ESSENTIALISM

Why read this text…

The concept of essentialism refers to the assumption that people and things have an essence – an intrinsic nature and indispensable characteristics that make them what they are. Essentialist thinking thus pertains to a set of ontological postulates about the nature of things, people and the world. Essentialist thinking in relation to culture pertains to postulates that social categories, which are based on for example gender, national identity, race, or religion, comprised a set of individuals with a particular essence, i.e. putative human characteristics and qualities that determine their nature and behavior. Thus, members of social categories are deemed similar, with uniform physical and cultural traits that bind together 'naturally' in primordial and absolute ways.

Essentialism is a useful concept for reflecting on what qualities are held to be 'natural,' innate and deep-rooted when characterizing a particular social category. For example, essentialist understandings of gender identities, embodied practices and roles produce stereotypical ideas about 'boys' and 'girls,' as stable categories with fixed and essentially different qualities. We see this in statements like – 'girls can't do math' or ' boys will be boys.'

Essentialism is also useful for thinking about the qualities, forms of knowledge and skills deemed 'essential' for enacting democratic citizenship. Often, these qualities are though to adhere and belong more to one culture of one group of people than others. As such, some social categories come up short on the right kind of inherent 'qualities' for enacting proper citizenship. If some children viewed as unteachable due to their inherent 'cultural' or 'social' nature, teachers may give up on trying to educate all children in common.

Historical Context

The concept of essentialism has a long and complex history in philosophical and scientific thinking. It draws on ideas rooted in debates about the relationship between culture and 'nature' or biology. Defined in biological terms, 'essence' becomes decontextualized, yet still replete with a priori assumptions about the cultural traits possessed by a human group, which are indispensible to its identity. The notion of essence is related to 'being'. It concerns the special nature of a person or a thing that makes it different from everything else. In the social sciences, essentialism suggests that a thing or a class of people has an inherent quality that derives from nature rather than from cultural history. Essentialist accounts hold that members of certain categories have underlying, unchanging properties or attributes (essence) that determine appearance, identity and outward behavior (Gelman 2003).

The idea of biological/physical characteristics to delineate the distinctive, innate character of a social group has been used to legitimize racist ideologies and national classificatory schemes and colonialism. This line of thinking suppresses temporality, precludes sociocultural dynamics from the construction of meaning, and assumes a primordial

ontology where the resulting categories are eternal, unchanging, stable, and universal (Brodwin 2002).

The concept of culture has served as a vehicle of validation for essentialist claims about the existence of racial, national, ethnic, gender, and other qualities (essences). Essentialist thinking, in this context, both encourages and justifies categorical stereotypes, and perpetuates the assumption that arbitrary cultural distinctions are natural, inevitable, and fixed (Narayan 1998). The doctrine of ethnic primordialism (that ethnicities are ancient and natural) was a popular in the 1950s and 1960s to account for apparent ethnic and regional fissures in the developing world. It was been applied after the fall of the Berlin wall to account for the instability of former socialist republics.

Since the early 1900s, anthropologists have adopted a critical stance towards essentializing ideologies. Anthropological understandings of individual and collective human action as ongoing processes are critical of theories that reduce complex, historically contingent effects to fixed and inherent properties of individuals and groups. Anthropological perspectives emphasize the constituting effect of human practices and human agency and the importance of social context in shaping these (Spivak 1989, Wright 1998). In his seminal work on the construction of ethnic difference, Fredrik Barth proposed shifting focus from the cultural properties of specific ethnic groups to the social and cultural conditions for action and agency and the means humans employ to create similarity or difference (Barth 1969). In other words, Barth suggests that groups may find it expedient to overstate differences, and understate similarities

Foucault (1997) has paid attention to the relations of power and the ways these both enable and constrain modes of subjectivity, meaning, knowledge and truth. Foucault relocates problems of identity, truth, knowledge, reality, and meaning outside their traditional domains of ontology, epistemology, and metaphysics into discourse analysis. Discourses are complex, dynamic systems of practices, knowledge, and multiple kinds of power. Such discourses generate disciplinary norms that simultaneously produce and constrain subjects and question formation; they enable participants to recognize and evaluate truth claims. Genealogies of historically specific discourses indicate that questions about essences could arise and remain salient or even intelligible only within certain ways of life.

a) Discussion

In education, essentialist ideas are often expressed in the ways national school systems and teachers approach, select and teach cultural values, knowledge and heritage to students. National curricula are often essentialist in the sense that they focus narrowly on a particular society and nation-state. National and world history, literature and social science are all approached and taught from a national perspective. Hence, all children, irrespective of local contexts and individual ability, needs and interests, are subjected to a curriculum designed to meet the objective of fashioning knowledgeable and loyal citizens of a particular nation-state (Howick 1971, Null 2007, Webb 2006).

Teachers are expected to teach and students are required to learn discipline, civility and respect for school authority. Schools are considered the key institutional settings for the

transmission of knowledge and teachers the crucial agents. Students should be prepared to become valuable members of the society. Thus, hard work is encouraged and respect for authority and discipline is to be instilled by the teachers. When this is achieved, students will have learned the essentials, such as academic knowledge and rigor, patriotism, and character development in order to be members of a common culture for all citizens (Imig & Imig 2006, Ornstein & Levine 2003).

Critics of this educational approach state that it is largely teacher-centered and authoritarian and attributes students a passive role. Moreover, it encourages the emergence of cultural essentialism, the ethnocentric practice of categorizing groups of people within a culture, or across cultures, according to essential qualities. Since membership to a category is permanent and a member cannot easily become non-member, the essence attributed to that category is inherent to the person and assures its group membership (Gil-White 2001).

b) Practical Example

Studying how children develop essentialistic ideas in Israeli school, Birnbaum (et. al. 2010) assessed how children make inferences about one's ethnic belonging. Taking into account the cultural, ethnic and ideological heterogeneity of Israeli society, Birnbaum focused on the extent to which knowledge of a particular category to which an object belongs allows one to infer properties of the object. A total of 144 children participated in this study in a sample consisting of 16 children from each of three sectors (secular Jews, religious Jews, and Muslim Arabs), and within these from three age groups (kindergarten, second grade, and sixth grade). The majority of Israelis are secular Jews, while modern religious Jews express different values for religious and often political reasons, and Muslim Arabs constitute a heavily stereotyped and stigmatized minority. This study addresses a broader question of whether children's essentialization of human kinds is a ''bottom-up'' process by which children simply represent categories they perceive in the world, or a ''top-down'' process by which the categories are first in the child's mind and then looked for in the world.

The study confirmed that within Israeli society, ethnicity stands out as the most inductively powerful human category. It revealed that ethnicity has a privileged status, particularly among modern religious Zionist children. Social labels are particularly effective triggers of an essentialist bias that, while intuitive to all children, may be differentially latent with regard to particular social categories depending on a child's sociocultural background. Religious Jewish children in Israel may have a stronger essentialist belief about ethnicity than children from the other two sectors tested here. One reason that accounts for this is the degree of contact among members of different social categories that inversely relates to the degree to which the social categories are essentialized. In addition, adults might emphasize ethnicity via linguistic markers, such as chronic labeling of ethnic categories, which children may then pick up and reproduce.

In a study from Belmonte, Brazil, Baran (2007) examined how children integrate certain aspects of essentialist ideologies in their identity construction and use racial categorizations to define anyone not "purely" branco (white) as negro (black). This system of categorization

conflicts with popular belief in a mixed-moreno Brazilian identity based not only on ancestry but also on observable physical features. Through ethnographic research conducted at a municipal high school, Baran found two contexts in which Belmonte children encounter powerful anti-essentialist messages that compete with essentialist teachings: history lessons from the textbook and informal teaching moments during which a teacher's own thinking about race takes center stage. The study concluded that students' thinking about race did not conform simplistically to ideas of multiple, nonessentialized categories of race in Brazil. Rather, they combine different elements of racial classification such as mixed family origins which they creatively integrate in new ways to portray positively racial similarities and differences.

Thinking further:
• What kind of essentialist ideas can be traced in the educational settings and practices of your country/region?
• What challenges do teachers face in dealing with essentialist understandings of similarity and difference?
• What techniques and skills should teachers acquire in order to counter the essentialist and ethnocentric perceptions often found in national curriculum and textbooks?

KEY-WORDS/ CROSS-REFERENCES
Culture, difference, education, classification. ethnocentrism.

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