

Systematic Review

Systematic Review of Essentialist Beliefs in Social Sciences (2014–2024): A Critical-Performative Approach to Their Production, Circulation, and Stabilization in Social Categories

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Abstract

This systematic review examines how students and teachers acquire, reproduce, and transform essentialist beliefs about social categories such as gender, race, class, and disability. These beliefs attribute fixed and natural characteristics to social groups, thereby contributing to the legitimization of social hierarchies from an early age. Unlike studies that focus on measuring these beliefs or analyzing their effects, this review examines the processes through which they emerge, circulate, and stabilize, especially in educational contexts. I analyzed 29 empirical studies published between 2014 and 2024, identified through a systematic search in Web of Science and Scopus and reported according to PRISMA guidelines. The corpus includes experimental, quasi-experimental, correlational, descriptive-comparative, and non-experimental studies, most of which use cross-sectional data. The findings were organized into three analytical dimensions: trajectories in the production of essentialist beliefs; sociocultural–institutional mechanisms of circulation and stabilization; and categorical approaches across social groups. The review shows that essentialist beliefs are not only individual cognitive dispositions, but are also shaped by educational practices, family narratives, media representations, scientific explanations, and broader sociocultural contexts. Overcoming essentialism requires not only new educational content, but also critical attention to the classificatory and epistemic frameworks through which social differences are made to appear natural, stable, and teachable.

Keywords: essentialist beliefs; essentialism; social categories; social sciences and humanities; education; production; stabilization; circulation



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1. Introduction

Various studies have shown that essentialist beliefs persistently shape perceptions of social groups across diverse sociocultural contexts ([Haslam and Whelan 2008](#); [Haslam et al. 2000](#); [Mahalingam 2007](#)). These beliefs assume that social categories such as gender, ethnicity, class, age, or religion have a natural, stable, and universal basis. In doing so, they can reinforce and legitimize hierarchical views of these categories ([Bastian and Haslam 2006](#); [Sutherland and Cimpian 2019](#)). Early research addressed these beliefs mainly through psychological and cognitive approaches ([Gelman 2004](#); [Haslam and Whelan 2008](#); [Haslam et al. 2000](#)). More recent work has increasingly linked them to social hierarchization and the reproduction of structural exclusion.

Essentialist beliefs shape social explanations and can contribute to the reproduction of inequalities. In psychological terms, the “inductive potential” of essentialism refers to

the tendency to understand members of a category as sharing an underlying, unchangeable essence. This belief, found from an early age, reinforces stereotypes and prejudices (Diesendruck and HaLevi 2006; Gelman 2003; Rhodes and Gelman 2009). By assigning natural, hereditary, and stable traits to categories such as gender or race, essentialist beliefs influence how people interpret others' behavior and anticipate social interactions (Bastian and Haslam 2006; Levy et al. 1998; del Río and Strasser 2011). These effects have been observed, for example, in recommendations for different educational paths (Nürnberger et al. 2016) and in prejudices about abilities, interests, and accepted behaviors for specific groups (Chao et al. 2007).

However, a significant portion of the literature has focused on conceptualizing essentialism as a construct or analyzing its effects. Less attention has been given to how these beliefs are produced, circulated, and stabilized across social groups and contexts. Prior reviews have also been limited in scope. Haslam and Whelan (2008), for example, propose a conceptual taxonomy of essentialism but do not address formative processes. Ryazanov and Christenfeld (2017) offers a narrative review without methodological systematization. Rossi and Caricati (2025) focus exclusively on gender essentialism and its effects. This fragmentation highlights the need for a synthesis that integrates evidence on the formation and acquisition of essentialist beliefs across multiple social categories and contexts.

This article systematically reviews empirical social science research from the last decade to identify how essentialist beliefs are produced, circulated, and stabilized across social categories. The corpus reviewed here is composed mainly of psychological and quantitative studies that examine essentialist reasoning as a measurable cognitive or social construct. For this reason, the review does not only synthesize what these studies report about the presence, development, or variation in essentialist beliefs. It also asks how essentialism is defined, operationalized, measured, compared, and stabilized as an object of knowledge within the empirical literature.

To address this question, the review proposes a critical-performative reading of essentialism. This reading draws on Butler's theory of performativity (Butler 1990, 1993), Foucault's work on knowledge and classification (Foucault [1975] 1984), and material-discursive approaches to knowledge production (Barad 2007; Haraway 1988). From this perspective, essentialism is approached not only as an individual belief or cognitive bias, but also as part of a naturalizing epistemic framework through which social differences are made intelligible, repeated, and stabilized. Essentialist beliefs can therefore be understood as produced through repeated practices that define category boundaries, assign essential properties, and make certain distinctions appear natural or self-evident (Butler 1993; Matus 2023; Sanz 2017). These processes may become embedded in pedagogical tools, scientific discourse, classification systems, and other material-discursive practices through which social categories acquire the status of common sense (Barad 2007; Foucault [1975] 1984; Haraway 1988).

Rather than treating this critical-performative framework as direct empirical evidence, the review uses it as a theoretical lens to interpret and discuss the broader empirical and epistemological implications of the patterns identified in the literature. In this sense, the framework guides the synthesis by directing attention to the ways in which essentialist beliefs are conceptualized, measured, circulated, and stabilized across the reviewed studies. By systematizing existing evidence through this theoretical lens, the review contributes to denaturalizing epistemic frameworks that sustain social hierarchies and inequalities.

2. Materials and Methods

A systematic search and review were conducted from September to December 2024 in Web of Science (WOS) and Scopus. This systematic review was conducted and reported in

accordance with the PRISMA 2020 Statement, Supplementary File S1 (Page et al. 2021). It aims to identify empirical studies addressing the production, circulation, and stabilization of essentialist beliefs among students and teachers and across related educational and sociocultural contexts.

The review was not prospectively registered, and no publicly available review protocol was prepared prior to conducting it. Instead, the review was guided by internal methodological documentation, including the search strategy, eligibility criteria, and data extraction matrix. This is acknowledged as a methodological limitation, as it reduces transparency compared with prospectively registered reviews with publicly available protocols. To address this limitation, the revised manuscript provides the full database-specific search strategies, eligibility criteria, study selection flow, data extraction categories, and synthesis procedure.

Study screening was conducted by the author in two stages: title and abstract screening followed by full-text review of potentially eligible records. Data extraction was conducted using a structured matrix that included authorship, year of publication, country of origin, methodological design, population or developmental stage, social category addressed, and type of essentialism, and reported findings. Given that this review employs thematic synthesis across heterogeneous empirical designs—rather than estimating pooled effects—standard risk-of-bias tools developed for intervention studies (e.g., RoB 2, ROBINS-I) were not considered appropriate for the aims of this review (Thomas and Harden 2008; Dekkers et al. 2022). Instead, a methodological quality appraisal was conducted using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), version 2018 (Hong et al. 2018). MMAT was selected because it allows for the appraisal of different empirical study designs within a single framework, including quantitative randomized, quantitative non-randomized, and quantitative descriptive studies. Each included study was assigned to the MMAT category that best matched its design, and the corresponding screening questions and methodological criteria were applied. The appraisal was not used as an exclusion criterion, but rather to contextualize the methodological robustness and limitations of the evidence included in the synthesis. Consistent with MMAT guidance (Hong et al. 2019), no overall quality score was calculated; instead, results are reported at the criterion level in Supplementary Table S1. Reporting bias assessment and certainty of evidence tools (e.g., GRADE) were not applied, as these instruments are designed for quantitative syntheses and were not warranted in a thematic review of this kind. The literature search focused on studies addressing the production, circulation, and stabilization of essentialist beliefs. Because these concepts functioned as the analytical framework of the review, but yielded few results when used directly, a broader search strategy was developed to capture analytically relevant studies. The key terms used were production, development, acquisition, construction, formation, internalization, stabilization, influence, association, essentialist beliefs, and essentialist thinking. Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to combine terms across Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus.

The same search strategy was applied in Web of Science and Scopus, with minor adaptations to the syntax required by each database. In Web of Science, the search was conducted in the Topic field (TS), while in Scopus it was conducted in Title, Abstract, and Keywords (TITLE-ABS-KEY). The general search string was: (“development” OR “acquisition” OR “construction” OR “formation” OR “internalization” OR “influence” OR “associat*”) AND (“essentialis* belief*” OR “essentialis* think*”). Both searches were conducted between September and December 2024, with filters applied for publication language (English and Spanish) and date range (2014–2024).

Inclusion and exclusion criteria limited the corpus to empirical studies in the social sciences that addressed the production, circulation, or stabilization of essentialist beliefs.

Empirical research was understood, following APA (2017), as research based on systematic observation, data collected through defined procedures, and explicit analysis. This criterion was used to identify studies that could provide a systematic basis for comparative thematic synthesis. It also narrowed the scope of the review by excluding theoretical, conceptual, review-based, and non-empirical publications. This limitation is addressed in the Discussion.

The search yielded 486 records, including 223 records from Scopus and 263 from Web of Science. Before screening, 292 records were removed: 128 duplicates, 45 non-empirical studies, 113 records outside the 2014–2024 timeframe, and 6 records published in languages other than English or Spanish. This resulted in 194 records for title and abstract screening.

During title and abstract screening, 165 records were excluded for the following reasons: not belonging to the social sciences ($n = 38$), focusing on the effects or impact of essentialism rather than on its production, circulation, or stabilization ($n = 40$), treating essentialism as a secondary concept or addressing it in an overly specific way ($n = 65$), being meta-analyses, theoretical papers, or reviews ($n = 12$), or focusing only on scale validation ($n = 10$). The remaining 29 reports were sought for retrieval and assessed for eligibility through full-text review. All 29 reports met the inclusion criteria and were included in the systematic review.

The study selection process followed the PRISMA 2020 phases of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. Figure 1 presents the revised PRISMA flow diagram of the selection process.

The analysis followed a hybrid deductive–inductive thematic synthesis, informed by thematic synthesis in systematic reviews and methodological guidance on coding procedures in literature reviews (Thomas and Harden 2008; Xiao and Watson 2019). The initial coding was guided deductively by the review objective, which focused on how essentialist beliefs are produced, circulated, and stabilized across social categories. During full-text reading, each study was coded according to its methodological characteristics, population or developmental stage, social category addressed, type of essentialism, and reported findings related to the emergence, reinforcement, circulation, destabilization, or persistence of essentialist beliefs. These codes were then refined inductively through comparison across studies. This process allowed recurring patterns to be grouped into three analytical dimensions: trajectories in the production of essentialist beliefs, sociocultural–institutional mechanisms of circulation and stabilization, and categorical approaches across social groups.

Finally, the synthesis incorporated a critical-performative interpretive stage, drawing on performativity, knowledge/classification, and material-discursive approaches to knowledge production (Butler 1990, 1993; Foucault [1975] 1984; Barad 2007; Haraway 1988). This stage constitutes part of the theoretical contribution of the review and acknowledges the epistemological tension between the predominantly psychological and quantitative orientation of the included studies and the critical framework used to interpret their broader implications. The critical-performative perspective was not treated as direct empirical evidence, nor as a claim directly tested by the reviewed studies. Rather, it was used as an analytical lens to discuss how the identified patterns may be read in relation to broader processes of classification, naturalization, and stabilization of social categories.

Figure 1 PRISMA flow diagram of the study selection process, adapted from Page et al. (2021). For the synthesis of results, the following data were extracted from each selected study: authorship and year of publication, country of origin, type of methodological design, population or stage of development analyzed (childhood, adolescence, adulthood), social category addressed (gender, race, religion, among others), and type of essentialism

(biological, psychological, or social). This information enabled us to characterize the corpus and guide the analysis systematically.

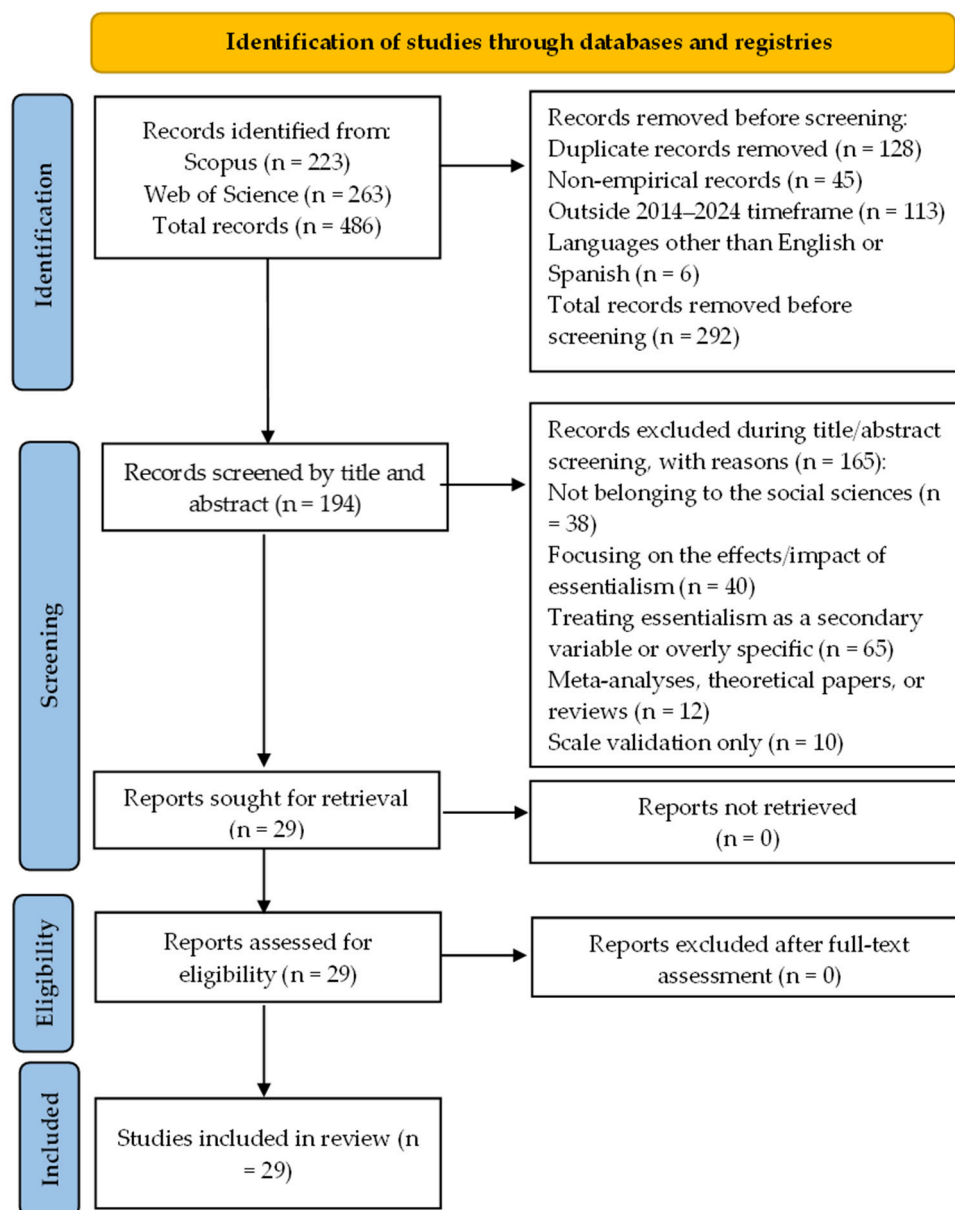


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram of the study selection process, adapted from Page et al. (2021). For the synthesis of results, the following data were extracted from each selected study: authorship and year of publication, country of origin, type of methodological design, population or stage of development analyzed (childhood, adolescence, adulthood), social category addressed (gender, race, religion, among others), and type of essentialism (biological, psychological, or social). This information enabled us to characterize the corpus and guide the analysis systematically.

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the empirical articles selected through the search:

Table 1. General characterization of the studies included in the systematic review.

No.	Authors	Title	Year	Country	Study Type	Data Type	Development Stage	Social Category	Type of Essentialism
1	Chalik et al. (2017)	Cultural Context Shapes Essentialist Beliefs About Religion	2017	United States	Quasi-experimental	Cross-sectional	Childhood and adulthood	Religion	Psychological and social essentialism (religious)
2	Coley et al. (2017)	Intuitive Biological Thought: Developmental Changes and Effects of Biology Education in Late Adolescence	2017	United States	Non-experimental descriptive-comparative	Cross-sectional	Adolescence and adulthood	Other (Sciences and diagnostics)	Essentialism (general)
3	Heiphetz et al. (2017)	The Perceived Stability and Biological Basis of Religious Beliefs, Factual Beliefs, and Opinions	2017	United States	Non-experimental descriptive-comparative	Cross-sectional	Childhood and adulthood	Religion	Psychological essentialism
4	Smyth et al. (2017)	Development of Essentialist Thinking About Religion Categories in Northern Ireland (and the United States)	2017	Northern Ireland and the United States	Descriptive-comparative, non-experimental	Cross-sectional	Childhood	Religion	Essentialism (general)
5	Mandalaywala et al. (2019)	The Nature and Consequences of Essentialist Beliefs About Race in Early Childhood	2019	United States	Non-experimental descriptive-comparative	Cross-sectional	Childhood	Race	Biological/genetic essentialism
6	Noyes and Keil (2019)	Generics Designate Kinds but Not Always Essences	2019	United States	Experimental	Cross-sectional	Adulthood	Not specified	Biological/genetic essentialism
7	Sutherland and Cimpian (2019)	Developmental Evidence for a Link Between the Inherence Bias in Explanation and Psychological Essentialism	2019	United States	Experimental	Cross-sectional	Childhood	Not specified	Psychological essentialism
8	Davoodi et al. (2020)	Essentialization of Social Categories Across Development in Two Cultures	2020	Turkey and the United States	Non-experimental descriptive-comparative	Cross-sectional	Childhood and adulthood	Multiple at the same time	Psychological essentialism

Table 1. Cont.

No.	Authors	Title	Year	Country	Study Type	Data Type	Development Stage	Social Category	Type of Essentialism
9	Foster-Hanson and Rhodes (2020)	How origin stories shape children's social reasoning	2020	United States	Experimental	Cross-sectional	Childhood	Fictional	Psychological essentialism
10	Gibbs et al. (2020)	What's in a name: the effect of category labels on teachers' beliefs	2020	Finland and the United Kingdom	Quasi-experimental	Cross-sectional	Adulthood	Other (Sciences and diagnostics)	Essentialism (general)
11	Peretz-Lange and Muentener (2020)	Children's Use of Generic Labels, Discreteness, and Stability to Form a Novel Category	2020	United States	Experimental	Cross-sectional	Childhood	Not specified	Essentialism (general)
12	Roth et al. (2020)	Do genetic ancestry tests increase racial essentialism? Findings from a randomized controlled trial	2020	United States	Experimental	Longitudinal/pre-test-post-test	Adulthood	Race	Biological/genetic essentialism
13	Stuhlsatz et al. (2020)	Investigating the Conflation of Sex and Gender Language in Student Writing About Genetics	2020	United States	Experimental	Cross-sectional	Adolescence	Gender	Biological/genetic essentialism
14	Foster-Hanson et al. (2021)	Categories convey prescriptive information across domains and development	2021	United States	Experimental	Cross-sectional	Childhood and adulthood	Fictional	Psychological essentialism
15	Gülgöz et al. (2021)	Transgender and cisgender children's essentialist beliefs about sex and gender identity	2021	United States	Non-experimental descriptive-comparative	Cross-sectional	Childhood	Gender	Biological/genetic essentialism
16	Kesberg and Keller (2021)	Personal values as a motivational basis for psychological essentialism	2021	Germany	Correlational—non-experimental	Cross-sectional	Adulthood	Not specified	Psychological essentialism
17	Leshin et al. (2021)	Does It Matter How We Speak About Social Kinds?	2021	United States and United Kingdom (primarily)	Experimental	Cross-sectional	Childhood	Not specified	Social essentialism (religious)

Table 1. Cont.

No.	Authors	Title	Year	Country	Study Type	Data Type	Development Stage	Social Category	Type of Essentialism
18	Peretz-Lange et al. (2021)	Developmental shifts toward structural explanations and interventions for social status disparities	2021	United States	Experimental (non-randomized experiment)	Cross-sectional	Childhood and adulthood	Other (Sciences and Diagnostics)	Social essentialism
19	Reyes-Jaquez et al. (2021)	When Multiracial Individuals Are the Numerical Majority: Children’s Racial Attitudes in the Dominican Republic	2021	Dominican Republic	Non-experimental descriptive-comparative	Cross-sectional	Childhood	Race	Biological/genetic essentialism
20	Benitez et al. (2022)	The influence of linguistic form and causal explanations on the development of social essentialism	2022	United States	Experimental	Cross-sectional	Childhood and adulthood	Fictional	Social essentialism (religious)
21	Foster-Hanson et al. (2022)	Speaking of Kinds: How Correcting Generic Statements Can Shape Children’s Concepts	2022	United States	Experimental	Cross-sectional	Childhood	Fictional	Essentialism (general)
22	Morosoli et al. (2022)	Genetic and Environmental Influences on Biological Essentialism, Heuristic Thinking, Need for Closure, and Conservative Values	2022	Australia, United Kingdom, United States	Correlational—non-experimental	Cross-sectional	Adolescence and adulthood	Multiple categories simultaneously	Biological/genetic essentialism
23	Muradoglu et al. (2022)	Formal Explanations Shape Children’s Representations of Animal Kinds and Social Groups	2022	United States	Experimental	Cross-sectional	Childhood	Gender	Essentialism (general)
24	Pronovost and Scott (2022)	The influence of language input on 3-year-olds’ learning about novel social categories	2022	United States	Experimental	Cross-sectional	Early childhood	Fictional	Essentialism (general)
25	Wang et al. (2022)	How Children’s Media and Teachers Communicate Exclusive and Essentialist Views of Science and Scientists	2022	United States	Non-experimental descriptive-correlational	Cross-sectional + longitudinal follow-up	Childhood and adulthood	Other (Sciences and Diagnostics)	Essentialism (general)

Table 1. Cont.

No.	Authors	Title	Year	Country	Study Type	Data Type	Development Stage	Social Category	Type of Essentialism
26	Young et al. (2022)	Initial Evidence for Shifting Race Essentialism Beliefs in the Classroom	2022	United States	Quasi-experimental	Longitudinal/pre-post intervention	Adulthood	Race	Biological/genetic essentialism
27	Ball et al. (2024)	Challenging Misconceptions about Race in Undergraduate Genetics	2024	United States	Quasi-experimental	Longitudinal/pre-post + follow-up	Adulthood	Race	Biological/genetic essentialism
28	Fine et al. (2024)	Transformative tales: The role of story videos in children’s reasoning about transgender identities	2024	United States	Experimental	Cross-sectional	Childhood	Gender	Biological/genetic essentialism
29	Shahbazi et al. (2024)	The Development of Social Essentialist Reasoning in Iran	2024	Iran	Non-experimental descriptive-comparative	Cross-sectional	Childhood and adulthood	Multiple groups simultaneously	Psychological and social essentialism

Note. Study type and data type classifications were harmonized by cross-checking the data extraction matrix against the MMAT appraisal.

3. Results

3.1. General Characterization of the Corpus

This systematic review included 29 empirical studies published between 2014 and 2024 that address the production, circulation, and stabilization of essentialist beliefs across different social categories. As shown in Table 1, the corpus is geographically concentrated in the United States. Twenty-one studies were conducted exclusively in the United States, representing 72.4% of the corpus. If studies involving the United States as part of cross-national or comparative designs are also considered, 25 studies, or 86.2% of the corpus, include some form of United States participation. This distribution reflects a strong concentration of knowledge produced in Anglo-American and Global North contexts, limiting the possibility of exploring how these beliefs take shape in culturally and geopolitically diverse settings. From the critical perspective adopted in this review, this concentration is not only a descriptive feature of the corpus, but also a relevant condition for interpreting the scope and limits of the available evidence.

Regarding methodological design, all included studies are quantitative. Fourteen studies were classified as experimental or non-randomized experimental, representing 48.3% of the corpus. Four studies were classified as quasi-experimental, representing 13.8%. The remaining eleven studies, equivalent to 37.9%, were non-experimental, including correlational, descriptive-comparative, and descriptive-correlational designs. This distribution reflects a tendency to treat essentialist beliefs as constructs that can be measured, modeled, compared across groups, and, in several cases, experimentally examined through exposure to narratives, linguistic categories, causal explanations, labels, or educational interventions.

Regarding data type, twenty-five studies used cross-sectional designs, representing 86.2% of the corpus. Four studies, equivalent to 13.8%, incorporated longitudinal, pre-test–post-test, follow-up, or mixed cross-sectional and follow-up components. This predominance of cross-sectional design limits the possibility of examining how essentialist beliefs change, stabilize, or become destabilized over time through experience, socialization, and educational or institutional encounters.

Regarding the samples, there is a clear predominance of studies including childhood, which appears in 20 studies, or 69.0% of the corpus, either exclusively or in combination with other developmental stages. This trend reflects the field's strong emphasis on childhood as a key stage in the formation of essentialist categorical frameworks. Sixteen studies, equivalent to 55.2%, also include adults, allowing for some exploration of the persistence, stabilization, or destabilization of these beliefs beyond early childhood. In contrast, only three studies, or 10.3%, include adolescence, underscoring an underexplored area in the literature.

Finally, in terms of thematic coverage, the corpus examines various social categories, including gender, race, religion, fictional or novel groups, diagnostic and scientific labels, unspecified categories, and multiple categories addressed simultaneously. Gender and race are among the most visible substantive categories in the reviewed literature, particularly in studies concerned with the biological or genetic naturalization of difference. However, the corpus also includes studies focused on religion, fictional categories, diagnostic or scientific labels, and multiple categories at the same time. This distribution suggests that the field does not address all social categories with the same intensity or through the same conceptual frameworks. It also shows the limited presence of studies that examine how different categories relate to one another in the production and stabilization of essentialist beliefs. Beyond the frequency with which certain categories are addressed, it remains necessary to examine which dimensions of social difference are made visible, which are omitted or fragmented, and how these emphases shape the available evidence.

Table 2 summarizes the main descriptive characteristics of the reviewed corpus, including geographic scope, methodological design, data type, and developmental stage.

Table 2. Descriptive summary of the reviewed corpus.

Dimension	Category	<i>n</i>	%
Geographic scope	United States only	21	72.4
Geographic scope	Any United States involvement	25	86.2
Methodological design	Experimental	14	48.3
Methodological design	Quasi-experimental	4	13.8
Methodological design	Non-experimental	11	37.9
Data type	Cross-sectional	25	86.2
Data type	Longitudinal	4	13.8
Developmental stage	Childhood included	20	69.0
Developmental stage	Adulthood included	16	55.2
Developmental stage	Adolescence included	3	10.3

Overall, the MMAT appraisal indicated that the included studies generally had clearly stated research questions and used data that were appropriate for addressing those questions. Across the corpus, however, recurrent methodological limitations were identified. These included reliance on convenience samples, limited representativeness, incomplete reporting of randomization procedures in experimental studies, limited information about baseline comparability, incomplete reporting of blinding, and insufficient control for potential confounders in non-randomized designs. These limitations do not invalidate the studies, but they indicate that the synthesis should be interpreted as a mapping of patterns in the empirical literature rather than as a basis for estimating definitive causal effects.

3.2. Conceptualization of Essentialism in the Reviewed Studies

One of the most striking aspects identified in the reviewed studies is the diversity of ways in which essentialism is conceptualized. The articles do not approach essentialism as a single uniform construct but rather break it down into variants that address different contexts, categories, and levels of analysis. This thematic analysis is relevant because it shows how the formation, acquisition, and stabilization of essentialist beliefs are understood across the corpus.

General essentialism is usually understood as the belief that categories possess an underlying “essence” that defines their stable and universal properties (Heiphetz et al. 2017; Smyth et al. 2017). In contrast, psychological essentialism focuses on how individuals attribute internal, stable, or immutable properties to categories, thereby shaping cognitive biases, judgments, and expectations about category members (Chalik et al. 2017; Sutherland and Cimpian 2019). Social essentialism applies these assumptions to social categories, such as gender and race, reinforcing inequalities and hierarchies perceived as natural. This variant is deeply influenced by cultural norms that perpetuate these beliefs (Benitez et al. 2022; Leshin et al. 2021). Finally, biological or genetic essentialism links social categories to innate, biological, or genetic characteristics, justifying inequalities through biological determinism (Fine et al. 2024; Mandalaywala et al. 2019). Overall, the reviewed studies tend to conceptualize essentialism primarily as an individual, psychological, or cognitive construct. Even when studies address biological or genetic essentialism, they rarely engage explicitly with critiques of biological determinism. This absence is relevant for the synthesis because it indicates that, within the reviewed corpus, essentialism is more often analyzed as a measurable belief, explanatory schema, or target of intervention than as a socio-historical framework.

3.3. Analytical Dimensions of the Findings

Beyond their methodological and population-based differences, the reviewed studies show recurring patterns in how essentialist beliefs about social categories are produced, circulated, and stabilized. To organize these findings, I propose three intertwined analytical dimensions. These dimensions are not mutually exclusive categories, but complementary entry points for examining different layers of the phenomenon.

The first dimension focuses on the trajectories through which essentialist beliefs emerge, stabilize, intensify, or change across the life course. The second dimension focuses on the sociocultural and institutional environments in which these beliefs are activated, circulated, or maintained, such as schools, families, media, and political discourses. The third dimension examines how essentialist beliefs are approached across different social categories, highlighting variations in the conceptual frameworks and analytical emphases used by the reviewed studies.

3.3.1. Dimension of Trajectories in the Production of Essentialist Beliefs

The reviewed studies identify trajectories through which essentialist beliefs emerge, are reinforced, and are sometimes destabilized across life stages. Although most of the reviewed studies adopt a psychological perspective and organize their designs according to stages of individual development, the corpus also indicates that age-related patterns are shaped by educational experiences, social contexts, and category-specific meanings.

This dimension organizes the findings by life-cycle stage: childhood and early socialization, adolescence and educational experiences, and adulthood and socio-political experiences. The emphasis is on when essentialist beliefs appear, how they persist, and under what conditions they change.

Table 3 summarizes the main studies and findings for each stage. It focuses on developmental trajectories, while sociocultural and institutional settings are discussed in the next dimension.

Table 3. Trajectories in the production of essentialist beliefs.

Life Cycle Stage	Studies Addressing This	Key Findings
Childhood and early socialization	Foster-Hanson and Rhodes (2020) ; Peretz-Lange and Muentener (2020) ; Mandalaywala et al. (2019) ; Reyes-Jaquez et al. (2021) ; Davoodi et al. (2020) ; Chalik et al. (2017) ; Shahbazi et al. (2024)	Essentialist beliefs often emerge early, especially for categories treated as stable or natural. Generic language, causal explanations, visual markers, and family or cultural input shape these beliefs, with variation by context.
Adolescence and educational experiences	Stuhlsatz et al. (2020) ; Davoodi et al. (2020)	Educational practices and curricular content can reinforce or destabilize essentialist beliefs.
Adulthood and socio-political experiences	Smyth et al. (2017) ; Morosoli et al. (2022) ; Roth et al. (2020) ; Kesberg and Keller (2021)	Essentialist beliefs may persist into adulthood. Factors such as authoritarianism, political ideology, formal education, or transformative experiences influence their persistence or transformation.

A. Production and stabilization of essentialist beliefs during childhood and early socialization

One relevant finding concerns how narratives shape children's interpretations of social categories and group differences. During childhood, several experimental studies document an early tendency to essentialize social categories. [Gülgöz et al. \(2021\)](#), [Fine et al. \(2024\)](#), and [Mandalaywala et al. \(2019\)](#) show that children often reason about gender or race as stable or biologically grounded. Studies on religion also report that children may

construe religious affiliation as stable or inherited, depending on the cultural setting (Chalik et al. 2017; Smyth et al. 2017). On the other hand, Foster-Hanson and Rhodes (2020) find that causal explanations have a significant impact on the development of essentialist beliefs, especially regarding the categories of gender and social class. Furthermore, Reyes-Jaquez et al. (2021) expand this discussion by examining how children internalize social and family expectations within certain categories, suggesting that the immediate environment plays a crucial role in shaping these beliefs.

However, the intensity and persistence of these beliefs vary depending on the social category examined and on the kinds of effects they produce in specific contexts. Mandalaywala et al. (2019) show that children as young as four years old already attribute fixed properties to social groups such as gender or race. Peretz-Lange and Muentener (2020) found that children are more likely to essentialize categories with clear visual markers, such as gender, than those with abstract markers, such as nationality. Davoodi et al. (2020), in their comparison of children from Turkey and the United States, show significant cultural differences in how and when essentialist beliefs emerge. In contexts with greater religious or ethnic diversity, there is a lower tendency to essentialize, suggesting that essentialism is not simply a universal cognitive stage.

Taken together, these studies point to early stabilization of social categories as fixed or informative. Sutherland and Cimpian (2019) demonstrate that children's inherent bias is associated with stronger essentialist beliefs, while interventions emphasizing extrinsic explanations can weaken these beliefs. This suggests that early essentialist schemas are malleable.

B. Trajectories of development and stabilization in adolescence and educational experiences

As individuals move from adolescence to adulthood, the reviewed studies show varied trajectories in the stability and transformation of essentialist thinking. Although adolescence has received limited attention in the corpus, the available studies suggest that this stage may be especially relevant for examining how essentialist beliefs are reinforced or destabilized, given the influence of educational experiences and broader social environments on identity formation. Stuhlsatz et al. (2020) examine how high school students in the United States distinguish sex and gender in biology classes, showing that curricular language may reinforce biologizing views or create opportunities for conceptual clarification. Davoodi et al. (2020) also show that exposure to non-essentialist narratives in the classroom can produce significant shifts in how categories such as religion or culture are conceptualized. This finding highlights the role of educational environments in shaping essentialist beliefs during adolescence, either by reinforcing existing explanatory frameworks or by opening possibilities for their destabilization.

C. The formation and stabilization of essentialist beliefs in adulthood and in relation to socio-political experiences

In adulthood, several studies indicate that essentialist thinking may persist as a framework that shapes attitudes toward particular social groups, especially when these beliefs remain unchallenged. Smyth et al. (2017) show how adults may reproduce essentialist views when exposed to information that naturalizes social categories. At the same time, the reviewed studies also document possibilities for transformation. Morosoli et al. (2022) find that cognitive sophistication and reflexivity are associated with lower adherence to biological essentialism, suggesting that these beliefs may be destabilized when individual dispositions interact with broader contextual factors.

This pattern is also observed among individuals with advanced academic training or experience in scientific fields. Ball et al. (2024), Young et al. (2022), and Coley et al. (2017) report that both college students and professionals in the natural or social sciences

may continue to endorse biologizing explanations of categories such as race, gender, or ability. Roth et al. (2020) show that exposure to genetic ancestry tests can reinforce racial essentialism by strengthening associations between racial identity and biological ancestry. Kesberg and Keller (2021) find that personal values, including authoritarianism and a need for order, are positively associated with psychological essentialism among German adults. Overall, these studies indicate that essentialist beliefs may persist in adulthood and are not necessarily reduced by formal education or scientific training.

Cross-age studies also show that contextual and cultural differences can accentuate or attenuate essentialist beliefs. Chalik et al. (2017) and Shahbazi et al. (2024) examine how religious affiliation and cultural context shape perceptions of social categories in both childhood and adulthood. Their findings indicate that contextual differences may strengthen or weaken essentialist beliefs across age groups. Heiphetz et al. (2017) find that adults tend to perceive some social categories as more stable and biologically determined than children do, suggesting differences in essentialist reasoning across developmental stages. Finally, Wang et al. (2022) show that both teachers and children's media can contribute to the reinforcement of these beliefs. Overall, these studies indicate that essentialist beliefs may vary across childhood and adulthood, while also being shaped by cultural, educational, and media contexts.

3.3.2. Sociocultural-Institutional Processes of Circulation and Stabilization

This dimension examines how essentialist beliefs are shaped and how they circulate across sociocultural and institutional settings. The reviewed studies show that these beliefs are stabilized and circulated across social contexts through schools, families, media, scientific, and religious practices.

Table 4 organizes this finding around two areas: educational and family environments, and institutional, media, and politico-cultural frameworks. It summarizes how these contexts contribute to the circulation, stabilization, and destabilization of essentialist beliefs.

Table 4. Sociocultural–institutional dimension of the circulation and stabilization of essentialist beliefs.

Subdimension	Studies Addressing This	Key Observations
Educational and family environments	Wang et al. (2022); Stuhlsatz et al. (2020); Gibbs et al. (2020); Davoodi et al. (2020); Benitez et al. (2022); Fine et al. (2024); Gülgöz et al. (2021); Pronovost and Scott (2022); Reyes-Jaquez et al. (2021)	Studies examine how school practices, teaching materials, pedagogical interactions, and family experiences shape perceptions of social differences as natural. They document both reinforcement and destabilization.
Institutional, media, and politico-cultural mechanisms	Morosoli et al. (2022); Kesberg and Keller (2021); Roth et al. (2020); Shahbazi et al. (2024); Muradoglu et al. (2022); Wang et al. (2022); Fine et al. (2024); Foster-Hanson et al. (2022)	Studies examine how institutional discourses, ideological frameworks, and media representations reinforce or challenge social classification.

A. Educational and family environments

This sub-dimension focuses on the role of primary social institutions, such as school and family, in the production, transmission, and legitimization of essentialist beliefs. The reviewed studies show how pedagogical practices, labels, curricular language, and family experiences shape how children and young people interpret social differences.

In school settings, Wang et al. (2022) analyze how educational materials and teacher interventions in natural science present sex and gender in ways that may reinforce binary or deterministic understandings. Similarly, Stuhlsatz et al. (2020) find that high school students in the United States do not always clearly distinguish between the concepts of sex and gender in school settings. Together, these studies indicate that classroom

materials, teacher explanations, and students' conceptual understandings can influence how biological and social explanations of gender are reinforced or challenged.

In teacher education, [Gibbs et al. \(2020\)](#) show that labels, such as "migrant children" or "students with special needs," can activate essentialist beliefs among pre-service teachers, and influence their pedagogical expectations and classroom practices. [Davoodi et al. \(2020\)](#) further indicate that exposure to non-essentialist narratives may not be sufficient to transform essentialist beliefs unless these narratives are accompanied by pedagogical interventions that explicitly challenge fixed or hierarchical understandings of social categories.

Some studies also identify conditions for destabilization. [Benitez et al. \(2022\)](#) show that causal explanations in stories and narratives can either stabilize or weaken essentialist beliefs, depending on the narrative structure. [Ball et al. \(2024\)](#) describe interventions in university contexts that combine critical analysis with intercultural experiences to reduce essentialist beliefs among young adults. These interventions include open discussions about the social implications of essentialist narratives and exposure to diverse perspectives. [Fine et al. \(2024\)](#) emphasize that changes in essentialist beliefs require sustained and integrated approaches across educational and cultural environments.

Family socialization also emerges as an important context for the formation and reinforcement of essentialist beliefs. [Reyes-Jaquez et al. \(2021\)](#), for example, show that children's understandings of social groups are shaped by family explanations and everyday interactions, particularly in relation to gender and social class. These beliefs may be reinforced when parenting practices or adult explanations promote internalist interpretations of behavior and individual characteristics. From another perspective, [Gülgöz et al. \(2021\)](#) examine gender essentialism among transgender children, their siblings, and cisgender children. Their findings show that transgender children and their siblings exhibited lower levels of gender essentialism than their cisgender peers, suggesting that family experiences that challenge binary gender norms may shape how children conceptualize social categories. [Pronovost and Scott \(2022\)](#) find that caregivers' language influences how children interpret statements about social groups. Generic and unqualified statements may lead children to interpret group attributes as fixed or inherent traits. Therefore, the type of language used contributes to children's essentialist inferences about the social world.

B. Institutional, media, and political-cultural mechanisms

This sub-dimension focuses on broader institutional, media, political, and scientific contexts. This area of analysis examines how essentialist beliefs are reinforced or challenged through recurring ways of naming, explaining, and representing social groups across institutional, media, political, and scientific contexts. The reviewed studies show that these contexts can shape whether social categories are understood as stable, natural, or changeable. They also indicate that essentialist beliefs are not only associated with individual reasoning but are influenced by broader social representations and institutional practices. Several studies examine the association between political orientations, cognitive styles, and essentialist beliefs. [Morosoli et al. \(2022\)](#) find that conservative political orientations and cognitive dispositions such as low-effort thinking, need for cognitive closure, and preference for simple causal explanations are associated with higher levels of essentialist thinking among adults. In line with this, [Kesberg and Keller \(2021\)](#) find that personal values, including authoritarianism and a need for order, correlate significantly with essentialist beliefs. [Roth et al. \(2020\)](#) show that exposure to genetic ancestry tests can increase racial essentialism by strengthening associations between racial identity and biological ancestry, even among participants with liberal political views. Together, these studies indicate that political values, cognitive dispositions, and genetic information can shape essentialist reasoning in adulthood.

Media are also examined as contexts in which essentialist beliefs may be reinforced or challenged. Wang et al. (2022) analyze how audiovisual materials aimed at children can reinforce essentialist views on science and gender. Fine et al. (2024) examine the effects of audiovisual narratives on children's reasoning about gender, showing that some narratives may support more flexible forms of reasoning, while others may reinforce binary interpretations. Similarly, Foster-Hanson et al. (2022) show that exposure to generic statements, which are common in books and cartoons, can increase children's tendency to view social categories as based on fixed internal properties.

At the macro-political level, Shahbazi et al. (2024) examine how Iran's political and religious context shapes essentialist reasoning about religious groups. Their findings indicate that children in this context tend to interpret religious differences as innate and immutable. Similarly, Muradoglu et al. (2022) show that the type of explanation provided to children affects the degree of essentialist reasoning. Formal or category-based explanations tend to support more deterministic interpretations, whereas more open or structural explanations may allow for more flexible understandings of social categories.

3.3.3. Dimension of Categorical Approach in Studies on the Production, Circulation, and Stabilization of Essentialist Beliefs

This dimension analyzes how the reviewed empirical studies address different social categories. The review shows that these categories are not examined uniformly. Gender and race are the most frequently studied, whereas categories such as social class, disability, and religion receive less attention. Table 5 below summarizes these patterns and highlights variations in the frequency, theoretical framing, and methodological treatment of each category.

Table 5. Categorical approach in the reviewed studies.

Social Category	Studies Addressing It	Key Observations
Gender	Gülgöz et al. (2021); Fine et al. (2024); Muradoglu et al. (2022); Foster-Hanson et al. (2022)	This is the most extensively explored category. Associated with binary narratives from childhood; reinforced by gendered language, educational, and cultural discourses. Early internalization with stabilization in adulthood.
Race/ethnicity	Mandalaywala et al. (2019); Reyes-Jaquez et al. (2021); Ball et al. (2024); Young et al. (2022); Roth et al. (2020)	High persistence in adulthood. Associated with inherited scientific discourses, genetic tests, phenotypic markers, and essentializing family explanations.
Religion	Chalik et al. (2017); Heiphetz et al. (2017); Smyth et al. (2017)	Considered an inherited and stable category from childhood. Its essentialization depends on the sociocultural context and its intersection with other categories such as ethnicity.
Social Class and Disability	Gibbs et al. (2020); Morosoli et al. (2022)	Largely unexplored. They are mentioned in relation to institutional labels or in combination with other categories. There is a lack of specific studies.

A. Predominance of studies on gender and race

Gender and race are the most frequently addressed categories in the corpus. Approximately two-thirds of the reviewed studies focus on at least one of these two dimensions. In the case of gender, the reviewed studies often examine how children and adults associate gender with stable, internal, or biologically based traits. Gülgöz et al. (2021) analyze gender essentialism among cisgender and transgender children, showing differences in

how children reason about the stability and biological basis of gender. [Fine et al. \(2024\)](#) also examine how gender is understood as a stable or binary category, while highlighting the challenges involved in modifying these beliefs through intervention.

[Muradoglu et al. \(2022\)](#) show that children may attribute gendered behaviors to internal causes, particularly when explanations are framed in generic or category-based terms such as “boys are like . . .”. [Foster-Hanson et al. \(2022\)](#) similarly find that generic statements, such as “girls are sensitive,” can influence whether children understand gender categories as stable or based on internal properties. Across these studies, language and causal explanations appear as relevant factors in how gender essentialism is formed or reinforced.

In the case of race, studies by [Mandalaywala et al. \(2019\)](#), [Reyes-Jaquez et al. \(2021\)](#), [Ball et al. \(2024\)](#), [Young et al. \(2022\)](#), and [Roth et al. \(2020\)](#) show that racial essentialism is present in both childhood and adulthood. These studies link racial essentialism to biological explanations, family and cultural contexts, scientific knowledge, and genetic ancestry information. [Roth et al. \(2020\)](#), for example, show that exposure to genetic ancestry tests can reinforce associations between racial identity and biological ancestry. [Reyes-Jaquez et al. \(2021\)](#) show that family and cultural contexts can shape how children explain racial group membership and group differences.

Overall, although some studies recognize that gender and race may intersect with other social categories, most of the reviewed studies analyze them separately. This indicates a gap in the corpus regarding how different categories, such as gender, race, class, religion, or disability, interact in the production and stabilization of essentialist beliefs.

B. Religion: between inheritance and choice

Religion is addressed less frequently than gender or race, but several studies examine how children conceptualize religious identity in relation to inheritance, stability, and change. [Chalik et al. \(2017\)](#), [Heiphetz et al. \(2017\)](#), and [Smyth et al. \(2017\)](#) show that children may understand religious identity as a stable or inherited category rather than as a cultural practice or personal choice. [Chalik et al. \(2017\)](#), in particular, find that religion tends to be more strongly essentialized in contexts where it is closely associated with ethnicity or nationality.

[Heiphetz et al. \(2017\)](#) also find that children perceive religion as less changeable than other kinds of beliefs, such as political views. This suggests that religious identity may be understood by children as relatively stable, especially when compared with categories or beliefs perceived as more flexible.

Overall, the reviewed studies tend to analyze religion as a relatively isolated category. They pay less attention to how religion may intersect with other social dimensions, such as class, gender, race, ethnicity, or nationality. This indicates a gap in the corpus regarding how religious essentialism operates in relation to other categories of social difference.

C. Under-explored social categories and limited relational approaches

Analysis of the corpus shows a strong concentration of research on gender and race, in contrast to the limited attention given to other relevant social dimensions, such as social class, disability, age, or sexual orientation. These categories tend to be mentioned only briefly or in combination with others, rather than as central analytical axes.

[Gibbs et al. \(2020\)](#), for example, examine the use of institutional labels such as “students with special educational needs,” and how these labels may activate essentialist beliefs among pre-service teachers. However, the study does not focus specifically on disability as a social category. Similarly, [Morosoli et al. \(2022\)](#) show that student teachers may mobilize essentialist explanations related to social class or disability, but these categories are not examined as the primary focus of analysis.

Overall, the reviewed studies tend to analyze social categories separately or through comparison across specific domains. Less attention is given to how different categories may interact in the production and stabilization of essentialist beliefs. Most studies analyze categories separately or compare them across specific domains, rather than examining how multiple dimensions of difference operate together in particular social, cultural, or institutional contexts. This indicates a gap in the corpus regarding less frequently studied categories and the relationships between them.

4. Discussion

This discussion interprets the findings of the systematic review on the production, stabilization, and circulation of essentialist beliefs, emphasizing their conceptual contributions and relevance to the social sciences through feminist performative and material-discursive theoretical frameworks (Butler 1990; Haraway 1988; Bilge 2013; Barad 2007; Sanz 2017; Matus 2023). These frameworks are not treated as claims directly tested by the 29 empirical studies. Rather, they are used to interpret and discuss the broader empirical and epistemological implications of the patterns identified across the corpus.

Based on the analysis of the 29 included studies, this review outlines how essentialist beliefs are configured, circulated, stabilized, and sometimes destabilized across social categories. A primary contribution of this review is that it complicates interpretations of essentialism as a universal or invariant cognitive predisposition. Developmental psychology has shown that essentialist reasoning may emerge early through internal-cause reasoning, stable trait attribution, or teleological thinking (Gelman 2004; Rhodes and Mandalaywala 2017; Sutherland and Cimpian 2019). However, the reviewed evidence also shows that situated social, educational, institutional, and cultural environments shape how these beliefs are reinforced, circulated, or challenged.

In this sense, essentialist beliefs can be interpreted not only as individual cognitive dispositions, but also as situated epistemic practices that become entrenched through specific discursive, pedagogical, and institutional mediations (Butler 1993; Foucault [1975] 1984; Barad 2007; Matus 2023; Sanz 2017). The reviewed studies locate these mediations in school textbooks, curricular language, scientific explanations, family narratives, generic language, and educational interventions, which may reinforce or destabilize the naturalization of social categories (Peretz-Lange and Muentener 2020; Wang et al. 2022; Ball et al. 2024). Thus, rather than displacing cognitive accounts, the critical-performative reading proposed here situates their findings within broader processes of classification, repetition, and legitimization.

The corpus also supports an expansion of accounts that emphasize phenotypic perceptibility in children's essentialist reasoning (Peretz-Lange and Muentener 2020). In the reviewed studies, categories become available for essentialization not only because they are visually salient, but also because they are repeatedly named, explained, and used in social and pedagogical settings. Studies on gender and race, for example, show that essentialist reasoning is reinforced through generic language, causal explanations, educational materials, and scientific or family narratives (Gülgöz et al. 2021; Young et al. 2022; Foster-Hanson et al. 2022; Reyes-Jaquez et al. 2021).

Davoodi et al. (2020) show that exposure to non-essentialist narratives is not always sufficient to modify essentialist beliefs unless such narratives are accompanied by pedagogical interventions that challenge internalist explanations. This is consistent with Sutherland and Cimpian (2019), but the reviewed corpus further suggests that essentialist beliefs do not necessarily disappear with age or formal education. Instead, studies such as Ball et al. (2024) and Coley et al. (2017) indicate that these beliefs may persist in uni-

versity and scientific contexts, where they can be reformulated through more technical or biologizing explanations.

The second central contribution is that essentialist thinking cannot be understood solely as an individual phenomenon or as the result of universal cognitive dispositions (Hirschfeld 1994; Levy et al. 1998). The reviewed studies show that essentialism is shaped through educational, institutional, and discursive mechanisms. In schools and teacher education, for example, curricular materials, biological explanations, institutional labels, and pedagogical language may reinforce naturalized distinctions (Gibbs et al. 2020; Stuhlsatz et al. 2020; Wang et al. 2022). From the theoretical perspective adopted here, these findings suggest that essentialism operates not only as a belief to be corrected, but also as a framework through which social categories become intelligible and legitimate.

In the reviewed corpus, this issue appears most clearly in studies on sex/gender, where school materials, generic language, and audiovisual narratives may reinforce binary or biologizing explanations (Fine et al. 2024; Foster-Hanson et al. 2022; Wang et al. 2022). These findings do not test a Foucauldian or performative account directly. However, they can be read alongside feminist performative perspectives that challenge binary thinking as a naturalized way of organizing knowledge (Matus 2023; Willey 2016). From this perspective, social categories do not merely describe pre-existing differences; they also participate in making some differences appear stable, recognizable, and legitimate. This reading resonates with Butler's and Foucault's accounts of how categories organize intelligibility and regulate what can be known, taught, or recognized as normal (Butler 1990; Foucault [1975] 1984). Thus, the reviewed studies support a critical interpretation of essentialism not only as an individual cognitive belief, but also as part of broader practices through which bodies, categories, and differences are classified and stabilized.

The third contribution of this review lies in identifying uneven patterns of essentialization across social categories. The reviewed studies suggest that not all categories are addressed or essentialized in the same way. Gender and race, for example, appear more frequently in the corpus and are often examined in relation to biological explanations, visible markers, family narratives, educational materials, media representations, and scientific discourses. Other categories, such as social class, religion, disability, sexuality, or Indigenous ethnicity, receive less sustained attention or are usually examined in relation to other categories.

This pattern is not only a descriptive finding about the distribution of studies. It also raises questions about the conditions under which some categories become more available for essentialist explanation than others. The corpus suggests that this availability may be related to factors such as phenotypic visibility, the recurrence of certain categories in educational and media materials, the use of biological or genetic explanations, and the political salience of forms of difference in specific contexts. In this sense, and unlike Rossi and Caricati's (2025) focus on gender essentialism alone, this review offers a broader comparative perspective on how essentialist beliefs are studied across categories and social settings.

From the critical-performative perspective adopted here, these uneven patterns can be interpreted as part of broader classificatory processes through which some forms of difference become more readily naturalized, stabilized, or treated as self-evident than others (Butler 1990; Foucault [1975] 1984). This interpretation does not mean that the included studies directly test such epistemic frameworks. Rather, it situates the empirical distribution of the corpus within a broader discussion about how social categories become available as objects of measurement, comparison, and naturalization. Future research could further examine how essentialist beliefs operate across multiple and overlapping dimensions of

social difference, drawing on situated, relational, and intersectional approaches where relevant (Bilge 2013; Cho et al. 2013).

Drawing on the patterns identified in this review, essentialism can be interpreted, from the critical-performative perspective adopted here as more than an individual psychological belief. The included studies document how essentialist beliefs are produced, reinforced, circulated, and sometimes destabilized through social, educational, linguistic, and institutional conditions. A material-discursive reading (Barad 2007; Haraway 1988) suggests that essentialism may also operate as a classificatory practice through which some forms of difference become more recognizable, intelligible, and legitimate than others. This claim is not directly tested by the included empirical studies; rather, it is a theoretical interpretation of how the reviewed literature collectively frames, measures, and stabilizes essentialist beliefs as objects of knowledge.

This review differs from previous studies not only in its systematic and comparative scope, but also in the epistemological framework from which it is situated (Barad 2007; Haraway 1988). Rather than conceptualizing essentialism only as a mental structure or a set of stable beliefs, the review approaches it as a situated performative practice that participates in the naturalization of hierarchies and regimes of social classification (Butler 1993; Foucault [1975] 1984; Matus 2023).

While this review sought to integrate a broad but bounded corpus of empirical studies, it has several relevant limitations. First, the inclusion criteria prioritized research published in English or Spanish and indexed in Web of Science or Scopus, potentially excluding local, situated, or non-indexed works, as well as studies published in other languages, that may address alternative ways of understanding essentialism. Disciplinary biases were also observed, as most studies came from psychology and education, leaving other areas, such as critical sociology or cultural studies, underrepresented. Moreover, disciplines outside the social sciences, such as biology or medicine, may also offer relevant insights into the production of essentialist thought, but were beyond the scope of this review. A geographical concentration in the Global North was also identified, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other sociocultural realities. These limitations do not invalidate the contribution of the review, but they invite future research that expands, challenges, or deepens the discussions presented here.

Regarding the review process, several limitations should also be noted. The review was not prospectively registered, and no public protocol was prepared before it was conducted. This limits transparency compared with registered reviews with available protocols. In addition, screening and data extraction were conducted by a single reviewer, increasing the risk of selection and extraction bias. These limitations do not invalidate the findings, but they suggest that the corpus and its interpretive organization should be read as one possible articulation of the available evidence, rather than as an exhaustive account.

The MMAT appraisal also indicates that the corpus is methodologically uneven, particularly regarding sample representativeness, reporting of randomization procedures, baseline comparability, blinding, and confounder control. These limitations are relevant because many included studies come from developmental and social psychology, where experimental control is often prioritized over population representativeness. Accordingly, the findings should be understood as a mapping of recurrent patterns in the empirical literature, rather than as evidence for definitive causal claims.

Finally, from the perspective proposed in this review, the task is not only to map the presence of essentialist beliefs, but also to examine the conditions that make them possible, the contexts in which they are stabilized, and the interventions through which they may be destabilized without being replaced by new forms of normative fixation. In this sense, dismantling essentialism is not merely a critical gesture, but also an ethical

and epistemic commitment. As a dominant framework of intelligibility, essentialism can restrict which bodies, knowledges, and ways of life become recognizable, legitimate, or possible (Barad 2007; Butler 1990; Grosz 1994; Haraway 1988). Further research should therefore examine how these beliefs are modified in situated contexts, develop and evaluate non-essentialist forms of meaning-making, and attend to the complexity of social categories without reducing them to fixed hierarchies. The challenge is not only to dismantle this logic of thought, but also to open epistemological, affective, and pedagogical possibilities that do not reproduce stabilized narratives, and that enable more porous, contingent, and generative ways of knowing, forming, and inhabiting the world.

5. Conclusions

This systematic review synthesized 29 empirical studies published between 2014 and 2024 on the production, circulation, and stabilization of essentialist beliefs across social categories. The review identified three analytical dimensions: trajectories in the production of essentialist beliefs; sociocultural–institutional mechanisms of circulation and stabilization; and categorical approaches across social groups. Together, these dimensions show that essentialist beliefs are not only individual cognitive dispositions, but are also shaped by educational practices, family narratives, media representations, scientific explanations, political contexts, and broader sociocultural conditions.

A central contribution of this review is that it complicates the understanding of essentialism as a universal or stable cognitive tendency. The reviewed studies indicate that essentialist beliefs may emerge early, but also vary according to the social category examined, the developmental stage considered, and the context in which these beliefs are activated or challenged. Gender and race receive the most sustained attention in the corpus, while categories such as social class, disability, religion, sexuality, and Indigenous ethnicity remain less systematically explored.

From the critical-performative perspective (Butler 1990; Barad 2007) adopted in this review, these findings suggest that essentialism should be examined not only as a measurable belief, but also as part of broader classificatory and epistemic frameworks through which social differences are made to appear natural, stable, and self-evident. This interpretation is not a claim directly tested by the included studies, but a theoretical reading of the patterns identified across the corpus.

Future research should further examine essentialist beliefs through more interdisciplinary, situated, and relational approaches capable of addressing the complexity of the phenomenon. This includes studying how different social categories intersect, overlap, or are combined in the production and stabilization of essentialist and binarized explanations, rather than analyzing gender, race, class, disability, religion, or other categories as isolated dimensions. Future studies should also expand the range of disciplines, contexts, and methodological designs used to examine essentialism, particularly in underexplored sociocultural settings and educational spaces. In addition, more research is needed on how essentialist beliefs may be challenged or transformed through pedagogical, institutional, and cultural interventions. The challenge is not only to reduce essentialist beliefs, but also to develop epistemic and pedagogical practices that enable more contingent, relational, and non-essentialist ways of understanding social differences.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/socsci15080493/s1>: Table S1: MMAT methodological quality appraisal of included studies; File S1: PRISMA 2020 checklist.

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