

Construing Categories: Abstract (vs. Concrete) Thinking Leads to Greater Genetic Essentialism

Does *how* we think affect *what* we think about social groups? Construal level theory posits that people see the world on one of two levels: abstract (broad and decontextualized) or concrete (specific and detailed)ⁱ. Studies have found that moving from one construal level to another can affect attitudes, opinions, and behaviors. In my project, my coauthors and I examined how mindset level might influence how we perceive and feel about social groups.

Specifically, we focused on beliefs about genetic essentialism. Although contemporary societies typically eschew any proponents of explicit biological racism, people continue to perceive members of certain social categories (including racial groups) as having a shared “essence”—an innate, invariable, and unobservable property that all group members possess and that is causally related to group membershipⁱⁱ. Many researchers have illuminated the negative consequences of essentialist beliefs, especially their relations to prejudice and stereotypingⁱⁱⁱ, but few have explored their situational antecedents—that is, what might influence when people are more or less likely to engage in essentialist reasoning. We looked at one situational factor that can potentially influence the degree to which people endorse essentialist beliefs: construal level. We argued that people who construe the world more abstractly than concretely will be more inclined to believe in genetic essentialism, which, in turn, will lead to an increase in racial prejudice.

Specifically, we hypothesized that inducing an abstract (vs. concrete) construal would increase genetic essentialism because abstract thinking focuses people on identifying core, causal features that transcend specific situations. We tested this hypothesis across 4 studies, using different manipulations of construal level and different measures of genetic and racial essentialism. In general, we found support for our prediction that an abstract versus concrete construal produces greater proclivity for genetic essentialism—both generally and about racial groups in particular (Studies 1-4). Additionally, consistent with past research, greater belief in genetic essentialism led to a higher level of prejudice toward blacks (Study 4). Notably, while construal level significantly influenced biological attributions for traits and behaviors more generally, as well as essentialist reasoning about differences between racial groups in particular, it did not have a systematic impact on beliefs about social determinism (Study 2) or other components of essentialism (immutability, discreteness, and informativeness; Study 4).

Our work shows that indirect, subtle changes in mindset can impact beliefs about genetic essentialism. Due to the importance that essentialism seems to play in intergroup relations, it is important to understand what environments will promote or discourage essentialist thinking. These studies suggest that social groups that are more spatially, temporally, or socially distant (and thus more likely to be construed abstractly) may also be more likely to be essentialized. Additionally, though the policy implications of these findings remain to be tested, our research suggests that people might differentially support policies tied to race that are implemented now or far in the future, and policies that are implemented close by or far away.

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