

**PSYCHOLOGY 407**  
**ESSENTIALISM IN COGNITION AND CULTURE**  
**SPRING 2004**  
**155 Straub Wed 10-12**

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**Course Description**

In this seminar we will address some fundamental questions about the nature of human concepts. In particular, we will explore a widely encountered and powerful mode of reasoning known as essentialist thinking. Essentialism is the belief that category members share important underlying properties that determine category identity and are responsible for other important characteristics of the category. Essentialist thinking affects how we view the *natural* world (e.g., how we categorize biological species). It also shapes the way we think about the *social* world (e.g., how we think about gender, race, mental illness, personality, and the self). In this seminar we will discuss recent theorizing and research on essentialism. Among the questions we will examine are the following. To what extent does an implicit belief in essences characterize people's thinking about natural and social categories? Do essentialist beliefs underlie young children's concepts or are early concepts instead formed on the basis of more primitive perceptual features? What role does language play in shaping and fostering essentialist reasoning? In what ways do essentialist beliefs about social categories such as race, ethnicity, and gender contribute to stereotyping and prejudice? To what extent do essentialist notions underlie judgments about personality, psychopathology, and continuity in personal identity across time? And is psychological essentialism a universal characteristic of human reasoning, prevalent across quite diverse cultures?

**Reading**

The text for the course is Gelman, S. (2003), *The Essential Child: Origins of Essentialism in Everyday Thought*. New York: Oxford University Press. Additional papers will be available online or on reserve at the library. A list of class topics and reading assignments is attached.

## Requirements

### 1. *Participation in the seminar (50% of grade).*

- The best and most enjoyable seminars are those in which everyone comes well prepared and makes thoughtful contributions to the discussion. To enhance the quality of the discussion students should read the assigned material *before* the relevant class meeting, and post at least one question, comment, or reaction concerning the reading on our Blackboard web site by 9 a.m. on the morning of each class. We will then do our best in class to address the issues people have raised.
- Each student will be asked to help facilitate the discussion for at least one seminar during the term. The discussion facilitator should come prepared to briefly summarize the week's readings, and to present ideas or questions to help “jump start” the discussion if it happens to peter out or stray too far from the topic at hand. Discussion facilitators should consult with me in the week before the relevant seminar meeting.
- Each student will give a short oral presentation of his or her class paper on May 19, 26 or June 2.

### 2. *Paper (50% of grade).*

Students will write an 8-10 page paper relevant to one or more of the topics discussed in class or in the readings. The paper could be a purely theoretical position piece, an empirical research proposal, a selective literature review, or an attempt to integrate material across different areas.

- Paper topics need to be approved by the end of Week 4 (April 23).
- Papers are due by the end of Week 9 (May 28).

## OUTLINE OF CLASS TOPICS

<b>Date</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Reading</b>
March 31	Introduction	Gelman Ch 1
April 7	Essentialism in Childhood I	Gelman pp 21-60
April 14	Essentialism in Childhood II	Gelman Chs 3 & 4
April 21	Essentialism in Childhood III	Gelman Chs 5 & 6
April 28	Essentialism and Language	Gelman Chs 7 & 8 Gelman Conference Talk
May 5	Essentialism, Evolution, & Culture	Gil-White (2001) Plus Commentaries and Reply Gil-White Conference Talk Carey Conference Talk
May 12	Essentialism and Race	Hirschfeld (1996) Hamilton et al. (in press) Haslam et al. (2001) Hamilton Conference Talk
May 19	Essentialism and Mental Disorders	Haslam & Ernst (2002) Haslam Conference Talk
May 26	Essentialism and Self Continuity	Chandler (2001) Chandler Conference Talk
June 2	Conclusions	Gelman Chs 10 & 11