‘They’re all tribals’: essentialism, context and the discursive representation of Sudanese refugees

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Publication details
Published version available from:
http://doi.org/10.1177/0957926513519536
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Essentialism, context and the discursive representation of Sudanese refugees

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Abstract
The theory of psychological essentialism provides an account of how and why some social groups are represented as if they possessed an inhering, immutable and group-defining ‘essence’. Whilst much of the empirical and theoretical work on essentialism has attended to characterising its cognitive components through the utilisation of survey measures, this article, adopting a synthetic discursive psychological approach, examines naturally-occurring conversations on talkback radio. We demonstrate how speakers attribute Sudanese refugees with essentialised cultural or tribal properties. These qualities were employed to account for the violent behaviour of Sudanese refugees, both in Sudan and in Australia, as relatively invariant and collectively shared attributes. Although participants recurrently depicted Sudanese refugees as sharing a cultural essence, these latent propensities were constructed to only manifest in the behaviour of some group members. We contend that essentialist ontologies can be established on implicit lay theories, causally linking culture to behaviour, and acting ideologically as rationalisations for illiberal and racist ends. We discuss how a discursive approach affords insights into the nuanced practice of psychological essentialism in everyday talk.

Keywords
Critical discursive psychology, ontology, psychological essentialism, racism, refugees, social psychology, talkback radio

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**Introduction**

How are the behaviours of individuals constructed as indicative of the cultural group they belong to, and how do such ontological theories invoke causal, socio-historical discourses, often removed from the immediate context and the agents involved? Over the last two decades, the theory of psychological essentialism (Rothbart and Taylor, 1992) has been used to explain why some social groups are represented as if they were collectively defined by some inhering, immutable and group-defining ‘essence’ (Wagner et al., 2009). According to the theory, essentialism functions to rationalise individual behaviour in light of group stereotypes, whilst minimising alternative contextually-driven accounts of behaviour (Yzerbyt et al., 1997, 1998).

In this article, we contribute to an extensive body of research, primarily conducted within the social-cognitive domain, examining how psychological essentialism functions in out-group stereotyping and prejudice. In concert with other discursive research (see Durrheim and Dixon, 2000; Holtz and Wagner, 2009; Verkuyten, 2003), we elucidate how essentialist resources are used for speaking about the behaviour of minority groups. More specifically, we examine how essentialist discourses are variably constructed, contingent on the rhetorical and ideological context, leading to the negative portrayal of Sudanese refugees on talkback radio.

**Psychological essentialism**

The notion that people invoke essentialist beliefs to categorise social groups in essentialist forms has attracted considerable attention over the last two decades in social psychology (e.g. Chao et al., 2007; Demoulin et al., 2006; Haslam et al., 2000, 2002; Holtz and Wagner, 2009; Kashima, 2004; Kashima et al., 2010; Morton et al., 2009; No et al., 2008; Roets and Van Hiel, 2011; Rothbart and Taylor, 1992; Williams and Eberhardt, 2008; Yzerbyt et al., 1997). The theory of psychological essentialism attempts to address the question of how and why people construe social groups as sharing an immutable but hidden essence (Rothbart and Taylor, 1992). Such an essence is conceptualised as rendering category members akin to ‘natural kind’ categories, making them who they are, whilst defining their difference to other category members. Much of the empirical and theoretical work conducted within the socio-cognitive domain has worked to delineate the components of essentialist thinking (e.g. Haslam et al., 2000; Roets and Van Hiel, 2011; Yzerbyt et al., 2001), and the effects of holding essentialist beliefs on perceptions of culture, social groups, prejudice and stereotyping (e.g. Chao et al., 2007; Haslam et al., 2000, 2002; Morton et al., 2009; No et al., 2008; Williams and Eberhardt, 2008; Yzerbyt et al., 1997).

Psychological essentialism has been conceptualised as being comprised of two key dimensions: ‘natural kind’ (inalterability) and ‘entitativity’ (inductive potential). When a social category is characterised as immutable, sharing common features, natural, discrete (from other categories) and stable over time (Haslam et al., 2000), it can be conceptualised as a ‘natural kind’ (the classic pseudo-biological notion of essentialism). The second essentialist dimension, entitativity, is the belief that some social categories share a unitary, homogenous character, through which imputations of an inherent underlying
'natural’ essence can be made. Importantly, entitative social categories are assumed to hold informative value; that is, they provide rich inductive potential about the dispositional qualities of category members, causally determining their identity. For some scholars (e.g. Yzerbyt et al., 2001), both dimensions of essentialist thinking are argued to be interdependent, mutually reinforcing each other to influence group perception.

The conceptual distinction and interconnectedness of natural kinds and entitative dimensions of essentialism have been a core motif of research conducted in socio-cognitive psychology. For instance, Haslam et al. (2000) asked participants to rate 40 social categories (e.g. ‘old people’, ‘Asians’) on nine elements of essentialism. Categories such as gender and ‘race’ were represented as natural kinds insofar as category members were perceived to share an immutable membership to the group. Contrastingly, the social categories ‘homosexuals’ and ‘AIDS patients’ were rated high on the entitativity dimension, thus perceived as sharing inhering similarities, defining their identity and holding informative value. According to Haslam et al., stigmatised groups can be essentialised on either one of two dimensions (natural kind or entitative), but rarely both.

Adding another conceptual layer to the natural kinds and entitativity binary, a recent line of research has focused on the biological components of psychological essentialism and its role in motivated social cognition (e.g. Jost et al., 2003), prejudice, conceptions of cross-cultural differences and the consequent motivation to engage with ‘races’ deemed Other (e.g. Keller, 2005; No et al., 2008; Williams and Eberhardt, 2008). For instance, Keller found a positive relationship between those who scored high on the ‘Belief in Genetic Determinism Scale’ (BGD) – a scale constructed to measure the belief that behaviour and personality are determined by heritable genetics (more than social determinates) – and endorsement of negative racial stereotypes. Additionally, to test the effects of holding ‘chronic essentialist beliefs’, participants in an experimental group read a text priming the biological component of psychological essentialism. This stimulus was found to predict prejudicial attitudes towards stigmatised out-group members.

In a similar vein, Williams and Eberhardt (2008) observed that individuals who strongly endorsed notions of ‘race’ as a fundamentally biological (as opposed to social) construct more readily accepted racial disparities in society, were less emotionally affected by such injustices and maintained a less racially diverse set of friends. Further, No et al. (2008) examined how an essentialised ‘theory of race’ oriented Asian Americans to construct differences and similarities between themselves and White Americans on dimensions of ‘culture’ and ‘typical’ personality typology. That is, participants who held a biologically determined theory of race were more likely to perceive discrete differences between groups.

There are a number of important insights and implications arising from the aforementioned studies. First, much of the psychological essentialism work carried out in the socio-cognitive tradition advances the notion that essentialist beliefs are akin to static entities, invoked in much the same way for deployment in most contexts. Like Allport’s (1954) proposition that essentialism constitutes a cardinal element of the prejudiced personality, some recent research treats essentialist beliefs as if they were analogous to dispositional traits residing in the minds of those who are motivated to perceive and organise the world in unambiguous ways (e.g. ‘epistemic closure’; Roets and Van Hiel, 2011).
Less consideration, however, has been given to how essentialist theories are resourced from the vestiges of historical discourses for rhetorical and ideological use. Because the concept of essentialism is most often measured with forced-choice surveys – and hence, responses aggregated and analysed statistically – this precludes an examination of the broader political and action-oriented functions of essentialist discourses as practised in interaction.

However, psychological essentialism has recently been conceptualised as a representational and ontological resource. Drawing from social representations theory (Moscovici, 1984), the focus here is on the strategic motivation of in-groups and out-groups alike to deploy varied essentialist notions of culture contingent on their interests (Holtz and Wagner, 2009; Wagner et al., 2009, 2012). Thus culture, social context and political intent are seen as significant components in the attribution of inalterability and naturalness to group membership. For example, Wagner and Holtz demonstrated how extreme right-wing internet groups in Germany ascribed immutability and a ‘natural kind-ness’ to Jews and Africans, justifying and advancing their right-wing political agenda.

For some theorists, essentialism is most usefully characterised as a sense-making resource, allowing the world and its social structures to be cognized, ordered and, thus, oriented to, engendering a guide for social practice. In particular, Yzerbyt et al.’s (1997) socio-justificatory account of ‘subjective essentialism’ functions as a social rationalization process, insofar as majority groups draw on a number of beliefs to help explain their social milieu. Yzerbyt et al. explain their position thus:

In our subjective essentialistic view of stereotyping, groups’ ‘inherent’ characteristics are some sort of social creations, that is, arbitrary qualities, that are attributed to social entities in order to explain their behaviours in a given cultural and historical context and to perpetuate the social system. (p. 47)

For these writers, a socio-cognitive imperative to understand the social system drives essentialist stereotyping, facilitating people’s rationalisation of out-group behaviour, which, in turn, functions to stabilise the social and political status quo. The notion that essentialist views can be moulded to accomplish ideological goals is important. Yet within mainstream psychology a paucity of research has elucidated how essentialist ontologies manifest in talk, for situated purposes and to rationalise the social order.

In one of the few discursive analyses of essentialist rhetoric, Verkuyten (2003) demonstrated how notions of culture could be harnessed for different rhetorical and ideological ends. Ethnic Dutch (majority) and ethnic minority participants used both cultural essentialist and de-essentialist resources. For example, the Dutch in-group, when arguing that ethnic minorities should assimilate into the majority culture, shedding their cultural roots to take on the culture of the in-group, implicitly drew upon a de-essentialist, pliable notion of culture. On the other hand, some minority group participants drew on an essentialist discourse of culture, representing it as key to protecting their cultural identity and, thus, their arguments against cultural assimilation.

Instructively, in Verkuyten’s (2003) study, consistent with the language of ‘new racism’ (Barker, 1981), deployment of biological or racial terms were seldom used. And
again, this is attributed to the general opprobrium against such terms as they are widely construed as racist (e.g. Van Dijk, 1992). What is particularly salient to the current study is Verkuyten’s observation that a discourse of culture, akin to biological conceptions of race, is discerned as a natural set of attributes providing a rich set of inferences about why some social groups are ‘the way they are’ (also see Balibar, 1991; Durrheim and Dixon, 2000).

The present study

Although previous research has marked out various components of essentialist thinking and extended its conceptualisation as an instrument for warranting and advancing social and political action, sparse research has considered the dynamic nature of essentialism as it operates within conversation towards rhetorical and ideological goals. The present study aims to explore how essentialist assumptions are employed in both lay and political depictions of Sudanese refugees. In particular, we show how a refugee group’s cultural and political history is rhetorically crafted to explain the group’s behaviour in essentialist forms.

The thesis of this article contends that essentialist theories of out-groups and their behaviour, when observed in talk, are constituted by an implicit network of causal assumptions, flexibly mobilised to accomplish various aims. This article aims to complement the pervasively cognitive and individualist literature on psychological essentialism (e.g. Haslam and Levy, 2006; Keller, 2005; Medin and Ortony, 1989), delineating how essentialised theories of culture and socio-political history comprise a racial ontology that has the potential to justify arbitrary social and political treatment.

Background to the data

Since 1996, over 20,000 of the Sudanese Diaspora fleeing Sudan’s civil war have settled in Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007). Like other immigrant groups throughout Australia’s history, refugees from Sudan have been intermittently subject to a critical evaluation of their rate of ‘resettlement’, and over the last five years a number of ‘controversies’ have been widely reported in the media (Hanson-Easey and Augoustinos, 2010). For instance, in 2007, Kevin Andrews, the former Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, cut the humanitarian quota for Sudanese refugees from 70% to 30%. This decision was partially justified by Andrews’ assertion that Sudanese refugees ‘don’t seem to be settling and adjusting into the Australian life as quickly as we would hope’ (Topsfield and Rood, 2007: 1). Andrews’ decision to radically reduce the Sudanese quota was specifically predicated on ‘cultural issues’ and the formation of ‘race-based gangs’ (Farouque and Cooke, 2007).

Also pertinent to the talkback radio data analysed in this article is the murder of a young Sudanese refugee by another Sudanese refugee youth in the central business district of Adelaide in 2008. This murder elicited racialised talkback debate after a young Sudanese refugee, Liep Gony, was bashed to death in Melbourne in 2007 (see Windle, 2008). It is important to note that the proceeding analysis is backgrounded by discourses operating within Australia that have characterised Sudanese refugees by their proclivity
for criminality and gang violence. Indeed, these features are often held up to signify ‘integration problems’ (see Hanson-Easey and Augoustinos, 2010).

**Method**

**Analytical frame**

This study employs a synthetic critical discursive psychological approach (Wetherell, 1998), melding a post-structuralist critical epistemology (e.g. Billig, 1991; Van Dijk, 1993, 1995; Wetherell and Potter, 1992) with a discursive psychological approach (e.g. Edwards and Potter, 1992; Wiggins and Potter, 2007). As previous socio-cognitive work on psychological essentialism suggests, the ontological reasoning at work when people categorise and account for social groups is a nuanced activity. As a window into these complex and variable systems of reasoning, a synthetic critical discursive approach privileges the means by which essentialist language is recruited to represent Sudanese refugees and explain their behaviour.

Our particular focus here is on the kind of social action talk achieves, its ‘action orientation’ (Heritage, 1984) within the interaction at hand and how these language practices are inexorably bound to the wider social-political context, making the link between everyday talk and the maintenance and reproduction of group identity and intergroup relations.

**Data**

The talkback calls analysed here derive from a corpus of 16 talkback radio ‘call-ins’ to *The Bob Francis Show* on FIVEaa, a radio station in the Australian city of Adelaide. A general search on *Media Monitors*’ database using the category term ‘Sudanese’, between 12 November 2008 and 21 May 2010, was conducted. In all, 24 ‘call summaries’ met this criteria. Further analyses of the call summaries were made. Call recordings were subsequently transcribed using a simplified version of Jeffersonian transcription conventions (Jefferson, 2004). A single ‘doorstop’ interview was also drawn from an associated corpus of five radio and two doorstop interviews conducted between the MP Kevin Andrews, the then Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, and various journalists between 2 and 5 October 2007.1

**Analysis and discussion**

**The essential tribe**

Yzerbyt et al. (1997) have argued that people subscribe to essentialist beliefs when social groups need to be understood in light of salient and potentially threatening social events. In the following extract, the caller and host are debating the causes for what is glossed as ‘friction’ between Sudanese refugees in Adelaide. Of particular note here is how participants orient to the notion of tribal influences, and how these characteristics are deployed to rationalise current events.
KEN: I will start with a: a: h (0.5) the ah (0.4) the Sudanese now ah (0.4) Sudan is in the northern part of Africa and the Congo [it’s the biggest it’s the biggest country in a: h .hh in in Africa=Su[dan? [ye:s an- and you were talking about the Tutsi’s th- they’ve got nothin to do with the Tutsis? (0.3)

BOB: but but there’s still tribal situations bu- bouncing in from Rwanda .hh which is right next door? (0.7)

KEN: we:ll rw- r: rw- Rwanda and Congo are right down the southern: more southern part of Africa.

BOB: n::o (0.7) Rwanda and th- the ah .h Democratic Republic of th- the Congo are a:ll alongside each other.

KEN: yeah those two are but a- ah- as I say Sudan is up further but anyhow I will go on with my subj- ther- the fiv- there’s nineteen hundred-ah (0.5) ah Sudanese in South Australia,

BOB: yeah,

KEN: and ah- there’s-ah five sects: (1.1) different sects (0.5) in er- er- of ah people in that nineteen hundred?

BOB: mm-mm?

KEN: which therefore? (0.3) that how the friction is caused.

BOB: and they’re all tribal’s?

KEN: [yeah.

BOB: [tribal frictions yeah,

KEN: ah- (0.2) this is- this is what’s causing the trouble with the (0.4) young people which a::h they(0.4)they virtually a:h resist (0.4) the other people because they get (0.5) preferences over ya’know different things and all that sort of thing this is how it’s all started up?

BOB: yeah.

KEN: and virtually they come out here with nothing (0.4) and then the fed- federal government um gives them every’thin and they giv’em then a house and all [that sort of thing.

BOB: [well what do you expect the government to do. Giv’em absolutely nothing and let’em live they way lived in Africa?

KEN: no no but’tha that’s what I say th- th- the government gives’em th- tha- like a- a start in life,
In this extract, the speaker initiates his call topic by recounting geographical details about Sudan and its geographical position in relation to other countries in Africa. He takes to task statements that the host has previously made about the causal influences of the ‘Tutsis’ on Sudanese refugees in Adelaide, challenging the host’s claim that ‘tribal situations are bouncing in from Rwanda which is right next door’ (lines 19–20). From this juncture, the caller works up an alternative explanation for the ‘friction’ that exists between ‘the Sudanese’: the ‘five different sects’ are driving the conflict, and this claim implies that these sects have their genesis in Sudan.

As Haslam et al. (2000) propose, if we are to understand the function of essentialist social theories (social ontologies) in legitimating inequality, then we should ask not only how a group is construed as a natural kind category, but also how they are reified as a homogenous group. In Extract 1, a sense of inherent invariability of (actual and potential) behaviour is inferred by constructing the tribal nature of Sudanese society as temporally stable. In other words, as interlocutors represent Sudan as inherently tribal, they also induct that frictions in Australia are similarly manifestations of this intrinsic tribal quality. This account, we argue, is predicated on an important essentialist assumption: in different spatial and temporal contexts, the violent behaviour attributed to this group remains constant. Their tribal nature causally determines this.

Yet this depiction of a homogenous collective is curiously paradoxical. The quantification of ‘five sects’ within the ‘nineteen hundred’ works to delineate sharply bounded groups within the larger collective. Hence, not only are the Sudanese constructed as homogenously tribal, individuals are rendered distinct from each other as well. That is, they are represented as internally disjointed because of their inherent tribalism. Indeed, this is a social collective that is tethered to its tribal past – it is experiencing difficulty moving beyond its essentialised tribal nature to behave in ways that are consonant with normative standards. Consequently, as a function of their historical tribal affiliations, their ability to peacefully co-exist with their own national group is mollified.

The tribal nature of the Sudanese is further held to manifest in competition over fundamental social services, such as public housing. A cleavage between the tribes is thus exposed: ‘they virtually ah resist (0.4) the other people because they get (0.5) preferences over ya’ know different things’ (lines 41–43). Here, it is the welfare state and the provision of housing that give rise to the tribal nature in the Sudanese. Moreover, this explanation sustains a tacit complaint about the wisdom of providing public housing to this group.

Also notable in this extract is how the host orients to the caller’s tribal formulation. The host indeed accepts the idea that tribes exist within the Sudanese community, uttering ‘and they’re all tribal’s’ (line 37) and ‘tribal frictions’ (line 39). Yet although he agrees that ‘tribal situations’ are ‘bouncing in from Rwanda’ (lines 19–20), he does not accept the caller’s claim that Sudanese refugees are being supported unfairly by social services. In the nomenclature of psychological essentialism, the host in this segment of talk moderates the assumed homogeneity or uniformity (entitativity) of the category, not in reference to their shared, inherent and entitative tribalism (something that the host
repeatedly makes pronouncements on), but in terms of how this characteristic becomes conspicuous. Put differently, a group may be reified as inherently tribal, but this feature may not reliably predict behaviour across the group as a whole because this latent attribute will only become manifest in particular contexts (i.e. in competition over housing).

Attributing group members’ behaviour to some intrinsic or pseudo-biological cause is a key tenet of psychological essentialism. However, in the previous extract, a historical narrative of civil instability and war is applied to comprehend both the causes and potential implications of the events under discussion. When considering much of the theorisation on psychological essentialism, this extract would perhaps suggest that it is not an exemplar of essentialist rhetoric but, rather, an example of a ‘social constructionist’ (de-essentialist) lay theory (e.g. No et al., 2008). As we will continue to argue throughout the following analysis, what subtly binds this argument together is the quiet inference that tribalism, having been putatively experienced in the home country, has become embedded in Sudanese refugees, regulating their behaviour over things like perceived competition for social resources.

Although a high proportion of calls analysed in the talkback corpus could be characterised as explicitly pejorative, in the next extract the caller is observed to mitigate the perceived threat that Sudanese refugees pose to the in-group.

Extract 2.

(4 seconds removed)

1 KEITH: several previous callers have mentioned Sudanese and
2 usually .hh when people are: babbling a:h about migration
3 they usually .hh clutch at straws and one of those is
4 Sudanese? .hh they and th- th- the caller several hours
5 ago mentioned that .hh they: cause us trouble here .h no
6 they don’t give us trouble they fight amongst themselves
7 .hh their fights are usually tribal ones an- don’t concern
8 us?
9 BOB: ri↑ght
10 KEITH: .hh s:o hh they might be brin- bringing their troubles
11 here in a sense but they don’t trouble us too much
12 because usually .hh they- they do their own kind of
13 infighting.

Here, the caller employs a tribal representation of Sudanese refugees that functions as a retort to ‘previous callers’ (line 1) who ‘clutch at straws’ (line 3) when talking about (im)migration issues, including the Sudanese situation. The caller accounts for the degree of threat the Sudanese are presumed to pose to ‘us’ (i.e. the non-Sudanese). Analogous to the tribal formulation in Extract 1, these influences are deployed in an essentialist formulation, reasoning that their ‘fights’ (line 7) are best understood as ‘tribal ones’ (line 7), and that these conflicts have their provenance in Sudan, having contiguously travelled with the refugees to Australia.

Again, an implicit essentialised logic portrays all Sudanese immigrants as a homogeneous social category, no matter where they originate from in Sudan, what their specific
history is or what religion they subscribe to. Interestingly, the ascription of tribal properties to Sudanese immigrants is used to mark a boundary around potential violence by depicting it as an intragroup problem.

As noted in Extract 1, what could be understood as a prejudiced representation of a collective as inherently tribal does not follow a direct rhetorical path leading to an explicitly negative evaluation. Rather, this formulation works to delimit the threat posed to the in-group, bounding the threat of tribal violence to Sudanese refugees themselves. Nevertheless, the account advances on implicit stereotypical and pejorative assumptions that engender the group with essentialised tribal qualities.

In Extract 3, the host and caller have previously (not shown here) been discussing a fight witnessed by the caller involving two Sudanese adolescents. In this segment of the call, a lay theory on what could be motivating such violence between Sudanese refugees in the community is constructed.

Extract 3.

(2 min, 56 s removed)

68 BOB: and from what I’ve heard: and I hope it- it’s not true
69 but I- I’ve heard that’ah that ah people coming out from
70 .h ah the northern African countries who’ve been .h
71 allowed to come out here an- an- and be part of our .h our
72 nation here .hh are bringing their .h ah their their
73 warring factions from the tribes that they belong to .hh
74 in: Rwanda and Sudan and places like that ya’know th- .h
75 the Hutu’s and the Tutsi’s and all that sort of stuff, .h
76 BRAD: well that- thats yeah?
77 BOB: an’that an’tthat’s terrifying (beca’hav’ya) that have been
78 done in the past between .h ya’know Croatian and Serbians
79 and ah I’m I’m hopeful th- that’s .h all finished but
80 still seems to drag around .hh an’it and it it hangs
81 around .h between ah sort’of parents and then the- then
82 down to kids and goes through through through generations
83 .hh of the hatred (.) of of different people,
84 BRAD: yep…

Although the host does ‘hope it’s not true’ (line 68) (a disclaimer of sorts, inoculating his account from being judged unfair or racist), he nevertheless represents people from ‘northern African countries’ (line 70) as a homogenous collective, invariably importing their ‘warring factions from the tribes that they belong to in Rwanda and Sudan’ (lines 73–74). Most notably, the previously noted violence is interpreted as a consequence of tribalism, and invocation of the Rwandan genocide brings to bear connotations associated with this evocative and notoriously bloody exemplar of mass murder. Conflating notions of Sudanese tribal affiliations with those implicated in the Rwandan genocide and ‘places like that’ (line 74) does important work to gloss this account with symbolic threat, whilst again making inferences about the intractable tribal cause of the violence witnessed by the caller.

Discernible here are the tightly wound links between essentialism and causal attributions in the formation of essentialist accounts. There are clear parallels between
attribution theory (e.g. Hewstone, 1989) and psychological essentialism in so far as both theories attempt to account for how social groups and phenomena are attributed a nature that causes their observable behaviour and features. The description of Sudanese refugees as invariably tribal, then, can be read to infer that the violence witnessed by the caller in Adelaide is attributable to the same tribal orientation that drove the ‘warring factions’ in Africa. Thus, an essentialist presupposition of cause explains both phenomena, in Africa and in Australia.

This extract evidences how essentialist reasoning can function to transmogrify historical experiences of civil war in Sudan, viscerally represented via the Rwandan genocide, into an inherent and relatively immutable attribute. Arguably, the notion of a travelling invariant tribalism encompasses both a socially constructed (experience of civil war) and internal (essentialist) dimension when used to construct the root cause of the violence.

As the host in the above extract elaborates on, a deeply rooted proclivity towards violence is not only limited to people from Africa, but also explains why ‘Croatian and Serbians’ (line 78) still carry around ‘the hatred of different people’ (line 83). A propensity for violence is hence causally attributed to conflicts such as the Serbian War of Independence, and this conflict is similarly rationalised as leaving a deeply-rooted mark on the displaced peoples fleeing the conflict. Indeed, an intergenerational hatred is constructed here as a trait-like quality, passed down from parent to child – ‘and it goes through generations’ (line 82). Behaviours that are deemed violent are thus constructed as manifestations of this latent trait that ‘still seems to drag around’ (line 80).

As an ideological justification, prescribing an inherent and enduring tribalism to the Sudanese Diaspora, functions as a prosaic and highly malleable rhetorical device. Notionally, any current contextual problem, whether political, institutional or material, impinging on this group’s capacity to meet perceived normative patterns of behaviour can thus be elided under an essentialist tribal theory – effectively, and singularly, attributing blame to the out-group themselves. Ideologically, such a discourse explains away the social (and political) disadvantages that come with being a refugee, whilst maintaining and reinforcing the appearance that responsibility for such disadvantages lies with refugees themselves.

**Cultural essentialism**

In Australia, like many other countries, it is relatively rare for biological or genetic conceptions, nested within the concept of race, to be heard. Rather, covert ontological reasoning about cultural distinctiveness and incompatibility is regularly marshalled to justify segregation (Balibar, 1991; Barker, 1981; Durrheim and Dixon, 2000; Goldberg, 1993) or illiberal policy interventions, while simultaneously mitigating against accusations of racism (e.g. Condor et al., 2006; Van Dijk, 1992). Discourses that fashion culture in essentialised forms are now considered key to racist practice, and cultural racism is considered far more ideologically and rhetorically flexible than crude biological racism, as it can avoid ‘essentialist understandings of primitiveness and permanent inferiority’ (Durrheim and Dixon, 2000: 94). As we will show in the proceeding section, essentialist
notions of culture provide the logic for causal theories for why Sudanese refugees are not integrating into Australian society.

In the following extract, the caller (Tom) details his views on people who have come to Australia from societies ‘like the Sudan’, contrasting their potential adaptation to Australian society with previously immigrated people with ‘European ancestry’.

Extract 4.
(2 min, 45 s removed)

19  TOM: I try to look at it with degree of um of- of coolness? .hh
20     it wasn’t too difficult although it was somewhat difficult
21     for people of European um: ancestry .h Italians and um
22     (red) Lithuanians and other people to find a .hh niche for
23     themselves in: in Australia particularly as it was .h all
24     those years ago when we were a little less um easy to get
25     along with? .hh but its exceed- hh it’s’gunna be very very
26     difficult .h for gentleman who have been ra- ra- raised in
27     these societies .hh like the Sudan and places of that
28     nature? .h to find it easy to settle in to places like
29     Australia?

Although ‘culture’ is not specifically mentioned in this extract, the caller’s deployment of ancestry connotes an analogous category. Like the notion of tribalism observed in Extract 1, ancestry is represented as travelling with people from their homelands, guiding their behaviour and, as a consequence, constraining their capacity for integration. Those with European ancestry, such as ‘Italians and Lithuanians’ (lines 21–22), are posited to have with some effort found a ‘niche for themselves’ (lines 22–23) in Australia. They have integrated, and have done so at a time in history when ‘we were a little less easy to get along with’ (lines 24–25).

Contrastingly, the caller suggests that ‘it’s gunna be very very difficult for gentleman who have raised in these societies like the Sudan and places of that nature’ (lines 25–28). How does the caller construct previous immigrants from Europe as having successfully acculturated into Australian society whilst maintaining that people heralding from Africa will not similarly integrate, finding their own niche over time? We contend that this account advances on the tacit essentialist inference that treats culture (‘ancestry’) as an inherent attribute for both immigrant groups through time, but differentially affects the groups’ ability to adapt to new cultural settings. In other words, the idea that European immigrants could find their niche is predicated on the logic that there was enough cultural affinity between Australia and Europe to allow this integration to be realised in the first instance. Refugees from Sudan, however, are represented as being so culturally dissimilar to their host country as to seriously impede their integration. Here again, the quiet reasoning of this rhetoric treats culture as an essentialised quality and acting as a disruptive force, undermining Sudanese refugees’ acculturation and integration.

Embodied political culture and policy justification. Various social psychologists (Jost and Banaji, 1994; Wagner et al., 2009; Yzerbyt et al., 1997) have elucidated how essentialism functions ontologically, naturalising differences between social categories. The
construction of differences between groups on the basis of invariant and discrete cultural properties has been shown to function ideologically, as a legitimating tool for rationalising and justifying political action that holds the potential to be discerned as racist.

The social justificatory role of cultural essentialism, deployed for political purposes, is illustrated in the next extract. This segment is taken from a ‘doorstop’ interview with Kevin Andrews, the Minister for Immigration in the previous Liberal Coalition government of Australia. To contextualise this extract, Andrews had just publicly announced that the humanitarian refugee quota from Africa, most of whom originated from Sudan, was to be significantly reduced. Part of the justification for the reduction was premised on reports his department had received about Sudanese refugees experiencing trouble integrating, forming ‘race-based gangs’ and involving themselves in ‘family disputes’ (Andrews, 2007). These grounds for the quota reduction sparked vigorous media and talkback radio debate, with Media Monitors reporting that the issue received 345 mentions on radio in the 24-hour period after the announcement (quoted in Topsfield and Rood, 2007).

Extract 5.

85 JOURNALIST: In what way have African refugees had more trouble settling in than refugees from other
generations in the past?
86 ANDREWS: Well each generation comes from different
87 backgrounds. When you talk about refugees, for a
88 long time the major source of refugees to Australia,
89 if you go back to the beginnings of
90 this programme after the end of the Second World
91 War, many of the people who came to Australia as
92 refugees came as refugees from Europe, who came
93 from largely the same Western liberal democratic
94 culture as we share in Australia. They may have
95 spoken different languages, eaten different
96 foods, etcetera, but largely there was a sharing
97 of culture in terms of the people who came to
98 Australia. More recently we've had people from
99 parts of Asia, for example, in which there has
100 been some similarities, again, in terms of the
101 culture. Now this is not to denigrate or to
102 suggest that there is something wrong with
103 particular cultures, it's just being realistic
104 enough to say that if we've got some challenges
105 then we ought to be clear-headed enough and we
106 ought to be sensible enough to say let's look at
107 those challenges and let's work in a way with the
108 people concerned to ensure that we can meet their
109 aspirations, meet the aspirations of Australians
110 general.

In the above extract, Andrews develops a socio-historical narrative that functions to legitimate the controversial cutting of the humanitarian refugee quota from Sudan. In response to the question, ‘In what way have African refugees had more trouble settling
in than generations from the past?’ (lines 85–87), he contrasts the cultural ‘backgrounds’ of various refugee cohorts and their relative ‘fit’ with a ‘Western liberal democratic culture as we share in Australia’ (lines 95–96). Although refugees from Europe are depicted as speaking different languages and having their own culinary tastes, they ostensibly share one core similarity with Australia: a ‘Western liberal democratic culture’.

What might it mean to lack a Western liberal democratic cultural heritage? And, importantly, how does this account invoke essentialist assumptions in this setting? First, the category term ‘Western democratic culture’ signifies, in opaque terms, what cultural attributes African refugees do not possess – and, thus, implicitly, what is axiomatic to Australian culture. The notion of a Western democratic culture arguably invokes an integrated stock of concepts and values that emerged out of the Enlightenment, including representational government, the rule of law, rights of the individual, civil rights, due process of law, and so forth (e.g. Scruton, 1982). For this reason, characteristics that are imputed to be lacking in Sudanese refugees constitute many of the fundamental social and political values that structure the Australian polity.

Second, Andrews’ account constructs a ‘Western democratic culture’ – or more accurately, a lack of it – as a reified entity, akin to some ‘thing’ that a person may or may not possess. Fowler (1991) writes that reification, by means of ‘nominalisation’ (Billig, 2008), turning verbs into nouns, is such that ‘processes and qualities assume the status of things: impersonal, inanimate, capable of being amassed and counted like capital, paraded like possessions’ (p. 80). Accordingly, the strategic use of nominalisation of political culture does important rhetorical and ideological work, which is worth examining now in further detail.

What can generally be conceived as a ‘Western democratic culture’ (and its binary opposite – a non-Western, ‘un-democratic’ culture), its political structures, norms and practices, are, as a function of reification, transformed into the abstract. A whole cache of practices can thus be re-specified into one abstract, nominal term, and this has the rhetorical effect of protecting this account from dispute, as the now rather vague claim that African refugees lack a certain ‘thing’ is more difficult to pick apart. Arguably, if he had, by example, delineated the processes by which people actively engage with their political culture, undermine it, manipulate it, reject it outright, and described it as a highly variable and contextually contingent system of practices, Andrews’ argument may not function so persuasively (Billig, 2008).

We are now in a position to elucidate how linguistic nominalisation and essentialism are partnered as important rhetorical elements of an account that essentialises political culture as a determinant of people’s ability to adapt to new social environments. In short, if a political culture can be nominalised and transformed into an abstract entity, then it can also be manufactured into an essentialised attribute, divorced from the complex social and political processes that mediate how people relate to, and participate in, their communities. Similar to extracts within the corpus that point to Sudanese culture as the problem, this rhetoric is fundamentally ideological in its effect – ideological, we argue, because it propagates a discourse that transforms refugees’ past socio-political experiences into powerful essences, imputed to determine current and future behaviour.

As discussed elsewhere (Hanson-Easey and Augoustinos, 2010), the socio-political environment from which refugees flee is precisely the reason they seek humanitarian
assistance in the first place. Positioning Sudanese refugees as lacking in attributes associated with Western democratic culture, and utilising this to justify a reduction in the humanitarian quota, speaks to the persuasive power that essentialised, political rhetoric can impart.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this article was to examine the discursive structure, rhetorical effects and ideological function of essentialist resources as employed by speakers when fashioning theories about Sudanese refugees and their lack of integration into the Australian culture. The foregoing analysis has demonstrated how Sudanese refugees’ experiences of civil war, persecution and socio-political instability constitute an ontological theory of culture, accounting for recent violent events. A contiguous and intrinsic tribal dispositional quality was mobilised to account for Sudanese refugees’ behaviour. Accordingly, a potted history of refugee experience was essentialised, constituting the entitative bonds that held them together as a social category.

Psychological essentialism has received considerable empirical and theoretical attention over the last two decades, especially from experimental social psychologists (e.g. Demoulin et al., 2006; Haslam et al., 2002, 2006; Keller, 2005; Levy et al., 2006; Morton et al., 2009; No et al., 2008; Roets and Van Hiel, 2011; Williams and Eberhardt, 2008). Previous studies have cast light on the structural and cognitive elements of essentialist beliefs and the relationship these have with prejudice, stereotyping and intergroup relations. However, a paucity of research has considered how socio-historical discourses are mobilised in order to essentialise social groups. Refugees resettling in a host country do not arrive and occupy an empty discursive and representational context, enabling them to construct and manage their own group identity(ies). Rather, they are socially constructed by the in-group and, thus, positioned relative to a pre-formed social matrix of understandings (Moloney, 2007). These constructions, as we have elucidated, can be flexibly summoned to impose nefarious or benign identities upon those groups who are most at risk of social and political alienation.

Our chief point here is that essentialist representations of out-group members are comprised of complex, causal narratives, affiliating historical experiences of civil and political unrest with assumptions of how these may impinge on the behaviour of refugees. We contend that the conceptualisation of psychological essentialism could be broadened from an individualistic account, attributed to, for example, a person’s ontological bias or ‘epistemic motivation for closure’ (e.g. Roets and Van Hiel, 2011), to include a more concentrated focus on the discursive and representational resources available in the social realm. For example, a number of scholars have identified a tractable discourse of violent criminalisation of Sudanese refugees in the Australian media (Due, 2010; Robins, 2003; Windle, 2008), attributing this to Sudanese refugees’ traumatic experience of violence in their homelands. Further research could productively explicate the linkages between essentialist lay ontologies and media discourses, and, importantly, how these variably function towards different ideological goals.

As we have maintained throughout this article, psychological essentialism, as it manifests in language, can be understood as constituting more than the simple cognitive
propensity to minimise uncertainty and ‘reduce the complexity of their social environment’ (Demoulin et al., 2006: 38). The present contribution has illustrated how essentialist thinking, as it is evidenced in talk, is contingent on the social and political conditions germane within any given social context. As others (e.g. Morton et al., 2009) have emphasised, essentialist lay theories are most likely to be flexibly employed, contingent on their strategic aim. Yet some studies appear to reify essentialist beliefs as akin to a rigid dispositional trait (e.g. Chao et al., 2007), inherently (and unconsciously) shaping social perceptions and behaviour, irrespective of context. As the present study has illustrated, essentialist beliefs can be multifarious, composed of a mosaic of constructions, historical representations and tacit causal attributions. These interlaced dimensions are rarely studied in the contexts in which they are used, and, accordingly, our knowledge of essentialist beliefs, and how they are variably fashioned for their occasioned, interactive and political purposes, is all too often confounded with the methodologies employed to elucidate it.

Moreover, constructing prejudicial accounts of a humanitarian refugee group is a delicate undertaking for speakers (e.g. Hanson-Easey and Augoustinos, 2011, 2012). Sudanese refugees, living in a predominantly white, English-speaking milieu, are marked as ethnically, phenotypically and culturally ‘visible’ (Colic-Peisker, 2009). We suspect that the invocation of genetic or race-based explanations for why this group is different and, indeed, problematic, may constitute a particularly risky rhetorical move for speakers. This is especially delicate when considering the historical context of how racism has traditionally been perpetrated against those who are perceived as phenotypically different. To mitigate against being denounced as expressing racist views, especially against a highly visual humanitarian refugee minority, we presume that an essentialised cultural discourse is likely to be preferred to a blatant, pseudo-genetic theory of race (e.g. Van Dijk, 1992). In other words, the rhetorical dilemma of constructing an antipathetic account, whilst avoiding a problematic identity, is managed by the deployment of cultural essentialism.

Further research could fruitfully interrogate how essentialised characterisations of culture are occasioned to depict out-groups in forms that not only legitimise their views as rational and ‘not racist’, but concomitantly attend to how such discourses support the current socio-political order. Little discursive work has examined the functioning of essentialist accounts in naturalistic settings in relation to ideological practice (but see Durrheim and Dixon, 2000). We propose that future social-psychological work could re-orient some of the current focus on the cognitive elements of psychological essentialism to listen to how essentialist inferences are produced in constructing out-group identities. Indeed, the latent facets of essentialist lay theories evidenced here may easily go unobserved in social practice if they are examined under very different conditions.

Ascribing inhering cultural and biological essences to out-groups has an odious history. In the political realm especially, essentialist discourses have been harnessed to justify state-endorsed programmatic genocide (e.g. Raudsepp and Wagner, 2012; Wagner et al., 2010). Nor does one need to search too deeply for current permutations of essentialist rhetoric in extreme right-wing propaganda (e.g. Holtz and Wagner, 2009). Yet essentialist beliefs are equally salient in the everyday, and it is often within the parameters of mundane social practice that minority identities are produced, imbued with
credulity, and their illiberal treatment rationalised as ‘the nature of things’ (Goldberg, 1998). A critical discursive approach makes plain these ideological functions of language in legitimating and sustaining social inequality (Van Dijk, 1993). As we have argued here, essentialist ‘chains of reasoning’ (Durrheim and Dixon, 2000) fashion cultural and historical discursive resources into lay theories that explicate the root cause of problematised refugee behaviour. It is within these latent and pliable essentialist theories of cause that some important operations of new racism advance.

**Funding**

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

**Notes**

1. See Hanson-Easey and Augoustinos (2010) for a full description of the media interview corpus.
2. During the aftermath of the Second World War, the Australian government accepted displaced persons from countries such as Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, the Ukraine, Hungary and Italy. Whilst the infamous ‘White Australia Policy’ was still operating, it was being slowly dismantled in favour of an assimilationist policy. It is widely believed that selecting ‘Europeans’ of ‘Anglo Celtic’ appearance still elided with the fundamental ‘cultural cohesion’ tenant of the White Australia Policy (Cope et al., 1991).
3. Also, 13 press articles, 26 television and 50 internet mentions (Topsfield and Rood, 2007).
4. The deployment of the word ‘Western’ has myriad other connotations attached to it (e.g. Said’s (1978) conceptualisation of the discourse of the ‘Oriental other’).

**References**


Appendix: Jeffersonian transcription symbols (Jefferson, 2004)

- Double parentheses contain the descriptions.
- Empty parentheses mean the transcriber could not grasp what was said.
- Single parentheses with text in-guess at what was said.
- A dot in parentheses indicates a tiny, just noticeable pause.
- Numbers in parentheses indicate elapsed time in silence by tenth of seconds, so (0.7) is a pause of seven tenths of a second.
- A dot prefixed row of hs indicates the sound of inhalation.
- Without the dot, the hhh indicates exhalation.
- Speech contained within quotation marks indicates speech that was spoken as though reproducing verbatim a third person’s locution.
- Underlining indicates emphasis on that word or syllable.
- Uppercase indicates especially loud sounds relative to the surrounding talk.
- Arrows indicate marked shifts into higher or lower pitch in the utterance part immediately following the arrow. Double arrows indicate a greater shift.
- A question mark indicates a rising intonation, less pronounced than an upward arrow.
- A full stop indicates a stopping fall in tone.
- A comma indicates continuing intonation.
- Hyphens mark the abrupt cut-off of the preceding sound.
- Colons indicate prolongation of the immediately prior sound.
- signs enclose speeded up talk. Used in reverse for slower talk.
- indicates no discernable pause between two sounds within a single together. This is often called latching.
- Indicates laughter.
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