The Effect of Feeling Essentialized on Outcomes of Direct Confrontation

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Confronting bias can reduce prejudice (Czopp, Monteith, & Mark, 2006).
- But people are unlikely to confront (Kawakami, Dunn, Karmali, & Dovidio, 2009) because they fear backlash (Swim & Hyers, 1999), such as being disliked by the person who is confronted (i.e., the confrontee).
- The literature to date has not tested the effect of confrontation in the context of existing relationships. Feeling close to the confronter may reduce bias and backlash by the confrontee.

Understanding some characteristics and social categories as fixed, identity-determining essences (Gelman, 2003) is called essentialism.
- Essentialist beliefs can lead to viewing others as inalterable, possessing attributes that are informative of their true nature.
- Essentialist beliefs often predict stereotype endorsement and bias (Bastian & Haslam, 2005).
- White people are afraid of being seen as a racist (Bergseiker, Shelton, & Richeson, 2010). When they are confronted for bias, White confrontees may perceive that strangers (vs friends) see them as essentially racist. This may, in turn, increase backlash.

This research tests how a confrontee’s relationship with their confronter affects their feelings of being essentialized, and subsequent backlash against the confronter, biased attitudes, and intentions to control future bias.
- Hypothesis: Friendship with the confronter will reduce feelings of being essentialized, thereby reducing backlash and biased attitudes, and increasing intentions to control future bias.

245 White participants (165 women, 79 men, 1 nonbinary; age range: 18-82, M_age=42.19, SD=14.38) were crowd-sourced through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk.
- We manipulated whether participants imagined being confronted for making a racist comment by their friend or a stranger.

The participants read a scenario in which they visited a restaurant in an unfamiliar part of town. They imagined themselves admitting to the waiter that they felt unsafe in the neighborhood, to which either a friend or a White stranger at the next table responded, “I’m not gonna lie, that wasn’t cool. Just because this neighborhood has a lot of Black people doesn’t mean it’s dangerous. That comment makes you seem like a racist, you know?”

Essentialism 13 items; a = .74; [1 strongly disagree to 7 strongly agree]
Higher scores = More feelings of being essentialized by the confronter;
“The other person would say that ‘you are either a certain type of person or you are not’.”

Backlash 7 items; a = .92; [1 absolutely not to 7 absolutely]
Higher scores = More backlash against the confronter;
“The person who replied to my comment is sensitive.”

Bias against Black People 14 items; a = .96; [1 not well at all to 7 extremely well]
Higher scores = Less biased attitudes;
“Please indicate how well each of the following words describe most Blacks (e.g., Friendly, Violent, Lazy)”

Intentions to Control Future Bias 10 items; a = .96; [1 not at all true to 7 completely true]
Higher scores = More intentions to control future racial bias;
“After what I learned today, I will be more on guard for racially biased behavior.”

People feel less essentialized after being confronted for racism by a friend versus a stranger. Feeling less essentialized by a confronter reduces backlash against the confronter and biased attitudes, and increases intentions to control future bias.

Future research could examine the level of intimacy and knowledge in a relationship necessary to reduce feelings of being essentialized; different types of relationship contexts (e.g., workplace, familial), power dynamics within relationships, and shared values. Determining factors that reduce backlash while preserving bias reduction is key to combatting prejudice.