mention the trait "extroversion" with respect to someone, they use the term to evoke the existence of some disposition that this person has, and they do so by building upon a host of observations. There may well be an ongoing debate and markedly divergent views about the actual causes believed to be responsible for the emergence of a given attitude or a specific trait in any individual, whether learning processes and socialization or genetic factors are invoked, but it remains that constructs such as these capture a level of inference that make them qualitatively different from what is seen as simple indicators. For those students of the role of language in causal attribution and intergroup relations (Maass, 1999; Semin & Fiedler, 1991), a similar distinction is made between the concrete and abstract levels of communication. When communicating about some event by saying that "George is aggressive" rather than "George kicks the dog," the observer goes beyond the behavioral information and suggests the presence of some "thing" that presumably accounts for what is being observed.

In a way, we see a number of advantages in keeping a distinction between a reference to some essence that would not be strictly associated with a pure biological interpretation. Social observers may often react as if they were adopting some sort of "biological framework" when in fact they are referring to influences such as education, religion, culture, climate, and so on. As it turns out, the "inherence" characteristics as it was used by Haslam et al. (2000) is likely to be a proxy for essence even though is was located on the reification factor. Indeed, it has been found to be moderately correlated with the naturalness factor. Interestingly, our somewhat looser conception of what would be "natural" allows us to understand why people may often be tempted to attribute essential features to artifacts. A popular example is the sharp distinction between the cars made by different national groups. There is undoubtedly something of the Italian artistic touch and sophistication *in* the Alfa Romeo, and a Mercedes is *filled* with German strength and hardness.

This distinction lies at the heart of what we call subjective essentialism in the social domain (Yzerbyt, Rocher, & Schadron, 1997). When one or several perceptual cues point to the entitativity of a group of people, perceivers are inclined to infer the presence of some essence shared by these people. As a result, they may often end up making strong assumptions about the inductive potential and unalterability associated with group membership. In this sense, the present view on essentialism has much in common with Rothbart & Park's (this volume) definition of essentialist perception as the ascription to a group of fundamental, basic, or essential dispositions that are regarded as highly enduring and transmitted across time and space through the "mysterious mana" of biology or culture. We would add that the various aspects that D. T. Campbell (1958) saw as cues to entitativity play a major role in triggering such essentialist perception.

As a first empirical illustration of this process, our work on social attribution (Rogier & Yzerbyt, 1999; Yzerbyt et al., 1998) aimed at showing that high versus low levels of group entitativity facilitated versus hindered the emergence of essentialist perception. Specifically, we adapted several classic attribution scenarios (E. E. Jones & Harris, 1967; L. D. Ross, Amabile, & Steinmetz, 1977) to make them suitable for a group version and found that people confronted with behaviors emanating from more entitative groups (operationalized by means of group members' similarity or homogeneity in school affiliation or major) more readily inferred the presence of stable dispositions (for a review, see Yzerbyt & Rogier, 2001). We are not alone in suggesting that the use of traits and adjectives to describe people would be linked to some sort of natural-kind thinking and that people's tendency to rely on dispositional attribution and so to fall prey to the fundamental attribution error thus stands as an indicator of essentialist perception. For instance, Gelman and Heyman (1999) noted that the use of nouns rather than verbs to describe other people's behavior leads people to make stronger inferences over time and across settings. The same idea lies at the heart of the linguistic category model (Semin & Fiedler, 1991) and has been nicely illustrated in research on the linguistic intergroup bias (Maass, 1999).

Similarity or homogeneity would seem like an obvious way to manipulate the entitativity of the group (Dasgupta, Banaji, & Abelson, 1999). Still, the message put forth by Yzerbyt, Rogier, and Fiske (1998) should certainly not be taken to mean that the presence of shared attributes ought to be equated with entitativity. In fact, we would even argue that homogeneity or similarity is far from being the most powerful cue among the ones listed by D. T. Campbell (1958). Other factors such as the internal organization of the group, the presence of a common fate or the existence of common goals may prove far more efficient cues to signal the entitativity of a group (see Rothbart & Park, this volume).

In an attempt to collect evidence for the multiple roots of entitativity and the overall parallelism in their impact, we (Castano, Yzerbyt, & Bourguignon, in press; see Castano, this volume) conducted a series of four studies to show that various aspects of entitativity may impact on people's reactions to their own group. Distancing ourselves from the literature that say entitative groups come across as being more negative than non-entitative groups (Abelson et al., 1998), we proposed that when it comes to the ingroup, entitativity may actually be seen as a positive feature. One can think of several reasons for this (Castano, Yzerbyt, Paladino, & Sacchi, 2002; Hogg & Mullin, 1999; S. J. Sherman, Hamilton, & Lewis, 1999; Yzerbyt et al., 2000). For instance, group members may see an entitative ingroup as one which is more likely to act upon its agenda and indeed achieve its goals (Yzerbyt et al., 2000). Recent empirical work guided by mortality salience induction also suggests that an entitative group is probably more apt to reassure group members when they are reminded about their own physical finitude (Castano et al., 2002). Other authors have also stressed the fact that an entitative ingroup may better fulfill group members' need for

certainty by offering more definite information about the appropriate norms to be adopted (Hogg, this volume; Hogg & Mullin, 1999).

Using the European Union as a focal ingroup, our specific prediction was that group members would respond with an increased rather than decreased identification when the entitativity of the European Union happens to be augmented rather than diminished. We expected these findings to obtain mainly, if not only, for participants moderately identified with the European Union. Indeed, more extreme participants should not easily be affected by subtle manipulation of the entitativity of the ingroup, and only moderately identified individuals should possess the necessary latitude to modify their identification. The first study confronted participants with a video of the EU stressing the common fate and common goals of the millions of European citizens in 15 countries. The second study manipulated the similarity aspect of entitativity. Participants were given a list of characteristics of the 15 countries in the European Union and instructed to find differences vs. similarities between the countries and to communicate them to a third party by way of a short text. A third study used a salience manipulation by asking participants to express their opinion of the European Union in an intragroup versus intergroup context. Finally, the fourth study relied on two different levels of boundedness, or, to use Campbell's words, good continuation, by showing participants that the future borders of the European Union were either not yet entirely decided upon or, instead, very well defined. Here again, participants conveyed their impression about the group in a short written description.

In all four instances, the findings confirmed our prediction that the manipulation of a given aspect of entitativity would directly influence the change in identification of moderately identified members. More importantly, because the second and fourth study also secured information about participants' impressions of the group, we were able to test a mediational model linking our specific manipulations to the participants' level of identification by means of the degree of entitativity of the European Union as it was perceived by our participants. In both cases, the observed effect of the manipulation on identification (among individuals with a moderate attitude) was fully mediated by the entitativity score given to the texts by blind evaluators. Results such as these go a long way to show that different factors indeed influence the perception of entitativity. Group members were sensitive to the phenotypic information regarding their ingroup, that is, the perception and the representation of the group and group members, in a way that affected their identification with the ingroup. Seen from this perspective, the expression of a strong level of group identification is not unlike a claim that one possesses that which constitutes the essence of the ingroup.

In sum, a host of studies seems to suggest that people confronted with a high entitative group are tempted to jump to the conclusion that the members of the group likely possess or probably lack what can be seen as essential char-

acteristics. Once inferred, these essential, genotypic, features are invoked to account for the observed phenotypic regularities. Along similar lines, a study by Crawford, Sherman & Hamilton (2001) relied on a relearning paradigm to show that, when perceived entitativity of the group is high, observers seemed apt to extract the "essence" of the group and view the individual members as interchangeable parts. Because people who are member of a certain category or a certain group display signs of entitativity, we are inclined to interpret the observed behaviors as expressions of something inherent in the group members, an underlying essence. It is useful to note in passing that we were careful in our studies on the European identification to compare the impact of social categories that varied in their degree of entitativity. Although we would want to argue about the exact meaning some authors give to the notion of aggregate (Gil-White, 2001), there is no ground here for the potential criticism that the comparison involved a social category on the one hand and an aggregate on the other.

All in all, the empirical efforts detailed above are closely related to the observation that social perceivers are Aristotelian rather than Galilean and tend to ascribe the various social phenomena they witness in their daily lives to inherent characteristics of people rather than to the dynamics of the relation and the temporary situational forces. This basic partiality in our perception of the social environment, which some authors call lay dispositionism when applied to individual observers (L. D. Ross & Nisbett, 1991), departs from the Lewinian framework characterizing social psychology and seems to be also operating when the targets of our judgment are social groups. In the next section, we leave the causal path from entitativity to essentialism and turn our attention to the reverse causal flow, asking ourselves how our beliefs about the existence of fundamental characteristics may impact the perception of entitativity.

ESSENTIALISM AND THE CREATION OF ENTITATIVITY

One of the most fascinating questions in research on entitativity and essentialism is how the perception of groups as being based on essential features affects people's views regarding these groups. Is it the case, for instance, that groups whose members are thought to share a common essence are also seen as having more surface attributes in common? Is perceived homogeneity or similarity influenced by the belief that group members possess some fundamental characteristics even when the implications of the presence of these underlying features remain entirely unknown? This is the first question to which we devoted our efforts (Yzerbyt, Corneille, & Estrada, 2001; Yzerbyt & Rocher, 2002).

To examine this issue, we relied on a paradigm that was adapted from a classic study by Tajfel and Wilkes (1963; Corneille, Klein, Lambert, & Judd, 2002). In an experiment that would turn out to have a lasting impact on social

psychology, Tajfel and Wilkes asked their participants to evaluate a set of eight lines. Depending on conditions, each line was presented separately (the no-label condition), the lines were always associated with one of two labels but there was no systematic relation between the length of the line and the specific label (the random-label condition), or the length of the line was systematically linked to the label (the correlated-label condition). The data revealed that a systematic association with a trivial category label induced perceivers to accentuate the differences between the two sets of lines. Later work confirmed that there is also a propensity for people to increase the similarity within the categories (see, for instance, Krueger & Clement, 1994; McGarty & Penny, 1988; McGarty & Turner, 1992), at least on dimensions that best allow teasing apart the two categories (Corneille & Judd, 1999).

Clearly, the correlated-label condition imagined by Tajfel and Wilkes (1963) should be seen as providing only a minimal set of essentialist beliefs. Consistent with our subjective essentialist perspective, we hypothesized that the imposition of a meaningful as opposed to a trivial category label should invite perceivers to magnify the accentuation effects and to see the groups even more as entities. We thus expected that the availability of a naive theory leading people to assume a fair degree of underlying coherence where little in fact exists would have perceivers strive to reinforce similarity and homogeneity at the surface level.

The scenario of the studies was quite simple. We asked students coming from the same population as our participants to write a one-page description of themselves in the context of a social setting. We selected 10 descriptions on the basis of the richness and length, rewrote them, and presented them on separate sheets. In a first study (Yzerbyt & Buidin, 1998, Experiment 1), the 10 descriptions were distributed in two groups of five before being handed out to participants. The participants' task was to read the first group of five descriptions and form an idea of the first group. They were then to come back to the first description, rate the first person on a series of 10 traits, read the second description and rate the second person on the same 10 traits, and so on. Once the five members of the first group were evaluated, participants were instructed to rate the group as a whole, again using the 10 traits. These steps were then repeated for the second group of five members. These traits had been carefully selected so that two scales would include each one of the five dimensions of Norman's (1963) Big Five factor structure. The analysis of the ratings revealed that 7 of the 10 scales were in fact highly intercorrelated and allowed the computation of a global index of sociability.

Apart from the use of one of two random distributions of the 10 descriptions, the other independent variable was the specific rationale given to the participants for the constitution of the two groups. Whereas half of the participants learned that the two groups of five people corresponded to two sets of

people waiting for a different bus, the remaining participants were told that the two groups comprised people sharing a different genetic marker. Pretest work had shown that these two kinds of groups were thought to be quite different in their degree of essentialism.

Using the ratings given to the group members and to the groups allowed the computing of a variety of indices of central tendency (two group-based evaluations and two target-based evaluations for each participant) and variability (one standard deviation of the sociability index within each group of five targets). Confirming the random nature of the distribution of the 10 descriptions in two groups of five, we found no difference in the group-based or target–based evaluations of the groups. In contrast, and in line with our predictions, the within-group standard deviation was significantly lower when participants were led to think that the groups revolved around different genetic markers than when participants thought that they comprised people waiting for different buses. This finding emphasizes the striking power of beliefs regarding the presence of a higher level of perceived internal coherence in the groups.

A second study (Yzerbyt & Buidin, 1998, Experiment 2) relied on the same scenario with the difference that the descriptions were first ranked on the basis of the mean evaluations given in the bus condition of the random study. In other words, one group comprised the five most sociable targets and the other was made of the five least sociable targets. Within each group, the five descriptions were then presented in a random order. Aside from the fact that participants were confronted with one of two orders of presentation, depending on whether the more social group was presented first or second, the crucial experimental manipulation concerned the alleged nature of the groups. In the bus condition, the two groups were said to comprise people waiting for a different bus. Participants in the gene condition learned that the two groups consisted of people with different genetic markers. As expected, the nature of the beliefs influenced the perceived entitativity of the groups. Participants rated the sociability of the five group members to be more similar when they were informed that the group members shared the same genetic marker than when they thought that the groups comprised people waiting for a different bus.

A third condition, in which participants were simply informed that they would be confronted with descriptions of 10 people, was also added in the study. Because there was no mention of the existence of two groups in this condition, participants were not asked to rate the groups in and of themselves. Supporting our idea that the provision of a meaningful basis of categorization facilitates the emergence of accentuation, the built-in difference between the more sociable and the less sociable group was qualified by the a priori beliefs about the group. Participants saw little difference between the sociability of the two groups when the various descriptions allegedly originated from 10 people or when the two groups were said to comprise five people waiting for a different bus. In sharp

contrast, the mention of some essential feature associated with group membership led to the perception of a significantly stronger difference between the two groups.

Other empirical demonstrations of perceivers' enormous potential for accentuation when groups are organized around essential features can be found in a study using the illusory correlation paradigm (Yzerbyt, Rocher, McGarty & Haslam, 1997; see Yzerbyt & Rocher, 2002). The illusory correlation paradigm has become a classic and there is thus no need to dwell on its detailed aspects here (Hamilton & Gifford, 1976). Suffice it to say that participants were presented with information about the behaviors of the members of two groups, a majority and a minority. Most behaviors are positive but the proportion of positive to negative behaviors is actually the same in both groups. A classic finding is that people tend to associate more negativity with the minority group. Over the years, it has become clear that the prevailing explanation is one in terms of differentiated meaning (Berndsen, Spears, McGarty, & van der Pligt, 1998; McGarty, Haslam, Turner, & Oakes, 1993; McGarty, Yzerbyt, & Spears, 2002; for a review, see Berndsen, Spears, Van der Pligt, & McCarty,2002). Various features of the situation induce perceivers to differentiate the two groups and, because there seems to be a subtle advantage for the initial working hypothesis that the largest group is positive, the final impression is one of more negativity among members of the minority.

To the extent that the differentiated-meaning explanation rests on the idea that participants are likely to confront a working hypothesis against the data, we (Yzerbyt, Rocher, McGarty & Haslam, 1997) reasoned that one key factor that may affect the subjective validity of this hypothesis could be the belief that group membership indeed rests on the presence of some fundamental feature. As expected, compared to control participants who received no other indication about the groups than that they were real groups out there, participants informed that the groups had been constituted by clinical psychologists, a profession thought to know a great deal about essential features of human beings, ended up with a much stronger illusory correlation. In contrast, participants told that the people had been assigned to a particular group by means of a computer program, a method taken to show only limited consideration for people's deep underlying characteristics, failed to show any sign of illusory correlation.

Like the above series of experiments, this study provides compelling evidence that perceivers' naive theories about the underlying essence of a group affect their construal of the group as a social entity. When participants were informed that groups consisted of people sharing some inherent property, they created similarity and homogeneity at the surface level. Data such as these stress the role of essentialism in intergroup relations because the nature of the beliefs causes a perception of similarity among group members. In the following section, we examine the impact of essentialist beliefs on the way people react to fellow ingroup members.

ESSENTIALISM AND GROUP POLARIZATION

As members of groups, we form beliefs about those very social entities to which we belong. Is it the case that insiders are sensitive to the assumed nature of their group and shape their behaviors accordingly? To begin to address this issue, we set out to examine the impact of naive theories about the origin of the ingroup on group decision-making processes. In a series of studies (Yzerbyt & Estrada, 1999), we examined the role of subjective essentialism in the construction of ingroup consensus by relying on a standard group-polarization paradigm. Participants were asked to volunteer for a study on opinion and decision making and were presented with a series of 10 risky dilemmas taken from the group polarization literature. Typically, such dilemmas describe a situation in which a target person is confronted with one line of action that is unattractive but involves no risk at all and another line of action that is much more attractive but entails some level of risk. The task of the participants is to read each dilemma and indicate the highest level of risk for them to continue to encourage the target person to select the attractive line of action.

The study took place in two sessions separated by one week. In a first session, up to 5 participants were first given a trial dilemma to familiarize them with the dependent measures. They were then given a series of 10 dilemmas and ample time to come up with their answers. Upon completion of the dilemma questionnaire, participants were asked whether they would agree to come back to the laboratory along with four other participants in order to study group decision making. In addition to setting an appointment time for the second session, participants were invited to take part to a test allegedly aimed at identifying the presence of certain personal characteristics. Specifically, they were asked to put a sample of their saliva on a small colored test paper. The female experimenter explained the result of the test could or could not be important for the second part of the study and that participants would receive more information if necessary. She then displayed the five colors that could result from the saliva test and explained that each color was associated with a different set of objective characteristics and that a few minutes were needed for the test paper to take on a particular color. Taking advantage of participant's examining the names given to the various colors, the experimenter randomly selected one of five precolored test papers and presented it as being the result of the participant's saliva test. Participants were then informed of the result of the saliva test that characterized them and asked to fill in the record sheet accordingly. An appointment was made for a second session.

In the second session, participants (from 3 to 5) were seated around a table in the middle of a large room. Control participants were informed that they would be presented with the same dilemmas as the ones used during the first session and that they were expected to reach a consensus in their answers using a maximum of 60 minutes for the 10 dilemmas. Experimental participants were

also asked to reexamine their record sheet and to notice that they were all associated with the same color, hence with the same set of objective characteristics. Actually, the assignment to the conditions was purely random; the only constraint was that participants were assigned to groups by test color.

At the end of the time given for the group task, participants were asked to individually sit either at one of the four tables placed against the walls of the lab room or at the central table. They were invited to go over each dilemma anew and to indicate what they now thought was the appropriate answer for each problem. Finally, participants were given a series of manipulation checks. They were then debriefed, thanked, and dismissed. Manipulation checks confirmed that our manipulation of the naive theories was successful.

In line with the standard procedure used in group polarization research, we first looked at the answers provided during the initial, individual phase. Not surprisingly, participants later assigned in one of the two conditions initially expressed similar views on the dilemmas. As a means of evaluating the presence of group polarization, we then compared the group answers to the initial individual answers. The average reactions to the 10 dilemmas revealed the presence of a significant risky shift. We had no clear expectations regarding the amount of polarization that could emerge in each one of the two conditions. On the one hand, it is possible to argue that people who are told that they share the same essence would be less ready to change their initial position. This could be because members of essentialized groups would already see themselves as a prototypical instance of the group or, alternatively, because they would like to retain their individual viewpoint as much as possible in order to affirm their distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991). On the other hand, the information regarding the underlying essence could facilitate the operation of informational and normative influence among the members of the group and result in greater polarization. Although the means were more consistent with the first than with the second conjecture, an ANOVA analysis indicated that the total amount of polarization on the 10 dilemmas was comparable in these two conditions. This pattern of findings means that all participants manifested polarization when confronted with a group decision.

Because we expected that naive theories about the foundation of the group would indeed influence the *way* people react toward other group members' positions, we compared how participants in the different conditions changed their individual decision into a group decision. To do this, we computed the squared difference between the initial individual answers and the group answer. The data revealed that the average amount of individual change was lower in the experimental than in the control condition. Such a pattern suggests that members of essentialized groups felt less of a need than control participants to abandon their individual position. To evaluate this interpretation more directly, we also computed the squared difference between the initial and the final individual answers. As expected, the data showed that the average impact of the

group discussion was more limited when participants thought that all group members shared the same essence. In sum, essentialized participants were more likely to maintain their initial position despite the experience of the group discussion.

These data provide intriguing evidence that people do not react in the same way when they think of themselves as a member of an ad hoc group or as a member of a group that is based on the shared presence of some deep characteristics. Although we provided our experimental participants with minimal information about the essential nature of the groups, such knowledge had a definite impact on the way they reacted to the situation. In the present case, the simple activation of naive theories reinforcing the ontological status of the group changed the way the members of the groups reached consensus in a decision-making context by minimizing their willingness to modify their initial position. In other words, the shifts toward the "new" consensual answer appeared to be smaller and more evenly distributed among members of essentialized than nonessentialized groups.

One possible explanation for this finding is that the members of essentialized groups saw the positions held by the different members of their group as being less different from each other. In a related vein, the reference to a strong ontological status of the group may have encouraged these participants to consider themselves as a prototypical incarnation of their group. As a result, members of essentialized groups may feel less of a need to abandon their individual positions. As we indicated, one intriguing alternative interpretation of our findings is that members of essentialist groups were more strongly opposed to the group decision and more reluctant to give up their distinctive features than members of nonessentialist groups. In this perspective, essentialized participants stick to their personal views in order to reaffirm their sense of uniqueness (Brewer, 1991).

ESSENTIALISM AND SELF-ANCHORING

Obviously, the former explanation is consistent with the view that people rely on their beliefs regarding the underlying essence of their group to create similarity. Along the lines developed by Cadinu and Rothbart (1996) in their work on self-anchoring (see also Otten & Wentura, 2001), group members would then see the rest of their group as less different from themselves. That is, they build upon their own characteristics and start seeing the group as a more coherent entity. This phenomenon bears some resemblance to social projection (Krueger, 1998). In contrast, the latter explanation stresses the fact that deep sharedness (especially when it concerns groups that have not been freely chosen) can be experienced as oppressive and lead group members to reaffirm their idiosyncrasy. In terms of Brewer (1991) and her theory of optimal distinc-

tiveness, one would thus say that group members would be reluctant to adopt other people's views when their need for differentiation gets activated by the explicit reference to a shared underlying characteristic.

In an attempt to replicate the above findings and to collect empirical evidence that would allow us to begin disentangling these two explanations, we designed a second study (Yzerbyt & Estrada, 1999, Experiment 2). In order to simplify the logistics of the experiment, we developed a scenario in which participants were confronted with a virtual group rather than with actual participants. Concretely, participants were called into the laboratory and informed that the study concerned the impact of various perceptual types on decision making. As a means of securing an initial attitudinal measure, participants were given an answer sheet and asked to provide their attitude regarding a controversial issue, namely, whether students reaching the end of the first level of their curriculum in psychology should be forced to undergo a psychological checkup. Participants indicated their reactions on a scale from 1 (totally against) to 7 (totally in favor) and wrote the various arguments in support of their position. Next, participants were presented with two filler tasks aimed at reinforcing the cover story. At this point, experimental participants were invited to take a perceptual test allegedly aimed at uncovering the presence of certain deep personality features. This test was made to comprise 7 groups of 3 geometrical figures, and the participant's task was simply to select the most preferred figure of the three. At the end of the test the experimenter explained that, although the test had given reliable information about the perceptual type of the participant, she wanted to further ascertain this result by means of a well-established saliva test. In all cases, the saliva test was said to have confirmed the perceptual type of the participant.

All participants were then given a chance to examine the answers to the controversial issue (both the scale values and the arguments) of four other participants that, they learned, had already taken part to the experiment. Experimental participants were informed that all four students had the same perceptual type as themselves. The opinions distributed to the participants were actual opinions randomly selected from a pool of 9 original answers. Each random selection was yoked across control and experimental participants. Participants were asked to imagine a two-hour group discussion with these four people and presented with a series of questions concerning their likely opinion about the controversial issue at the end of the two-hour discussion, the group's final opinion, the most representative member of the group, their perception of homogeneity and entitativity of the group at the beginning and at the end of the discussion, the prototypicality of each one of the five members of the group, and the degree of affinity and similarity between themselves and the group.

If the pattern observed in our first study is mainly the consequence of self-anchoring and social projection, the provision of naive theories about the essential nature of the group should lead participants in the present experiment

to see themselves as more typical representatives of the group when they have been informed that they share a fundamental characteristic with the other members of the virtual discussion group. In sharp contrast, if some kind of search for distinctiveness underlies the inertia in individual positions evidenced in the first study, we should rather observe a general reluctance in presenting oneself as a typical representative of the group. A similar rationale holds for the remaining dependent measures.

Clearly, the observed data provide strong support for our self-anchoring hypothesis and allow us to question the viability of an optimal distinctiveness interpretation of the data. Interestingly, we observed no difference in the individual positions collected either before or after the provision of the opinions of the four virtual participants depending on the experimental condition. This finding notwithstanding, the within-condition correlations between the final individual position and the estimated final group position indicated that there was an impact of the group opinions on the individual position only when the group was said to be based on the shared existence of a perceptual type. We also computed the absolute distance between the group's opinion and the final individual answer. Here again, the individual was significantly closer to the group's opinion when the experimenter had referred to the essence of the group. The distance between participants' final individual position and the position of the most typical group member was also significantly smaller when essential attributes of the group had been evoked.

The image of the group was also significantly affected by the instructions. Compared to control participants, experimental participants saw the group as significantly more homogeneous and entitative. Interestingly, this was true only on the questions pertaining to the end of the discussion. In other words, compared to control participants, experimental participants did not think that the group was more entitative at the beginning of the discussion. What did participants think concerning the prototypicality of themselves and their group members? On average, the five members of the group were seen as more representative of the group when the experimenter had mentioned the presence of some essential group characteristic. More importantly, the participants assigned to themselves a much higher level of prototypicality in the essentialized groups than in the control groups. Finally, experimental participants saw much more affinity and similarity between themselves and the rest of the group than control participants.

Clearly, although further research is certainly needed to disentangle the interpretation based on self-anchoring and social projection (Cadinu & Rothbart, 1996; Krueger, 1998; Yzerbyt, Corneille, Estrada, 2001) from the one derived from optimal distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991), data such as these provide compelling evidence that naive beliefs about the nature of groups may indeed have a substantial impact on group decision making. The present line of research also proves interesting in the context of current work on intragroup dynamics

(Abrams, Marques, Bown, & Henson, 2000; Marques, Abrams, Paez, & Martinez-Taboada, 2000; Marques & Yzerbyt, 1988; Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988; Coull, Yzerbyt, Castano, Paladino, & Leemans, 2001; for reviews, see Marques, Abrams, Paez, & Hogg, 2000; Yzerbyt, Castano, Leyens, & Paladino, 2000). As a matter of fact, it would seem that the way people react toward deviant ingroup members may be influenced by their beliefs about the nature of what brings the group members together in the first place. This is the focus of the next section.

ESSENTIALISM AND REACTIONS TO DEVIANCE

Group life is far from being always harmonious. Dissension and consensus are at the heart of group dynamics. How people react to the presence of a deviant group member is of utmost importance in the evolution of a group (Asch, 1956b; Moscovici, 1976; Schachter, 1951). Often, some form of negotiation is being initiated. Either marginal views are set aside to the full benefit of the dominant wisdom or the challenging perspective gets somehow integrated into the most popular position and new convictions emerge from the process (for review, see Van Avermaet, 1996). When the gap between the deviant and the rest of the group is too large, the reaction of the rest of the group is likely to be extreme, and schisms may even take place (Sani & Reicher, 2000). That is, the deviant is derogated (Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988) if not excommunicated (Castano, Paladino, Coull, & Yzerbyt, in press; for reviews, see Marques, Abrams, Paez, & Hogg, 2000; Yzerbyt, Castano, Leyens, & Paladino, 2000).

On the basis of Yzerbyt and Estrada's (1999) findings, we reasoned that, compared to members of nonessentialized groups, members of essentialized groups may indeed be inclined to react differently to deviant group members than members of less essentialized groups. Although they would generally tend to see group members in a more homogeneous way, i.e., a tendency corresponding to some sort of assimilation, they would also see a strongly divergent position as more irreconcilable with the dominant perspective, i.e., a pattern akin to a contrast effect. In sum, we expected members of essentialized groups to be more eager to affirm the homogeneity of the group and to exacerbate the reaction toward the deviant when its position is too distant from the dominant norm. The manifestation of strong opposition to the norm of the group would be taken very seriously and provoke a series of reactions such that reconciliation would seem difficult to achieve.

The study we designed to test this hypothesis (Estrada & Yzerbyt, 2002) once again had participants take part in a virtual discussion group. First, participants were given an answer sheet and asked to communicate their attitude toward the same controversial proposal as the one used by Yzerbyt and Estrada (2000, Experiment 2), that is, students reaching the end of the first level of

their curriculum in psychology should be forced to undergo a psychological checkup. Participants indicated their answer on a scale from 1 (totally against) to 7 (totally in favor) and provided various arguments in support of their attitudinal position, which they wrote on the answer sheet. As a means to later create the impression that they shared some underlying feature with the other members of their discussion group, experimental participants were invited to take a perceptual test allegedly aimed at uncovering the presence of certain deep personality features. The same procedure was used as in Yzerbyt and Estrada (1999, Experiment 2).

All participants were then given a chance to examine the scale values and the list of arguments provided by four other participants that, they learned, had already taken part in the experiment. Experimental participants were informed that all four students shared the same perceptual type as themselves. All participants then received a series of three pro-norm opinions, that is, opinions that were on the same side of the scale as the one expressed by the participants themselves, be it in favor or against the proposal. The nature of the fourth opinion distributed to the participants allowed manipulating the extremity of the deviant opinion. Whereas half the participants were provided with a moderately anti-norm opinion, the other half read a radical anti-norm opinion. It is important to note that the deviant was always holding an opinion which was located across the midpoint of the attitudinal scale, i.e., an anti-norm position.

Participants were asked to imagine a two-hour group discussion with these four people and presented with a series of questions concerning the four group members' opinions about the controversial issue, their own position at the end of the two-hour discussion, the group's final opinion, their perception of groupness at the end of the discussion, the prototypicality of and their impression of each one of the five members of the group, the identity of the most and least representative member of the group (the latter measure allowing verification that participants had taken good notice of the anti-norm deviant), the distance between the participant and the least representative member of the group, and the degree of affinity and similarity between themselves and the group.

Results indicated that the initial attitudes of the participants were the same in the various cells of the design. Also, and importantly, participants' initial agreement or disagreement with the proposal did not influence the pattern of findings. As a result, all analyses were conducted on the aggregated set of data. Confirming the success of our manipulation, the radical anti-norm deviant was seen as significantly less representative of the group's opinion than the moderately anti-norm deviant. Also, participants indicated that they saw more difference between themselves and the radical anti-norm deviant than between themselves and the moderately anti-norm deviant. Interestingly, participants' perceived difference between themselves and the deviant was more pronounced when the group was essentialized.

At a more global level, the perceived affinity and similarity among group

members and the perceived distance between participants' initial position and the final group position confirmed that essentialism had the predicted effect. Still, the direct measures of groupness did not reveal the presence of different impressions among participants in the various conditions. Several explanations may account for this somewhat unexpected finding, the most reasonable being that the two measures of groupness may not be ideal in the present case. Indeed, we relied on the same measures we used before in settings where people were confronted only with pro-norm group members. Although these measures proved sensitive enough when all participants shared largely similar views about the proposal, they may actually be too crude to capture the subtle differences between the four conditions created here.

The key measures concerned participants' indication of the likely position of themselves and each one of the group members at the end of the discussion. We computed three different indices to examine this issue. One index corresponded to the average squared distance between the deviant and the three pro-norm members of the group, another to the average squared distance between the deviant and the participants themselves, and a last one to the average squared distance between the participants themselves and the three pro-norm members of the group.

Not surprisingly, the more extreme the deviant was, the more participants indicated that they perceived a distance between the deviant and the three other group members. Also, the more extreme the deviant was, the more distant the participants saw themselves from the target. Although the interaction failed to reach a conventional level of significance, the pattern of means suggested that the distance between participants and the radical deviant was perceived to be greater when the group had been essentialized than when it was not essentialized. Finally, and confirming this trend, a very significant interaction was found with respect to the squared distance between participants themselves and the three pro-norm members of the group. Specifically, the proximity among the four pro-norm individuals was perceived to be strongest in the essentialized groups confronted with a radical deviant and lowest in the nonessentialized groups confronted with a radical deviant.

In sum, this study provides promising evidence of the potential impact of essentialist beliefs on people's reactions to deviance. On the one hand, we replicated our earlier finding that essentialism goes hand in hand with a stronger propensity to manifest self-anchoring, as indicated by the lower squared distance between the initial attitude and the final position of the group. On the other, we found that essentialist beliefs regarding one's group triggered stronger reactions toward an extreme deviant, potentially precluding compromise and rehabilitation.

Reactions such as the ones observed in the above study are reminiscent of a number of responses of caution manifested toward ingroup members or candidates for the ingroup (for a review, see Yzerbyt et al., 2000). A case in point is

Brewer's (2000) insightful analysis of the various factors that may limit the effectiveness of crossed categorization policies in promoting smoother contact between members of different subgroups. She notes that when people simultaneously belong to two different categories, they may embrace an exclusive versus inclusive path. Whereas the latter strategy would have them consider any person who shares at least one category membership as an ingroup member, the former pushes people toward seeing targets who possess both memberships as their sole ingroup fellows. In the present context, we would see the essentialist stance as one that promotes an exclusive attitude with respect to group membership. We suspect that an essentialist posture would thus also lead to stronger manifestations of ingroup overexclusion effect (Castano, Yzerbyt, Bourguignon, & Seron, 2002; Leyens & Yzerbyt, 1992; Yzerbyt, Leyens, & Bellour, 1995).

Clearly, there is growing evidence for the fact that group members holding essentialist beliefs about group membership are prompt to see homogeneity among group members, to use their self as an anchor to evaluate ingroup members, and to express less tolerance toward clear instances of deviance. In our conclusion section, we would like to sum up the findings and offer some speculative thoughts about the factors that we believe may foster the emergence of essentialist beliefs in the first place.

CONCLUSION

In the present chapter, we have been stressing the benefits of examining the relations between entitativity and essentialism more closely. Complementing earlier work showing the impact of cues of entitativity on the emergence of essentialism, we have been pursuing the idea that essentialist beliefs may indeed have a series of noticeable effects on the perception of groups and group members. Our specific focus was on the consequences of subjective essentialism regarding the ingroup on the way people react toward the other group members. A consistent finding was that participants were much more similar to each other in their convergence toward a group position when they believed in the essential nature of their group. We argued that this was due to people's tendency to see themselves as full-fledged representatives of the group whenever they are convinced they share some deep underlying feature with other group members. In contrast to what would be predicted on the basis of optimal distinctiveness theory, we did not find that essentialized participants were keen to distance themselves from the rest of the group. Clearly, intragroup differentiation was not the main motive underlying the general inertia in people's positions. In all likelihood, the compromise within the group was obtained on the basis of the individual members' conviction that they were prototypical instances of the group. This tendency to rely on self-anchoring when one group gets essentialized

should probably be moderated by a series of factors yet to be explored. Indeed, it is possible that the members of an essentialized group would be happy to differentiate themselves from others on other dimensions than the one used for the study. In any event, further research should help us clarify this issue. Also, it is likely that some manifestation of increased adoption of group characteristics would take place when the normative dimensions are well specified.

A second finding concerns the impact of the essential definition of the ingroup on people's reactions to deviance. As it turns out, the pattern of data indicates that members of essentialized groups tend to see the members of their group as forming more of a homogeneous block in their attitudes and opinions about a key issue. This is not unlike what was found a long time ago by Sherif and Hovland (1961) in the attitudinal domain. Indeed, these authors observed that the way individuals react to a series of attitudinal statements was largely a function of their ego-involvement. When people's had a vested interest in the particular issue, the number of categories in which statements were distributed was reduced substantially. Moreover, the number of attitudinal statements deemed neither acceptable nor unacceptable decreased, and the two extreme categories of acceptable and unacceptable statement became more populated. This response is not unlike the reaction of members of essentialized groups toward the radical deviant as well as the pro-norm members.

One distinct feature of the empirical work presented in previous sections concerns the fact that we somehow informed experimental participants that the targets of judgment or themselves shared some underlying feature with their fellow group members. That such a straightforward instruction leads outside observers and members of essentialized groups alike to boost the level of entitativity of the target group and the homogeneity of its members is no trivial finding. Still, real life settings may tend to differ from the lab environment in precisely that aspect. That is, although we can think of some cases in which people are being explicitly told about the presence of deep underlying features, it is doubtful that such information is always made available. It would therefore seem important to be able to point out the various factors contributing to the emergence of essential beliefs in front of one or several target groups.

A good place to start our analysis is to come back to the various cues of entitativity and to their role in suggesting the presence of some underlying essence among group members. Chief among these were similarity, shared goals, and group boundaries. Building upon our own findings and those of several other researchers, we would argue that social conflict in general and discrimination in particular should play a pivotal role in the emergence and perpetuation of subjective essentialism. Indeed, discrimination would be the factor *par excellence* that establishes deep sharedness among ingroup members because it involves many of the entitativity cues identified by Campbell, such as similarity, common fate, and impermeability. For instance, research shows that discrimination has the capacity to encourage group members to accentuate ingroup

homogeneity (Jetten, Branscombe, Schmitt, & Spears, 2001; Rothgerber, 1997; Schmitt & Branscombe, 2001). Building upon this first set of findings, we would predict that discrimination likely invites group members to rely on an essentialist appraisal of the situation (C. L. Martin & Parker, 1995).

As can be seen, a basic tenet of our subjective essentialist view (Yzerbyt, Rocher, & Schadron, 1997) is that the ascription of essence to a social group is not only a continuous, rather than an all-or-none phenomenon, but also highly sensitive to the structure of the group relations rather than static and impervious to drastic changes in such aspects as relative status and hierarchy. As far as the first aspect is concerned, we would like to argue that essentialist beliefs indeed come in various levels of intensity. The data from Haslam and colleagues (1998) offer convincing evidence that widely different degrees of essence can be attached to different social groups and that is not like a social group is either fully or essentialized. As for the second characteristic, we propose that subjective essentialism is a dynamic reaction that is most sensitive to the features of the social context and the peculiarities of social perceivers. For some people and in some circumstances, the confrontation with a given group of people may not give way at all to essentialist beliefs. For other people or in a somewhat different setting, the same group of people may insinuate the idea of an underlying essence.

Examples abound showing that the social context may in fact modulate the extent to which certain categories of people get essentialized. Even people working in a firm may come to be seen, by others and even more so by themselves, in a manner that is strongly reminiscent of an essentialist stance. In Belgium, the 70-year-old national air company, Sabena, recently met with a traumatic bankruptcy. This social tragedy led everybody in the country to start talking of "Sabenians." Belgian citizens and company workers alike were suddenly made aware that a great many Sabenians had somehow been living in a separate world. Due to specific job constraints, pilots, crew members, and even ground workers were hardly meeting anybody else outside of their work context, most of them finding a spouse or a partner within the company. More surprising, the number of employees who actually had a parent who had worked for the same company was astoundingly high. There is now an official website specially reserved for Sabenians where members of the company can find help and comfort from former colleagues, as it would seem that only congeners truly understand each other. One pilot recently committed suicide and, more than six months after the official end of corporated activities, several hundred Sabenians attended the funeral wearing the uniform of the company. We suspect that many of these workers will take quite some time to alter their way of thinking about themselves, and how many of them will be able to embrace new identities remains an open question. In sum, there is little doubt that most Belgians came close to having essentialized Sabenians, much as the company employees seem to have done themselves.

As the above situations illustrate, the study of subjective essentialism with respect to social groups is profitably distinguished from the strict biological interpretation of the concept sometimes promoted in anthropological work on essentialism (Gil-White, 2001). The present efforts are concerned with a much larger question than the issue of whether social observers are entitled to treat a particular group in terms of species or not. Rather, the aim is to gain a better understanding of the multifaceted consequences of endowing a social group with some essence as well as the conditions that lead to such a conception. The focus is thus on groups as perceived by the observers, along with the cognitive and social implications of adopting an essentialist approach.

To delineate once more our position regarding subjective essentialism in the social domain, we see subjective essentialism about social categories as the conviction that what people do, think, and feel is the expression of their deep nature (Rothbart & Park, this volume). In other words, observed behaviors are taken to derive from something that is largely shared by other group members and is endowed with a substantial level of inertia, be it associated with biology, culture, early socialization, or any other factor (for closely related views, Levy, Stroessner, & Dweck, 1998; Plaks et al., this volume). The belief that some kind of essence plays a causal role in shaping people's behaviors, opinions, and feelings is at odds with the idea that situational constraints are the main culprit in what takes place in the social arena, which can change both dramatically and rapidly. Given the close connection with the idea of dispositionism in interpersonal perception (L. D. Ross & Nisbett, 1991), the tendency to infer the presence of deep inherent features among social targets can also be seen as a process of "social attribution" (Yzerbyt & Rogier, 2001).

Clearly, the data collected in our studies indicate that there is a series of nontrivial phenomena that derive from the apparently innocent belief in the presence of some essence shared by the group members. We are only beginning to see the potential lessons of the present series of studies for our knowledge about group and intergroup behavior. A full specification of the impact of essentialist views in the perception of social groups awaits further investigation. Also, we are beginning to orient our work toward the identification of the various factors that generate such views in the first place. Hopefully, the provision of a global picture regarding both the antecedents and consequences of subjective essentialism should give access to some of the key dimensions of social conflict and help us find a way toward their resolution.