

Study on language and stereotypes suggests ways to reduce prejudice

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(Medical Xpress)—Hearing generic language to describe a category of people, such as "boys have short hair," can lead children to endorse a range of other stereotypes about the category, a study by researchers at NYU and Princeton University has found. Their research, which appeared in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)*, also points to more effective methods to reduce stereotyping and prejudice.

The study focused on "social essentialism," or the belief that certain [social categories](#), such as race or gender, mark fundamentally distinct kinds of people. For instance, social essentialism facilitates the belief that because one girl is bad at math, girls in general will be bad at math. While previous scholarship has shown that essentialist beliefs about social categories, such as gender or race, appear as early as preschool, it has been less clear on the processes that lead to the formation of these beliefs.

This dynamic was the focus of the *PNAS* study.

Specifically, the researchers tested whether generic language plays a powerful role in shaping the development of social essentialism by guiding children to develop essentialist beliefs about social categories that they would not otherwise view in this manner. In addition, in order to understand how social essentialism is transmitted, they examined whether or not holding essentialist beliefs about a social category leads parents to produce more generic language describing the category when

talking to their children.

"Taken together, these results showed that generic language is a mechanism by which social essentialist beliefs, as well as tendencies towards stereotyping and prejudice, can be transmitted from parents to children," says the study's lead author, Marjorie Rhodes, an assistant professor in NYU's Department of Psychology.

Rhodes adds that these results do not show that generic language creates essentialist thought, but, rather, that children's cognitive biases lead them to assume that some social categories reflect essential differences—and that generic language signals them to which categories they should apply these beliefs.

Provided by New York University

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