

An Analysis of Ethnic Labels: Essentialism vs. Circumstantialism

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Labeling was used through the daily life of most people and is critical in the idea of ethnicity. The purpose behind this experiment was to test Lindenwood student's thought process behind ethnic labeling. Mainly the experiment was meant to develop the idea of whether an individual was more circumstantialist or essentialist in nature when dealing with ideas of labeling. The hypothesis was that the Lindenwood students would tend to lean toward the essentialist group thought process due to the diversity of the student body. Essentialist believed their biological parents passed on ethnicity. While circumstantialist believed ethnicity was created by behavior (White, 1999). The experiment would test this through the use of voluntary questionnaires that deal with two switched at birth scenarios. These switched at birth scenarios mainly deal with scenarios where a child born of a different ethnic background is raised by a family with a different ethnic background. There will also be a demographic survey. The results of the questionnaire and survey were analyzed with frequency tables. The results showed that there was no statistically significant pattern in the demographic surveys, but the questionnaires tended to support the hypothesis. The results showed that 68% of the responses were essentialist in nature and 32% were circumstantialist in nature. Further research should be done and the sample size needs to be bigger to increase validity. Academic research like this helps further the knowledge of the human brain and benefits other researchers.

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Ethnicity has been part of culture and society for thousands of years. This was because humans were constantly categorizing and labeling their world to make sense of it. The goal of the current study was to find out how people categorize and label each other into different ethnicities. In order to understand how people categorize each other, one must know how the category was defined. For the purposes of this study ethnicity will be defined as a group of people that share a common belief, ancestry, and most importantly, culture. Within this study there were two viewpoints that the participants will be given. The Essentialist group dealt with the idea that ethnicity was determined from someone's hereditary ethnic group; for example, a White-Christian is always a white Christian even if they begin worshipping at a mosque or worship at Hindu shrine. The Essentialist view they was that hereditary ethnicities such religious preferences cannot be changed by an individual (White, 1999). Meanwhile, the Circumstantialist group is much different and believes that depending on the environment and behavior of the individuals they can change their ethnicity. Basically they believe that a White-Christian that changed his or her religion and could be considered a White-Jew, White-Muslim, or change his religion (Brubaker, Loveman, & Stamatov, 2004).

The rationale in determining essentialist or circumstantialist tendencies was that one could understand how people perceive ethnicity in our world and was to further substantiate academic claims that ethnicity was an adaptive cognitive function that has developed over time. The essentialist group has definitive formulae for determining ethnic groups and as a result this lent credence to the idea that categorizing ethnicities might have some cognitive adaptive roots. If essentialist viewpoints were prevalent one could deduce that more unconscious labeling is going on and that it was a cognitive function within the human brain. In essence the experimenter is trying to find out if the individual is labeling the individual along a hereditary

thought process versus the situational thought process used by circumstantialists.

Several experiments that have dealt with ethnicity used switched at birth scenarios to determine whether people were circumstantialist or essentialist (White, 1999). The switched at birth scenario uses an orphaned child of ethnic group A and is raised by an adoptive family that is ethnic group B. The point of the scenario is to give an individual the option to choose between essentialist or circumstantialist stances of different situations. These studies dealt with groups of people who chose between circumstantialist and essentialist viewpoints on a questionnaire (White, 1999). In general, his findings were that people would lean towards an essentialist viewpoint. He reasoned that this was because people evolved cognitively in groups and learned to identify other groups. These groups then became associated within certain behaviors depending on the outcomes of interaction (White, 1999). These views were why ethnicities and some of stereotypical beliefs still exist today. The hypothesis proposed for this study tends to agree with this assessment, but expands a bit on this concept with the “Us” and “Them” concept.

The “Us” and “Them” concept is the idea that there were two groups “Us” and “Them” and the “in group” or “Us” tends to view the other group negatively or differently (Brubaker, 2009). The hypothesis of this study was that people will lean towards essentialist views because of the “Us” and “Them” concept. This will be because of ethnic diversity within Lindenwood University and the idea that the more diverse a community was the more essentialist it will become. Research dealing with this concept showed that two tribal groups in Mongolia developed more essentialist ideas as they ethnic diversity of the community increased (Brubaker, 2009). As people migrate into tighter and smaller ethnic groups they will label other groups and take more essentialist viewpoints. The “Us” and “Them” concept would motivate people to be essentialist and was due to the cognitive function of the brain. The manner in which the study

would attempt to determine whether people were actually becoming essentialist was through a questionnaire.

That questionnaire was similar to the experiment in that it used a switched at birth scenario, but it was actually modeled off of a questionnaire that will be used in China in the summer of 2011(White, 1999). In every experiment the participant was presented with scenario that can either be answered in an essentialist or circumstantialist in nature. For instance, at the end of most questionnaires of this form the participant is asked to determine the ethnicity of the adopted child. If the participant chooses the ethnicity of the biological parents it was essentialist and if they were to choose the adoptive parent's ethnicity they would be circumstantialist. The reason that the participant's was categorized as essentialist was that they chose a biological relationship over the behavioral influences of the adoptive family. The same goes for the circumstantialist response except that the behavioral influence of the family and the child take precedence over the biological ethnicity of the individual. The purpose behind this kind of question was to get an automatic response that gave the experimenter an idea of what the participant was thinking. The experiment utilized participants from Lindenwood University specifically those who participated in the Lindenwood Participant Pool. During the experiment they filled out a questionnaire that details a switched at birth scenario. The purpose of this scenario was to reveal the cognitive functions of the individual as either circumstantialist or essentialist in nature. The idea was that by understanding the nature of how participants categorize ethnicity one could better understand the cognitive formation of an ethnic label.

Method

Participants

Within this research men and women were recruited from Lindenwood University. The intended amount of students to participate within the experiment was 40 students or more. The participants were all recruited through the Lindenwood Participant Pool (LPP). This pool drew students from Select GE-level classes in psychology, anthropology, sociology, athletic training, exercise training. Total number of participants recruited was 35 participants and they received bonus points within these courses if they completed an experiment. Of these participants 22 were male and 13 were female. These participants were largely from the St. Louis area as 22 of the participants hometowns were within Missouri. There were seven more participants from the United States and other six participants were from Africa, China, Serbia, and Turkey. The ethnicity of these participants was also collected eleven participants were of German descent, five were African American, three Irish, two Italian, three Serbian, there were one participant from these ethnicities Greek, Haitian, Scottish, Russian, Turkish, Bahmain, and five individuals were unidentified in ethnicity. The average age of participants was 20.52. The native languages of each participant were 27 English, 1 Swahili, 3 Serbian, 1 Creole, 1 Chinese, 1 Turkish. In general the participants were diverse enough to give a good sample of a diverse community.

Materials

Students that participated were given two copies of the experiment's informed consent letter (see Appendix A) before the experiment began. Afterwards the students read and signed the informed consent letter, they were asked to fill out a demographic survey (see Appendix B) that asked for their sex, ethnicity, and their students' status. This survey was given to gain an understanding of any patterns that developed between these variables. Once the survey was

completed a 16-item questionnaire dealing with different ethnic labeling situations would be presented (see Appendix C). The items are modeled off of a questionnaire developed by Scupin (2011) for a related study he will use in a trip to China testing similar ideas. When the questionnaires are completed the students will be asked to fill out a feedback letter (see Appendix D) that contained the reason for the experiment and the potential benefit to society as a whole. This letter contained the contact information of the researcher and the supervisor. Upon leaving the study the students were told to fill out their receipts which confirmed their completion of the study. Those receipts were used to gain extra credit through the pre-approved classes within the psychology, anthropology, and sociology departments. The students' participation was documented on a "list of participants" which was given to the LPP office every week. The location of the experiment was in classrooms with an average of 20 chairs and a psychology lab with an average of 3 chairs. The classrooms were more open and spacious while the psychology lab was more cramped and small.

Procedure

The researcher posted a Sign-up sheet approved by LPP that allowed students to sign up for approved dates. Each student signed the sign-up sheet and proceeded to the experiment's location when students showed groups every 15-30min up at the experiment, they were told to sign on the participant list. After the students completed the participant list they were handed two copies of the informed consent form. If students were under the age of 18 their parent or guardian was provided the informed consent form. They were told to fill both out and to keep one for their records. The other informed consent form was to be given to the researcher. Upon the completion of these forms the terms of the informed consent forms should have been understood by the students. The students were also informed that their participation within the

study could be terminated at any time if they felt uncomfortable. The students were also assured if they decided to terminate their participation they would still receive a receipt and thereby bonus points for their classes.

A brief explanation of the study was provided before the students received a questionnaire and demographic survey. Students were provided a demographic survey immediately followed by a 16-item questionnaire. Students were allotted 20 to 30 minutes to complete their questionnaire. There were two scenarios that specifically designed with switched at birth scenarios to engender a circumstantialist or essentialist response in participants. In order to understand if a response was essentialist or circumstantialist in nature the experimenter went through the scoring systems of previous experiments. In general, if a response were essentialist in nature it would favor the hereditary response. For instance, within each scenario some attributes of the biological parents are presented. These could have included the height and even length of fingers of the parents. If the participant favors the more hereditary based answer they were choosing an essentialist answer. If they choose the other answer they will be choosing circumstantialist answer because they would be using reasoning based off the environment of the individual. The environment that the individual grows up in is the main driving force behind circumstantialist thinking. So if participants answer in such a way that indicated that they believed the environment would have been influenced the child the response would be circumstantialist. Questions 1, 2, 9, and 10 were used to determine if individuals understood the question. If they did not understand the question their results were discarded for that scenario. If the students could not complete the questionnaire within 30 minutes they were asked to stop and the questionnaire was discarded. After the completion of this questionnaire the student would receive a feedback letter and debriefing to give them a better idea of the purpose, rationale, and

possible benefits of the experiment. Once the debriefing was completed students received a participant receipt to fill out. These receipts could then be turned into their professors for extra credit.

Results

The results of the study were analyzed using frequency tables to determine if there were any significant patterns and if there was an Essentialist majority in thought procreation. In general the majority of the question did fall into the Essentialist group. The results were that 68 % the questions asked were answered in the essentialist category. While 32 % of the question asked were considered circumstantialist in nature. The scores were coded into circumstantialist and essentialist answers. A majority of these answers were yes and no questions. The yes questions were circumstantialist in nature and the no questions were essentialist in nature. These responses would usually have individuals choose between situations where a characteristic of the adoptive child was to be determined. The participant had the choice between the child gaining the trait through hereditary means or the adoptive families influence or environment. If the participant chose yes they would usually chose the environment over the hereditary factors. When the participant chose an essentialist response they received a point and when they chose a circumstantialist response they received no points. Through tallying up the total score of essentialist and circumstantialist answers of each participant the experimenter could gain a better idea of what the thought processes were behind their responses. There were very few individuals that actually obtained purely circumstantialist or essentialist scores the average score have was around 6.91 out 10. When scoring the questionnaires a high score would indicate high essentialist viewpoint and a lower score would indicate circumstantialist viewpoint. An Independent t test was performed between the two different scenarios and $t(36) = -2.69$ also

showed that there was no significance between the two conditions. This was done to determine if there were bias or significant differences between scenarios due to ethnic bias.

Discussion

After the results of the statistical analysis were completed and processed the experiment has failed to reject the null hypothesis. Lindenwood students showed essentialist thought procreation when labeling an individual's ethnicity. The results support the hypothesis and further substantiate research such as White research on ethnicity in Mongolia (1999). This experiment proposed the idea that diverse communities created reinforced essentialist views was supported by this research. Since the sample was composed of diverse ethnicities, it provided decent information on this idea of diverse communities reinforcing essentialist thought. The questionnaires seemed have to worked in that they have gotten the participant to think about ethnicity in either a circumstantialist or an essentialist way. The experiment achieved this separation of essentialist and circumstantialist thought by presenting scenarios and questions that forced the participant to choose between environmental or hereditary factors. The questionnaires provided the switched at birth scenario that attempted to polarize participant's opinions into either the essentialist or circumstantialist group. Essentialist answers favored the hereditary labels of ethnicity for the child. For instance, Mexican child adopted by a German family would be considered Mexican in ethnicity by essentialist and that answer would be scored as one towards the total of ten possible points in the questionnaire. Through using a scenario that forces the individual to choose one group from the other the experimenter was able to analyze the data and get a general idea of what kind of thought procreation the participant had.

The main issue with this is the strength of their circumstantialist or essentialist views. As was stated in the results there very few maxed scores or zeros. It would seem individuals tend to

score “soft” rather than “hard” scores. Some research has attempted to explain this phenomenon as the soft and hard classifications within circumstantialist and essentialist groups. Essentially, soft categories are those individuals who were on the fence between essentialist and circumstantialist ideas (Brubaker, 2009). For instance, throughout the questionnaires an individual would answer numerous question in circumstantialist way and then at the end of the scenario answer in essentialist way by stating the child was still the same ethnicity as their biological parents and not their adoptive parents. This might have indicated confusion on the part of the participant, but it seemed to happen about one third of the situations indicating a pattern. In general, these individuals answered the questions 1, 2, 9, and 10 correctly indicating they were paying attention. This would seem to indicate that the individuals believed that one could change his behavior, but not their ethnicity. This supports the idea that individuals can carry both essentialist and circumstantialist views on different levels. It could even be seen in the results of the study as well since a majority of the participants scored 7 indicating their at least 70 percent essentialist. This means that very few “hard” essentialist or circumstantialist was found in this study. Those few participants that were considered hard essentialist’s are those who believe absolutely that hereditary attributes of ethnicity are passed down biologically and not created through behavior.

In general, the study seemed to have fairly consistent participant scores those that were not consistent, such as those who could not answer questions 1, 2, 9, and 10 were discarded. The fact that the experimenter did not use a consistent environment throughout the study could have detracted from the environmental influences on individuals and skewed results. There also could have been issues with the fact that the experimenter had to omit question 7 from the results, as there was no parallel in the other scenario to counterbalance the result. Individuals may have

been fatigued by the time they came to the second scenario. The issue of fatigue was also not addressed through counterbalancing the order of the questions due to the fact that the order of questionnaire was designed to develop the specific ideas of the ethnic labels within the participants mind. In general, the experiment's fatigue and order effects were minimized through the shortness of the answer yes or no and the fact that there were only 15 questions in all. These factors probably caused little damage to the results of the experiment due to their relatively weak nature.

Validity was probably an important shortcoming of this experiment. Even though the standardization of the questions on the questionnaire and the assigned time was appropriate, the lack of participants ($n = 36$) did not let the results translate well to the general student body in Lindenwood University. Due to the consistent nature of the results from the questionnaires the internal validity can supported. The results on average showed an essentialist trend, which would support the idea that essentialism was a major factor in the thought processes of participants. Increasing the number of participants next time the study was performed would increase the external validity greatly. The lack of external validity was probably the biggest drawback to the study.

Even though the external validity was lacking due to number of participants the general hypothesis seemed to be sound. Ethnic labels and the way individuals go about assigning them was the point and general idea behind the study. The importance of this study can be seen in the academic progress that can be gained through research. If the type of thought processes behind ethnicity is narrowed down one can research them more easily. It makes the research easier by narrowing down the factors one needs to look into to decide on what caused the development of that specific ethnic label. The trends these thought processes take were also important to the

research. For instance, the ideas of hard and soft essentialism and the distribution of these views according to environment are very important to research. Their important because they help the experiment to understand what kind of situation they could expect in different cultural environments. Through gaining a better understanding one could advance research and study in the creation of these thought processes.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent Form

I, _____ (print name), understand that I will be taking part in a research project that requires me to complete a short questionnaire asking about my perception of ethnic labels. I understand that I should be able to complete this project within 20-30 minutes. I am aware that my participation in this study is strictly voluntary and that I may choose to withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty or prejudice. I should not incur any penalty or prejudice because I cannot complete the study. I understand that the information obtained from my responses will be analyzed only as part of aggregate data and that all identifying information will be absent from the data in order to ensure anonymity. I am also aware that my responses will be kept confidential and that data obtained from this study will only be available for research and educational purposes. I understand that any questions I may have regarding this study shall be answered by the researcher(s) involved to my satisfaction. Finally, I verify that I am at least 18 years of age and am legally able to give consent or that I am under the age of 18 but have on file with the LPP office, a completed parental consent form that allows me to give consent as a minor.

_____ Date: _____

(Signature of participant)

_____ Date: _____

(Signature of researcher obtaining consent)

Student Researcher's Name and Number:

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Appendix B

Demographic Survey

Participant ID: _____

Sex (Male/Female): _____

Student Status (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior): _____

Ethnicity (Irish, German, Mexican, etc.): _____

Appendix C

Questionnaire for Missouri, United States

ID #

City:

Ethnic Group (German, Mexican, Irish, etc.):

Place of Origin:

Father's ethnic group

Mother's ethnic Group

Age:

Native Language:

Gender: Male or Female (circle the answer)

A. Mexican woman went to a hospital in order to give birth to a baby boy.

While giving birth, the woman dies. She had no husband.

At the same time, a German American woman gave birth to a baby boy in the same hospital.

The German American couple adopted the baby from the Mexican woman and raised it in their home.

She never tells the boy that he was adopted. The two boys grew up together as brothers.

1. Which woman gave birth to the baby that was adopted?
Mexican or German American

2. With which woman did the adopted baby grow up?
Mexican or German American

The Mexican woman was tall; the German American woman was short.

3. Will the two boys be the same height when they are adults?

The Mexican woman had long fingers; the German American woman had short fingers.

4. Will both boys have fingers of the same length when they are adults?

The Mexican woman really liked the color red, whereas the German American woman liked the color green.

5. Will the two boys like the same color as the German American mother when they are adults?

In school, both boys take a class to learn to speak English.

6. Will both boys learn to speak English in the same amount of time?

Also in school, the two boys take a class in advanced English.

7. Will both boys perform equally well in the class?

8. Is the adoptive boy Mexican or German American?

9. Why do you believe this boy is Mexican or German American? (explain in a couple sentences to a paragraph)

B. German American woman went to a hospital in order to give birth to a baby boy.

While giving birth, the woman dies. She had no husband.

At the same time, a Mexican woman gave birth to a baby boy in the same hospital.

The Mexican adopted the baby from the German American woman and raised him in her home.

She never tells the boy that he was adopted. The two boys grew up together as brothers.

10. Which woman gave birth to the baby that was adopted?
Mexican or German American

11. With which woman did the adopted baby grow up?
Mexican or German American

The German American woman was tall; the Mexican woman was short.

12. Will the two boys be the same height when they are adults?

The German American woman had long fingers; the Mexican woman had short fingers.

13. Will both boys have fingers of the same length when they are adults?

The German American woman really liked the color red, whereas the Mexican woman liked the color green.

14. Will the two boys like the same color when they are adults?

Both boys learn to speak Spanish.

15. Will both boys learn to speak Spanish in the same amount of time?

16. Is the adoptive boy Mexican or German American?

17. Why do you believe this boy is Mexican or German American? (explain in a couple sentences to a paragraph)

Appendix D
Feedback Letter

Thank you for participating in my study. The questionnaire was used in order to determine people's perception of ethnic labels. These labels are narrowed into two categories for the purpose of this study. Those categories are essentialist and circumstantialist. Essentialists basically believe that one's ethnic group's stick with someone throughout his or her life and the circumstantialist group largely believes that one can change his or her ethnic group through his or her behavior. The general hypothesis of the experiment was that most Lindenwood students would lean towards the circumstantialist point of view. Because Lindenwood students tend to receive a more diverse ethnic environment than an average person. The reason that this idea could be important is to determine the way in which groups cognitively think about each other through labels. This can be used in numerous studies to back up or question previous research and theories.

Please note that I am not interested in your individual results; rather, I am only interested in the results of a large group of students, of which you are now a part of. No identifying information about you will be associated with any of the findings.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding any portion of this study, please do not hesitate to bring him or her up now or in the future. Our contact information is found at the bottom of this letter. If you are interested in obtaining a summary of the findings of this study at a later date, please contact me and I will make it available to you at the completion of this project.

Thank you again for your valuable contribution to this study.

Sincerely,

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