

Abstract

Lay Theory of Mental Disorders

People have intuitive understanding of why and how categories exist. One example of such lay theory about categories is “psychological essentialism,” that is, the belief that certain categories have core, necessary (and often biological) features. The present study examined the structure of psychological essentialism regarding social categories, with a special focus on lay theories about “mental disorders.” **One-hundred and fourteen undergraduate students with no professional education regarding mental disorder rated a number of social categories, including seven mental disorders and four physical diseases on the scale of essentialist beliefs. Consistent with previous findings, factor analysis revealed that essentialist belief consists of two independent dimensions: naturalness and entitativity. Each category’s factor score indicated that mental disorders were judged to be more natural and equally or more entitative than physical diseases. This result suggested that participants viewed mental disorders in an essentialist manner. The strength of the belief that a social category is natural and has essence was negatively associated with the category’ social desirability. These results suggest that the lay essentialist theory of mental disorders is a possible foundation of the prejudice against them. Implications for the study of prejudice are discussed. In particular, it was emphasized that education provided by psychiatrists and medical health experts should be effective for reducing prejudices based on essentialist beliefs.**

Key words: Mental disorders; Lay theory; Psychological essentialism; prejudice; stereotype

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