# Who am I and how often?: Variation in self-essentialism beliefs, cognitive style, and well-being

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## ABSTRACT

Scientific and lay theories about personality as a stable entity reflect how people think about people, including themselves. The idea of immutable core attributes in others has been related to essentialist thinking in social cognition research, and to the belief in a "true self" in research on identity and well-being. Here items examining individual self-essentialism were used to examine to what extent said beliefs relate to well-being, cognitive styles, and self-construal. Study 1 found a three-factor structure comprised of beliefs about the self as an entity, about the biological origin of self attributes, and about the relevance of self attributes for predicting behavior. Greater self-essentialism scores were associated with greater life satisfaction, meaning in life, happiness, preference for consistency, and need for cognitive closure in two samples. Study 2 replicated findings for preference for consistency and need for cognitive closure, and revealed a relationship between greater self-essentialism and individualism. Individualism and collectivism separately moderated the well-being outcomes of self-essentialism; self-essentialism predicted greater well-being at low levels of individualism and high levels of collectivism. Study 2 additionally found a relationship between greater self-essentialism and people-essentialism. Implications for cultural fit and construct understanding are discussed.

## 1. Introduction

Current theoretical and empirical development in research on personality suggests a larger role for within-person variability and context (Fleeson & Jayawickreme, 2015). The trait-theorist view of personality (Millon & Davis, 1996), however, parallels how people – in Western society – think about the idea of self introspectively. Accordingly, advertisements and self-help books encourage people to discover their "true self", portraying the true self as an unchanging guidepost for a fulfilling life. However, individuals might differ in the extent to which they believe that they have a stable true self. If so, the strength of belief in one's true self may relate to other beliefs about self and the world. In other words: Do people have beliefs about how much they vary? And how does the perception of variation affect them?

Here we examine how the perception of an essentialized self relates to styles of cognitively processing the environment and psychological well-being. We additionally investigate how self-essentialism relates to self-construal.

### 1.1. Essentialist social cognition

Psychological essentialism is the idea that an object is perceived to belong to a category and is similar to fellow category members because of an underlying essence, or nature, that fundamentally determines its identity (Medin & Ortony, 1989). In thinking about other people, social categories are often viewed as natural categories (Rothbart & Taylor, 1992), and essentialist thinking about groups of people has been associated with stereotyping these groups (Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000; Yzerbyt & Rocher, 2002). Essentialized group categories include ethnicity (Gil-White, 2001), race (Chao, Chen, Roisman, & Hong, 2007; Hirschfeld, 1996; Verkuyten, 2003), gender (Mahalingam, 2003; Morton, Postmes, Haslam, & Hornsey, 2009), sexual orientation (Haslam & Levy, 2006), religion (Boyer, 1993), disease (Keil, Levin, Richman, & Gutheil, 1999), and mental illness (Haslam & Ernst, 2002).

### 1.2. Essentializing individuals

Individual persons, too, are viewed as essential entities. People think of others as fitting person types, in which groups of personality traits are seen as likely to appear together (Sedikides & Anderson, 1994). The more personality characteristics are essentialized, the more they are seen as desirable, emotional rather than cognitive, and prevalent in the general population (Gelman, 2003). Essentialized characteristics are considered the most informative for defining and forming

an impression of a person's identity (Haslam, Bastian, & Bissett, 2004). Research on implicit person theories indicates that some people hold an entity theory about personality traits and characteristics (e.g., intelligence) in which these attributes are fixed across time and situation (Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1997; Levy, Plaks, Hong, Chiu, & Dweck, 2001). Entity theories reflect the belief that personal characteristics are unchanging and immutable, and have been proposed to be part of a broader set of essentialist beliefs about people (detailed below; Haslam, Bastian, Bain, & Kashima, 2006). Supporting this, use of entity theories covaries with essentialist beliefs about personality (Haslam et al., 2004) and essentialist beliefs about people overall (Bastian & Haslam, 2008).

Beyond essentialist thinking about particular personality traits and capacities, essentialism is utilized to inform about a person's core nature. Accordingly, humans are believed to have entitative essences that are discretely bounded, immutable, situationally- and temporally-consistent, deeply inherent, and highly informative about them (Bastian & Haslam, 2007, 2008; Haslam et al., 2006). These people-essentialism beliefs have been associated with outgroup bias and have moderated personal adoption of social identities (Bastian & Haslam, 2008). If people believe that social groups and individual others have essences, do they also think about themselves as having an essence? Psychologists have discussed the self as the nucleus of identity, as containing stable and definite aspects, and occasionally as the source of personality (Epstein, 1973). The self-concept has been described as peoples' core theories about their own identity (Epstein, 1973). In other words, when people think about others and themselves, they seem to engage in essentialist thinking.

### 1.3. The true self

Recent advancements shed light on what people think about their fundamental nature, most frequently referred to as the true self, or who a person "really is deep down". People seem to perceive the true self as positive and valuable (Newman, Bloom, & Knobe, 2013), and social validation of one's true self has been associated with benefits to self-esteem (Schimel, Arndt, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2001). Higher cognitive availability of traits seen as part of one's true self-concept has been associated with increased meaning in life (Schlegel, Hicks, Arndt, & King, 2009; Schlegel, Hicks, King, & Arndt, 2011). Psychological essentialism as applied to the true self has yet to be directly measured in full. However, endorsement of essentialist self-belief items has been found to predict meaning in life (e.g., "The true self is real," "It is important to me to have a clear idea of who my true self is," "My true self is an important part of who I am;" Schlegel, Vess, & Arndt, 2012).

A discussion of beliefs about a person's core self is complemented by literature on the self-concept. In particular, the idea of authenticity, how closely a person behaves in concert with their nature, has received much attention in the literature. Authenticity has been described as the true self manifesting freely as daily behavior (Goldman & Kernis, 2002). While it would be difficult to measure a person's true self outright (Strohminger, Knobe, & Newman, 2017), making it difficult to measure a person's authenticity in turn, it is possible to assess how authentically a person believes themselves to be behaving. Feelings of authenticity when performing role-related behaviors—feeling that the behaviors reflect" who you really are"—have been linked to positive well-being (Bettencourt & Sheldon, 2001; Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997). This further suggests benefits associated with perceiving a connection between one's nature and actions, a key component of essentialist thought about the self.

Relatedly, a person's belief in having an intransient true self can be contrasted with direct measurements of stability in their self-evaluations and self-concept. Having a strong sense of self has been theorized as involving stability in self-esteem, actions reflecting high self-determination, and possessing clarity and confidence in self-concept knowledge (Kernis, 2005; Kernis, Paradise, Whitaker, Wheatman, & Goldman, 2000). A strong sense of self has been argued to

be beneficial (Kernis, 2005). Stability in self-esteem has been linked with less sensitivity to daily events and stressors (Greenier et al., 1999; Kernis et al., 1998). Further, positive well-being associations have been linked to self-determined action (Sheldon & Kasser, 1995) and self-concept clarity (Campbell et al., 1996). Supporting a strong sense of self as necessary, a highly differentiated and fragmented self-concept was associated with decreased well-being (Donahue, Robins, Roberts, & John, 1993). In addition to the beneficial role of certainty about self-knowledge and stability of self-evaluations for sense of self and well-being, we argue that core beliefs about the essential nature of the own self affect the way in which a person relates to their environment. Investigating into true self beliefs rooted in the framework of psychological essentialism promises to allow insight into this relationship.

## 2. Current research

In light of essentialist and dynamic conceptions of individuals (Epstein, 1973; Fleeson, 2012), it is of interest to understand the extent to which individuals are aware of this interplay within themselves. Over two studies we sought to measure aspects of essential thinking regarding the self (i.e., self-essentialism). To assess these beliefs, we adapted the language of the Essentialism Scale (ES; Bastian & Haslam, 2008), which targets essentialist beliefs about people in general, so that the new items now specifically referred to the participant's self. We also created five new items informed by research measuring the true self (Schlegel et al., 2009; Schlegel et al., 2012) and sought to investigate the latent variables underlying self-essentialism and their effects, a major goal of Study 1. In both Study 1 and Study 2 we examined the extent to which people vary on the strength of their self-essentialism beliefs and how this variance relates to other constructs.

Given the evidence that the true self is viewed as positive and belief in the true self relates to increased well-being, we assessed well-being outcomes in both studies: happiness, satisfaction with life, and meaning in life. Self-essentialism, in resonance with lay-narratives of the true self as a core guidepost for behavior, may be associated with well-being benefits. The true self has been proposed to provide a framework for navigating through an ambiguous world (Christy, Sanders, Vess, Routledge, & Schlegel, 2017), and self-essentialism may support this by portraying the true self as a real and stable point of reference. By bolstering the ability of the true self to provide such coherence (Schlegel & Hicks, 2011), self-essentialism may also facilitate connecting to life meaning. The present studies represent a first step in assessing this by measuring associations between self-essentialism and well-being variables.

We also examined cognitive styles of orienting to and preference for organization with the environment, hypothesizing that these perspectives are related to beliefs about one's own internal structure and consistency. Study 1 assessed situational self-awareness. Highly situationally self-aware individuals report constantly attending to their inner state and their environmental fit. We hypothesized this orientation to be associated with a tendency to view the self as essential to provide a reference point for gauging one's standing in the world.

In both studies, we assessed preference for consistency (Cialdini, Trost, & Newsom, 1995) and need for cognitive closure (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). People high in consistency preference expect consistency from others, value consistency in own behavior, and are most comfortable when the environment is predictable. Similarly, people high in need for cognitive closure avoid ambiguity and tend to act quickly to resolve ambiguity. Both cognitive styles suggest a corresponding self-concept with a clearly defined unambiguous core, as described by self-essentialism.

In Study 2, we also investigated the interplay of self-construal and self-essentialism. Individualists and collectivists have been shown to differ in the extent to which they view the self as more independent or interdependent of their social group (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).