

Racial Essentialism Reduces Creative Thinking By Making People More Closed-Minded

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New research suggests that racial stereotypes and creativity have more in common than we might think.

In an article published in [Psychological Science](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#), researcher Carmit Tadmor of Tel Aviv University and colleagues find that racial stereotyping and creative stagnation share a common mechanism: categorical thinking.

“Although these two concepts concern very different outcomes, they both occur when people fixate on existing category information and conventional mindsets,” Tadmor and her colleagues write.

The researchers examined whether there might be a causal relationship between racial essentialism — the view that racial groups possess underlying essences that represent deep-rooted, unalterable traits and abilities — and creativity.

They hypothesized that, once activated, an essentialist mindset would lead to a reluctance to consider alternative perspectives, resulting in a generalized closed-mindedness.

The researchers manipulated participants’ beliefs about racial essentialism by having them read one of three articles: one that described fictitious scientific research supporting racial essentialist beliefs, one that described fictitious research supporting racial nonessentialist beliefs, or one about the scientific properties of water.

The participants then took a commonly used test of creativity called the Remote Associates Test. The participants were given three distinct words and they had to identify a single target word that linked the three words together. So, for example, given the words “manners,” “round,” and “tennis,” the correct answer would be “table.”

The researchers found that participants primed with an essentialist viewpoint were less creative, solving significantly fewer of the word problems correctly than participants in the other two groups.

Results from a follow-up study showed that the link between racial essentialism and decreased creativity could be explained, at least in part, by an increase in closed-mindedness.

Together, these studies suggest that essentialism exerts its negative effects on creativity by changing how people think, as opposed to changing what they think. This finding fits with previous research on information processing and creativity.

The research also suggests that essentialist beliefs are fairly malleable. While there are many different aspects that still need to be explored, Tadmor and colleagues speculate that it might be possible to use

these findings to devise an intervention program that reduces racial essentialist beliefs, thereby leading participants not only to become more socially tolerant but also to unleash their creative potential in the process.

Co-authors on this research include Melody M. Chao of Hong Kong University of Science and Technology; Ying-yi Hong of Nanyang Business School, Nanyang Technological University and Beijing Normal University; and Jeffrey T. Polzer of Harvard University.

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