

# Lay Theory of Mental Disorders

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## Psychological Essentialism

People have intuitive understandings of **why and how categories exist**.

### Psychological Essentialism

The belief that categories have

**core, necessary (and often biological) features.**

**Essence**

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## Perceived essence

Gelman & Wellman (1991)



**Natural kinds**

Based on the essence



**Human artifacts**

Based on the function

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## Social category

Most of **social categories are like artifacts**

- Social categories are **based on their functions or roles** in the society.
- It is **difficult to find any definitive essence** in social categories.

**BUT...**

- People perceive **social categories are like natural kinds** and believe that **they have underlying essence**.

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## The structure of essentialist belief

Haslam et al. (2000)

### Dimension1: Naturalness

The degree to which categories are understood as **natural kinds**.

Elements: Naturalness, Immutability, Necessity

**Essence**

### Dimension2: Entitativity

**Reification**

The degree to which categories are understood as **coherent entities**.

Elements: Uniformity, Informativeness, Exclusivity

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## Essentialist belief and prejudice

Haslam et al. (2000)

Perceived naturalness and entitativity (and essence) **varied with categories**.

- Categories' evaluative status was **negatively correlated with perceived entitativity**.
- Categories that are relatively **essentialized on both dimensions tend to be especially stigmatized**.

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## Purpose of the present study

- **To reveal the structure of psychological essentialism regarding social categories, with a special focus on lay theories about “mental disorders.”**

1. Comparing essentialist beliefs about mental disorders and diseases.
2. Examining the association between essentialist beliefs and categories' social desirability.

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## Method

### ■ Participants

114 undergraduates  
(71 male and 43 female; Age:  $M=21.27$ ; Japanese)

... No professional education regarding mental disorder.

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## Target category\_1

### ✓ 7 mental disorder / patient categories

- ... Alzheimer's disease patient
- Depressed
- Bulimic patient
- Learning disorder
- Intellectually handicapped
- Schizophrenic<sup>a</sup> (New Japanese medical name  
;統合失調症患者 = Patient of integration dysfunction syndrome)
- Schizophrenic<sup>b</sup> (Former Japanese medical name  
;精神分裂病患者 = patient of mind split disease)

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## Target category\_2

### ✓ 4 physical disease categories

...Diabetes patient, Heart disease patient,  
Cancer patient, AIDS patient

### ✓ other 37 social categories

- Gender (e.g., Man, Woman)
- Race (e.g., Black, Yellow Race)
- Nationality / Ethnic groups (e.g., American, Maori, Chinese)
- Occupations (e.g., Police officer, Actor, Nurse) etc.

Total: **48 categories**

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## The scale of essentialist belief : Item\_1

(Haslam et al., 2000; Short ver.)

### 1. Naturalness

... How natural is this category? **Natural – Artificial**

### 2. Necessity

... How likely is it that this category has necessary features? **Likely – Unlikely**

### 3. Immutability

... Is it easy or difficult for a member of this category to become a non-member? **Easy – Difficult**

### 4. Uniformity

... How similar are the members of this category to each other? **Similar – Dissimilar**

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## The scale of essentialist belief : Item\_2

(Haslam et al., 2000; Short ver.)

### 5. Informativeness

... By knowing about a member of this category, how much do you think you can tell about other members?  
**Not at all – A lot**

### 6. Exclusivity

... How likely is it to be a member of this category and a member of other categories at the same time?  
**Likely – Unlikely**

### Additional item: Category's social desirability

... How valued or favorably regarded are they in our society? **High – Low**

All measures were 9-point scale

## Procedure

- 48 categories were divided into 4 different combinations of 12 categories (and reversed the order of presentation for each combination).
- Participants completed the questionnaire within 20 minutes.

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## Result

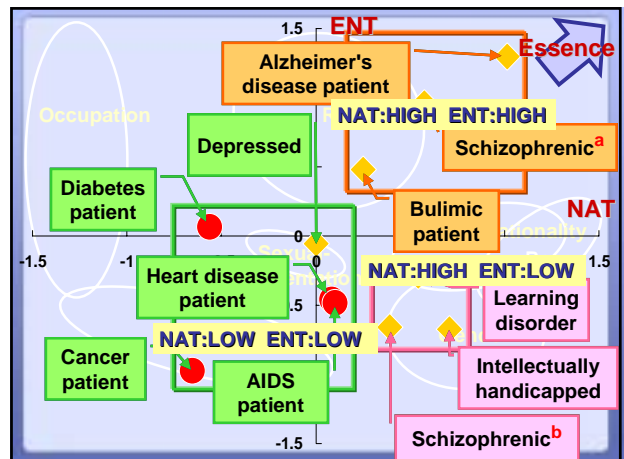
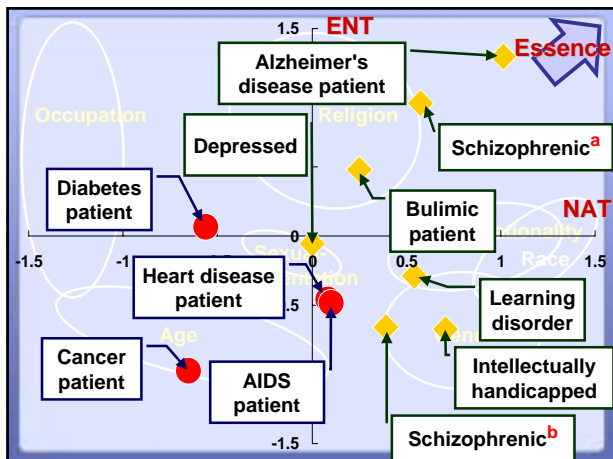
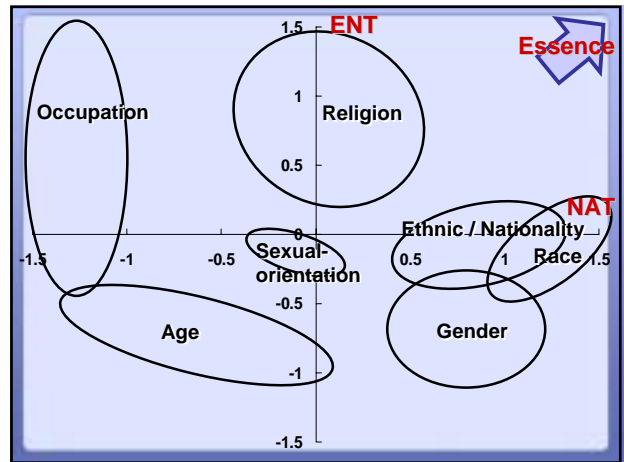
- The unit of analyses = **Category**  
*... All analyses were conducted on mean ratings of the 48 social categories on the 7 items.*
- Each category was rated by 25-31 participants.

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## The structure of essentialist belief

### Factor Analyses

Factors / items	Mean (SD)	Factor loadings	
		fac1	fac2
<b>1. Naturalness</b>			
Immutability	4.85 (.87)	.91	-.07
Exclusivity	3.37 (.65)	.64	.33
Naturalness	5.34 (1.39)	.52	-.38
Necessity	6.22 (.68)	.36	.06
<b>2. Entitativity</b>			
Informativeness	3.31 (.58)	-.09	.71
Uniformity	4.88 (.83)	.33	.57
% variance		0.37	0.26



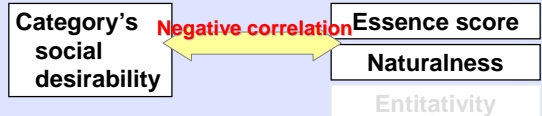
## Correlations

- Essence score:  
Combination effect (Interaction) of Naturalness and Entitativity.
- Essence score = ( NAT + 2 ) x ( ENT + 2 )

Factor scores were distributed in the range of -2 to +2. Each factor score was shifted into the positive value.

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## Correlations



Category's social desirability	Essence score	$r = -.39, p < .05$
	Naturalness	$r = -.29, p < .01$
	Entitativity	No correlation

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## Discussion

- Mental disorders were judged to be **more natural and equally or more entitative** than physical diseases.

Participants viewed mental disorders in an **essentialist manner**.

↳ **Equally or more than gender, ethnic and race.**

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## Discussion

- Perceived naturalness and essence were negatively associated with the category's social desirability.

■ Lay essentialist theory of mental disorders is a **possible foundation for the prejudice against them**.

■ As a **basis of prejudice against mental disorders and patients**, people come to view them in an essentialist manner.

## Future directions

- These findings will need to be replicated with other mental disorders included.
- The influence of essentialist beliefs on the prejudice against social categories will need to be examined.

■ Does essentialism **exacerbate stereotypes** or cause **polarization into positive or negative directions?**

■ Most powerful elements of naturalness:  
**Naturalness, Immutability, Exclusivity or Necessity**

**Thank you.**



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## Appendix

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## Target category

### ✓ other 37 social categories

Gender (Man, Woman, Boy, Girl), Race (Black, White, Yellow Race), Age (Young, Old), Nationality / Ethnic groups (American, Chinese, Maori, Arab, Jew, Native American, Hong Kong citizen), Occupations (Police officer, Actor, Nurse, Physicist, Teacher), Physical appearance (Beautiful woman, Handsome man, Unattractive woman, Unattractive man), Criminal (Killer, Terrorist), Politics (Liberal, Republican), Sex orientation (Heterosexual, Homosexual), Region (Catholic, Buddhist, Muslim), Personality (Introvert, Extrovert), Visually handicapped.

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