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Discourses about ethnic group (de-)essentialism: Oppressive and progressive aspects

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Social psychologists studying intergroup perceptions have shown an increasing interest in essentialist thinking. Essentialist beliefs about social groups are examined as cognitive processes and these beliefs would serve to rationalize and justify the existing social system. Discourse analyses on racism have emphasized that problems of racism are to a large extent problems of essentialism. Anti-essentialism has emerged as an emancipatory discourse in the challenge of hegemonic representations and oppressive relations. The present study examines how, in group discussions, ethnic Dutch and ethnic minority people define and use essentialist notions about social groups. Both Dutch and ethnic minority participants engaged in an essentialist discourse in which an intrinsic link between culture and ethnicity was made. However, there were also examples where this discourse was criticized and rejected. This variable use of (de-)essentialism is examined in terms of the conversation's context and issues at hand, such as questions of assimilation, group provisions, cultural rights, and agency. The main conclusion of this paper is that essentialism is not by definition oppressive and that de-essentialism is not by definition progressive. The discursive power of (de-)essentialist group beliefs depends on the way they are used and the context in which they appear.

Many authors have argued that essentialist group beliefs are central to racism (e.g. Brah, 1992; Hirschfeld, 1996; Jones, 1997; Mason, 1994; Solomos & Back, 1994). In different forms of racism, race and ethnic categories are presented as natural, inevitable and therefore unchangeable. These categories are taken to represent human types, specifying that an individual is fundamentally a certain sort of person. Racism attempts to fix social groups in terms of essential, quasi-natural properties of belonging within particular political and social contexts.

In social psychology, systematic interest in essentialist beliefs about social groups is rather recent, although the concept of essentialism was used by Allport (1954) and Sherif (1948). Allport emphasized the role of essentialist beliefs in prejudicial thinking and took these beliefs to result from a particular cognitive style. In addition, the work of Campbell (1958) on entativity is very closely related to essentialist beliefs. The perception of a coherent and unified entity is linked to a belief in an underlying essence and essentialist beliefs encourage the perception of coherence

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and unity (McGarty, Haslam, Hutchinson, & Grace, 1995; Yzerbyt, Corneille, & Estrada, 2001).

Interest in essentialist thinking has been growing in recent years. In cognitive psychology, Medin (1989) and his colleagues have investigated the common-sense belief that many categories have essences. Categories are assumed to be held together by theories that individuals develop about the nature of each category. Medin claims that people hold implicit theories of an essentialist sort because it gives them a firm understanding of the social world. In a theoretical paper, Rothbart and Taylor (1992) argue that people are inclined to treat many social categories as natural kinds, assuming these to have an underlying essence making them rich sources of inference about their members. Yzerbyt, Rocher, and Schadron (1997) have extended and empirically investigated these ideas. They emphasize the role of essentialist beliefs in stereotypes and argue that these beliefs serve to rationalize existing social arrangements. An essentialist view of social groups would provide an acceptable and justified account for the *status quo*.

Yzerbyt *et al*. (1997, p. 37) state that ' the critical question really is to understand why it is that people adopt a subjective essentialistic approach about social categories'. There are several answers to this question. For example, in his research on the development of children's racial thinking, Hirschfeld (1996, 1997) argues for the existence of a specific ' human kind module' that as a conceptual system organizes knowledge of social groups along essentialist lines. Others have attributed the essentializing of social categories to more general cognitive processes (Allport, 1954; Rothbart & Taylor, 1992). Yzerbyt *et al*. (1997) propose a syndrome of essentialistic categorization that serves to rationalize the social order. Their functional analysis takes social conditions into account but remains a clear psychological approach to essentialism. People are presented as inclined to rely on inherent features used to characterize social groups. Essentialist beliefs are thought to function as causal attributions by providing explanations and rationalizations for the differential treatment of social groups.

Although there are differences between these explanations, they are similar in their focus on inner psychological processes. However, essentialist ideas about social groups can also be examined as social practices. In this case, not cognition and perception but action and interaction are the focus of research. Taking a discourse analytical stance, it can be examined how groups are essentialized and group membership is presented as quasi-natural and unchangeable. In doing so, essentialist group beliefs are not studied as perceptual and (socio-)cognitive activities, but as social acts performed in discourse. Essentializing groups can be seen as something people do, instead of something people perceive and think. It can be treated as a discursive action that can perform a variety of social functions with different ideological consequences (e.g. Billig, 1997; Edwards, 1997; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Hopkins, Reicher, & Levine, 1997; Potter, 1996).

Such an analysis does not only provide an important addition to the dominant social–cognitive perspective in social psychology, but is also useful for examining assumptions of critical discourse studies on racism. These studies focus on how various linguistic devices and specific constructions are used to essentialize, legitimate and dissimilate patterns of social power and racial dominance (e.g. Brown, 1999; Essed, 1991; Van Dijk, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). A critique of essentialist positions in relation to race and ethnicity is at the heart of critical social theory and cultural studies. Problems of racism are understood to be problems of essentialism. Theories that claim

invariable and fundamental differences between social groups are defined as in need of deconstruction.

Within the social sciences and humanities, the term ' essentialism' is increasingly employed as a term of criticism. Instead of essentialist beliefs, the socially constructed nature of identities is emphasized. Anti-essentialism has emerged as an emancipatory discourse in the challenge of hegemonic representations, the fixity of identities and oppressive relations. These analyses share similarities with that of Yzerbyt *et al.* (1997) where they argue that essentialistic explanations best rationalize the way things are or justify the existing social system (Jost & Banaji, 1994). However, by focusing on the racist aspects of essentialism, these critical analyses tend to ignore the possible emancipatory aspects. Essentialism is not by definition oppressive, just as anti-essentialism is not by definition liberating.

Anti-racism, for example, has often relied on notions of fixed essence (Dominguez, 1994). Bonnett (2000, p. 133) gives a historical and international analysis of the development of anti-racism and he argues that ' essentialism is not some marginal current within anti-racism, but weaves through almost every aspect of its historical and contemporary practices. It is anti-racists who have called for indigenous peoples' racial identity to be '' respected''. It is anti-racists who have tried to identify and celebrate racial struggles against dominant groups. And it is anti-racists who have mobilized terms such as '' white people'', '' black people'', and so on, in the service of equality.'

A similar type of essentialism can be found in multicultural approaches that equate ethnicity with culture and emphasize authentic cultural differences that should be recognized and respected (Taylor, 1994; Turner, 1993). The deconstruction of ethnicity, culture and race is not very useful for those who want to mobilize around notions of racial oppression, ethnic exclusion or cultural rights. Ethnic and cultural identity are important political tools for indigenous or Aboriginal peoples such as for instance the Inuit and the First Peoples in Canada, the Aboriginals in Australia and the Maoris in New Zealand (Morin & Saladin d'Anglure, 1997; Roosens, 1999). These groups put forward essentialist arguments for the legitimation of their ethnicity and culture, and it has become increasingly difficult to ignore their claims.

Another example is presented by Verkuyten, Van De Calseijde, and De Leur (1999), who show how Moluccans in the Netherlands define the essence of the category of Moluccans in racial and cultural terms. Participants who defined themselves as ' real' Moluccans considered themselves ' full-blooded' as opposed to ' half-breeds'. Furthermore, they used an essentialist idea of Moluccan culture by presenting it as a precious inheritance that should be transmitted uncontaminated and unweakened. Talk about Moluccan identity functioned in an ideological way because it provided a justifying account of social boundaries and of a separate and essentialist identity. On the one hand, the ideological consequences of the constructions were to claim a special position for the Moluccans, distinct from other ethnic minority groups. Moluccans were presented as a separate group with unique claims and rights. On the other hand, it served to maintain the Moluccans' challenge of and resistance to the dominant group's definitions.

These examples indicate that it is important to examine the actual use of the notion of ' essentialism' in argument and debate. Such an examination will give an action-oriented rather than a cognitive answer to Yzerbyt's *et al*. critical question, i.e. why people adopt a subjective essentialist approach. In addition, a discourse analytical approach will raise a further critical question, namely: why is it that essentialistic

group presentations are effective in interactions? Why do these presentations have reactionary and racist or progressive and emancipatory effects? In answering this question, broader ideological themes should be considered. For example, the fact that indigenous peoples are increasingly able to make claims in terms of their 'authentic' culture and that the United Nation's General Assembly proclaimed 1991 the International Year for Indigenous People, is related to political and moral ideas about cultural and group rights. Similarly, culture can function as a powerful argument because it relates to multiculturalism which, as a contemporary policy and philosophy, has been adopted in many Western countries (e.g. Goldberg, 1994; Gruppelaar & Wils, 1998; Kymlicka, 1995). Multicultural notions promote the value of diversity as a core principle, and insist that all ethnic groups have a right to their own culture. However, studies on 'new racism' have shown that the idea of fundamental and inherent cultural differences is also used to exclude and abnormalize ethnic minority groups (e.g. Barker, 1981; Hopkins *et al.*, 1997; Rapley, 1998; Taguieff, 1988; Wieviorka, 1995). Hence, the effect of cultural essentialism is not self-evident but seems to depend on how it is used and the context where it appears.

The present study examines how, in group discussions, ethnic Dutch and ethnic minority people define and use essentialist notions about ethnic groups. The focus is on actual use and manifestation of these notions in conversations and the way they are related to claims and justifications. My central argument is that essentialist representations can be used in various ways and with various ideological effects. Essentialism can be examined as a flexible conversational resource which is variously defined and deployed, depending on the interactional task at hand. The analysis focuses first on the question of cultural essentialism in conversation by ethnic Dutch and ethnic minority participants. Secondly, the questions as to why people use cultural essentialist presentations and why these presentations are effective will be addressed. These questions will be examined in terms of the debate's context and the interactional issues at hand.

For the analysis, it is important to be clear about the notion of essentialism. In examining the diverse literature on essentialism, Haslam, Rothschild, and Ernst (2000) conclude that the concept has several discernible elements or criteria such as ideas about inductive potential, exclusivity, and necessary features. Haslam and colleagues found in two questionnaire studies of laypeople's beliefs about social categories that the notion of essentialism can be divided into two independent dimensions (Haslam *et al.*, 2000, 2002). The first is the extent to which categories are understood as natural kinds, and the second is the extent to which categories are reified or perceived as coherent and unified entities or 'real things'. The first dimension combines ideas of naturalness, immutability of group membership, discreteness and historical stability. The second dimension combines the elements of informativeness or inductive potential, uniformity, inherence or underlying similarity and identity-determining. Haslam *et al*. (2000, p. 123) conclude that 'social categories may be essentialized in two distinct ways, and social psychologists should be heedful of both naturalness *and* reification/entativity' (their emphasis). Furthermore, they found that there are social categories that were relatively essentialized on both dimensions, such as ethnic, religious and racial groups.

Thus, essentialism can be examined in terms of category differences that are presented as discrete, necessary, historically stable, and personally unalterable, and that allow many inferences to be made about category members who underneath would be basically the same.

Analytical context and issues

The data for this article were gathered during focus group studies among ethnic Dutch and ethnic minority adolescents and adults (see Verkuyten, 1997a, 2001). In these studies, a total of 168 people (between 15 and 70 years of age) participated. Seventy-one participants were of ethnic Dutch origin, and 97 were ethnic minorities, mostly Turkish, Moroccan and Hindustani people. Fifty-seven per cent were female, and 43% were male. The participants lived predominantly in the inner-city district of Rotterdam.

In total, there were 21 focus groups that met for at least 45 minutes and some sessions lasted as long as two and a half hours. Fifteen groups met only once, the other groups met up to five times. In total, there were 41 meetings. In most groups (18) the participants were either ethnic Dutch or ethnic minorities. The meetings were held at local schools and at two local community centres. The broader purpose of these meetings was to examine the many different community and educational aspects and problems, rather than just ethnic questions. The wider research involved not only focus groups but also interviews and ethnographic work.

The introduction of the group sessions focused on the participants' situation in school or in the neighbourhood. In all instances it was explained that we were interested in what people themselves thought about their local situation. It was also made clear to the participants that this was an independent study and that there were no links with the school board, city council or governmental institutions.

We used focus group discussion because we wanted to be able to record systematically longer discussions that were as close as possible to everyday talk (Krueger, 1989; Morgan, 1988). However, focus group discussions have specific characteristics, and we have discussed our use of the technique elsewhere (Verkuyten, 1997a). One thing that should be borne in mind is that the participants were likely to assume that they had to display opinions to the moderator. Meyers (1998) examines the structuring role of the moderator and most of his findings apply to our research. There were three ethnic Dutch moderators including myself, as well as three Turkish moderators and two Hindustani ones. In general, the moderators tried to be as passive as possible, but our role changed frequently. At times the participants explicitly addressed the moderator present, but there were many examples where the participants were clearly talking to each other, ignoring the moderator present. The prime task of the moderators was to introduce and initiate the discussion and to raise some general issues (such as life in the neighbourhood and in the Netherlands, the importance of education, and neighbourhood facilities). Sometimes short statements were used to elicit discussion, at other times, clarifications were asked, but in general, few interventions were made, allowing the discussions to run their own course.

Obviously, the focus groups differed in many respects, including the topics covered. For example, a main part of the focus groups with college students dealt with educational and school issues, whereas housing and living conditions in general was a prominent issue in the focus groups with neighbourhood residents. However, in all groups, part of the discussion dealt with ethnic groups and cultural differences. In some groups this was a dominant topic, whereas in others it was marginal. In the present paper, the focus is on some of the different ways that cultural essentialist discourses can be used or questioned depending on the context of the debate. Hence, the aim is to explore the interactive work that is being done when Dutch and ethnic minority speakers are organizing and orienting their talk towards issues of ethnicity and culture, and what the consequences of particular interpretations are.

All sessions were tape-recorded and transcribed. The transcript is considerably less detailed than is common in, for example, conversational analysis. Details such as pause lengths, stress and so on were not included. The transcript foregrounds the semantic content and the broad structural characteristics of the conversations. In addition, it is not easy to translate the discussion adequately. Shades of meaning are easily lost in translating these kinds of conversation. Hence, some Dutch terms are included. Before presenting the analysis, a reflective note on the use of the term ethnicity is in order.

There are always a variety of analysts' categories available to contextualize the data. As an analyst one employs analytical categories and makes decisions about focus and presentation of the material. In the present paper, a distinction between ethnic majority (Dutch) and ethnic minorities is used. The main reason is that for the participants, this distinction was central to most of the discussion groups (Verkuyten, 1997a). This may be due to the composition of the focus groups, but may also reflect the dominant ethnic discourse in the Netherlands. Furthermore, by using the term ethnicity, the Dutch are presented as one ethnic group along with other ethnic groups, that is as a group that claims (imagined) common history and origin.

Cultural essentialism

In the Netherlands, the term race is not used very often (Essed, 1991). Social categories are seldom defined in racial and biological terms and such definitions are widely seen as racist. The dominant discourse is about ethnicity and cultural identity, and this was also the case in the group discussions.

There were numerous examples in the discussions of the participants using reified notions in presenting ethnic groups and identities. Presumed cultural differences were used to sort groups by ethnic origin and the participants frequently adopted the language of separate ethnic groups defined by their historical cultures (see Verkuyten, 1997b). An intrinsic link between culture and ethnicity was made: each ethnic group would have its own discrete culture. Both the ethnic Dutch and the ethnic minority groups engaged in this cultural discourse and their ' own' culture was as readily reified as ' other' cultures. Culture was used as a marker of ethnic groups and because of the inextricable link between ethnicity and culture, the possibilities for people to take on a new culture alien to their own heritage were considered remote.

Below are two examples. The first one is taken from a discussion among Dutch participants about the integration of ethnic minorities. One participant has argued that it is difficult for these groups to integrate because they do not always have the same opportunities. To substantiate her claim, she refers to an article in a newspaper that stated that Hindu people in England have still not been integrated into society and that there are no Hindu representatives in the House of Commons. Another participant reacts to this claim by explaining social inequalities and arrears in terms of culture.

Extract 1

1. *1C:* 'But it's as easy as anything, if you give somebody an English passport that
2.   doesn't make him an Englishman, and if you give somebody a Dutch passport that
3.   doesn't make him a Dutchman, and that's what it's all about. It's just like when you
4.   take any six-year-old kid, or these days you start going to school when you're five,
5.   whatever your parents are, doesn't matter, if he's going to a Dutch school but he's
6.   entirely brought up in a different culture, he's never going to be a Dutchman and
7.   that's the problem'. (ethnic Dutch group 1)

A second example is where Turkish participants are discussing the differences between ethnic groups and the possibilities of cultural changes. One participant has argued that there are many similarities between people because of their shared humanity. Another participant reacts to this by emphasizing group differences.

Extract 2

> 1. *6A:* 'Of course we are all humans but we also have our own history and culture. The
> 2. Turks, the Dutch they just have their own ideas, own tradition, own culture, erm,
> 3. with every race you have those kinds of things. It's just the way things are and it's
> 4. something that will not change easily'. (ethnic minority group 6)

In these pieces of text there is a clear link between ethnicity and culture that is presented as self-evident and inevitable. In all focus group discussions there are examples where ethnicity is presented as an obvious and more or less natural way of categorizing people. The resulting ethnic groups are defined in terms of relatively fixed cultural characteristics that have not changed much throughout history.

The equation between ethnicity and culture is not simply stated, however, but made acceptable and factual. In Extract 1, the speaker does this by introducing his evaluation as very obvious (line 1), by giving concrete and detailed examples (lines 2–6), by using modalizing terms such as 'anything', 'entirely', and 'never' (Pomerantz, 1986), and by demonstrating his concern with the facts by correcting himself (line 4) (Edwards & Potter, 1992). In Extract 2, the Dutch word '*gewoon*' ('just' or 'simply') is used. In the discussions this word was frequently used for making the equation between ethnicity and culture self-evident. The meaning of this word is rather vague and does some interesting interactive work (Lee, 1987). The differences are described in such a way that they appear as ordinary and are therefore beyond discussion. Different groups have different cultures: that is just the way things are (line 3).

In Extract 1, culture is also presented as a mould that determines people's lives, their understandings and their behaviour (lines 6–7). People would inevitably be marked by their culture, which would make them easy to identify and exclude them from other groups. A discourse about early socialization was used to make people's cultural determination plausible and acceptable. Ethnic minority group members also used this discourse.

Extract 3

> 1. *11B:* 'Our culture's different and well we're made up differently from a Dutch, an
> 2. ordinary Dutch girl. That's the way it is. Our background's different, we've been
> 3. raised very differently'. (ethnic minority group 11)

> 1. *10D:* You're just different, raised differently in a different culture. It's simply here
> 2. in your head and you can never forget'. (ethnic minority group 10)

> 1. *20B:* 'Your culture's something you simply drink in with your mother's milk. It's
> 2. from birth, a really young age, and you can't help yourself, it's just the way you
> 3. are'. (ethnic Dutch group 20)

In these three pieces of talk, the speakers stress that all those born into a cultural community inevitably absorb and internalize the customary ways of thinking and feelings of the ethnic group in question. This, again, is presented as factual and as nothing out of the ordinary. People are marked by their culture through enculturation,

whatever subsequent layers of other meanings they may have absorbed. Culture is quasi-biological, a second nature that inevitably makes people who and what they are (see also Extracts 7 and 8). Although there are many possible ways of understanding development, a more mechanistic model is used here (Overton & Reese, 1973). Characteristics and actions are presented as the fixed outcomes of environmental cultural inputs.

The equation of ethnicity and culture was clearly the discourse the participants most often and self-evidently engaged in. There are also various examples in the discussion, however, where cultural essentialism is explicitly criticized and rejected. The speakers did not only use a discourse about cultural determination and being, but also questioned their own reifications. An example is the next extract from a group discussion with ethnic minority participants.

Extract 4 (group 9)

1. *9D:* 'I've just been raised in the Turkish way'.
2. *9A:* 'Me in the Dutch way, Dutch and Turkish'.
3. *9F:* 'Yeah, I've been raised in the Moroccan way'.
4. *9B:* 'I've been raised like in the normal way. I mean, that's the main thing. What does
5.   that mean, to be raised in the Dutch way or to be raised in the Moroccan way. I mean,
6.   there's no difference'.
7. *9A:* 'No'.
8. *9B:* 'I mean you can't say she's Dutch, she's Moroccan. You really can't'.

In the first three lines, it is claimed that one is raised as a Turk or a Moroccan. Again, this is presented as nothing special but as self-evident and ordinary. In line 4, however, the role of cultural differences in socialization is questioned and denied by another speaker. Here, the speaker argues that there is no such thing as Dutch or Moroccan socialization because there is no difference. Ethnic categories are presented as not informative or diagnostic about people (line 8).

Another example is a conversation between two girls. In talking about school they argued–as many other students did–that at the beginning of the new school year, they always immediately noticed and wanted to know the ethno-cultural background of their classmates (see Verkuyten, 1999). They explained this by saying:

Extract 5 (group 13)

1. *13A:* 'Of course you notice. I mean you want to know what a fellow student is like.
2.   and all, you just want to know how somebody is'.

Here, ethnicity is presented as an inductively potent category: you want to know someone's ethno-cultural background because you want to know what someone is like. Ethnic categories were presented as highly informative because they allow one to make many judgments about category members. However, in the same discussion, these girls also used another line of argument stressing the unimportance of ethnicity and culture.

Extract 6 (group 13)

1. *13A:* 'Every human being is the same I think. Whether you're Moroccan whether you're
2.   Turkish'.

3.   *13B:* 'Yeah, culture isn't what counts, it doesn't come into it. They're all just people,
4.   we're all just teenagers'.
5.   *13A:* 'It's not like it's colour, black or white, you are who you are and that's the end of
6.   it, everyone's different'.

In this extract, the importance of ethnicity and culture is denied by stressing a common humanity, another social category (' teenagers') and unique personal differences. Thus, in contrast to culture, there are concepts available that deny the relevance of cultural groups. The distinctions and reifications that are used are also questioned and problematized. The equation between culture and ethnicity was also dissolved and the relevance of culture denied. Although this questioning is not the dominant pattern in the discussions, it shows that there are always alternative discourses available to challenge dominant definitions.

Hence, both ethnic Dutch and ethnic minorities used a cultural essentialist discourse but there are also examples where this discourse is criticized by stressing change, internal differentiation and mixing. This variable use of cultural (de-)essentialism can be made sense of in terms of the conversation's context. That is, cultural (de-)essentialism can be examined as a flexible conversational resource which is variously deployed in talk depending on the issues at hand.

Cultural essentialism and adaptation

Ethnic Dutch
Cultural essentialism is central to ' new racism' which is based upon ideas of incompatible cultural differences, constituting a threat to one's group identity. In this perspective, the essential cultural ' other' must be segregated, kept at a distance or even expelled from the country. In the discussion groups with ethnic Dutch participants, there are various examples of cultural racism and there are also some examples where these consequences are explicitly favoured. Elsewhere, I have discussed focus group examples of this cultural or ' new' racism based on a cultural essentialist discourse (Verkuyten, 1997b, 1998). However, a similar discourse was also used by ethnic minority groups.

Ethnic minorities
In some focus group discussions, the moderator used statements to elicit and direct the discussion. One statement attributed to ' people in society' was, ' To be able to get ahead in Dutch society, you have to adapt as much as possible and forget your own culture as much as possible'. Reactions to this statement ranged from laughter to disbelief, but in all 10 ethnic minority discussion groups where this statement was used, the participants outrightly disagreed. Their disagreement focused on the aspect of ' having to forget one's own culture'. This was considered more or less impossible. Below are two examples taken from the discussions. In the first extract, the participants in the group initially reacted with laughter, then said:

Extract 7 (group 10)

1.   *10C:* 'No, no, no, boo. No way, Just no way'.
2.   *10D:* 'You've got to adapt, but you can't forget your own culture. How on earth could
3.   you?'
4.   *10A:* 'Of course you can't. How can you forget your own culture? That's not normal'.

5.   *MOD:* 'So if we take out the last bit it does make sense? To be able to get ahead in Dutch
6.   society you've got to adapt as much as possible?'
7.   *10C:* 'Yes, yeah, it would then'.
8.   *10A:* 'Yeah, that's right'.
9.   *10C:* 'You are living in their country, but this is it, in Holland and you will adapt'.
10.   *10A:* 'Of course you've got to adapt, but not in every way. You are who you are. Whether
11.   you are in Holland or in France, you are who you are, you can't change that, you
12.   can't just adapt like that'.
13.   *MOD:* 'So the second bit. The last bit isn't correct?'
14.   *10A:* 'No. It's nothing but discrimination'.
15.   *MOD:* 'Nothing but discrimination?'.
16.   *10A:* 'Yeah'.
17.   *10B:* 'Yes, but you will forget it of course, your culture's gonna change. Everyone goes
18.   about with everyone else and it'll all change'.
19.   *10D:* 'Yes, Moroccans, Turks and the Dutch as well and foreigners, and it'll all change'.

Extract 8 (group 8)

1.   *8F:* 'Cor! Shit man, no'.
2.   *8B:* 'No, you've gotta adapt to Dutch society, but you can't forget your own culture'.
3.   *8C:* 'You don't forget your own culture, there's no way, you can learn Dutch or
4.   something but . . .'.
5.   *8F:* 'No, that's how you've grown up'.
6.   *8C:* 'Yes'.
7.   *8F:* 'You just don't forget'.

In both extracts, the impossibility of forgetting your own culture is stressed because culture determines who you are: you are your culture. In these parts of the discussions and collectively, the participants presented cultural identity as an unalterable and integral part of themselves that should not and could not be forgotten even if they wanted to. You cannot deny your 'roots' as it were unless you deny yourself and ignore who you are (but see extract 10, and lines 17–19, see below).

The notable thing here is that this discourse is deployed in response to the assimilationist statement. This discourse is very effective in challenging the idea that adaptation to Dutch society implies cultural assimilation. Assimilation is presented as impossible because people are inevitably moulded by their culture and as discriminatory because it denies ethnic minorities' culture. Furthermore, the participants reject a unidimensional or bipolar perspective that pits adaptation against cultural maintenance. Adaptation without assimilation is presented as feasible, preferable and, considering the importance of culture, as the only viable option.

The equation of culture with ethnicity implies an us–them distinction, involving the issue of adaptation. When there are different groups with different cultures, the question of adaptation becomes relevant. As can be seen in the two extracts above, the participants agreed that one should adapt to Dutch society. There were two lines of argument here. On the one hand, there is the practical reason of trying to advance oneself in society. Adaptation was considered necessary to be able to find a good job later in life. You must be able to speak Dutch and know the rules. Or, as a student said 'although I am a Turk, I still have to talk Dutch'. On the other hand, adaptation was presented as a kind of moral obligation because one lives in the Netherlands. An example is in line 9 in Extract 7 where a speaker argues that you should adapt because 'you are living in their country'.

However, in the next lines (10–11) of this extract, it is argued that adaptation has clear limits because of the essential nature of identity. You have got to adapt but you cannot forget your own culture. In presenting culture as inevitably shaping members of a group it becomes more difficult for the majority group to expect assimilation or to attribute the blame to minorities for failing to adapt. The emphasis is more on the inability or impossibility to adapt and not on unwillingness. This line of argument is explicit in the last line of Extract 3. Here, the speaker clearly argues that you are not personally responsible for how you are culturally shaped in early socialization. So within this discourse, adhering to one's culture is not so much a moral issue but an inevitable and necessary fact of life. The participants talked about culture and ethnicity and stated that their typical in-group culture was important to them. They defined themselves as living in the Netherlands but not as being Dutch or as wanting to become Dutch. They argued that they should adapt to Dutch society, but at the same time they rejected and protested against the demand for adaptation by the Dutch. The Dutch would conceive of adaptation as assimilation, meaning a denial and rejection of ethnic minorities' own rich traditions and culture: that is, denying who they have become during early childhood.

Additionally, assimilation was seen as discriminatory and ignoring every groups' cultural rights (Extract 7, lines 13–15). Another example is the next extract, also from a discussion about culture and the need for adaptation to Dutch society.

Extract 9 (group 5)

1.   *MOD:* 'What can the Dutch and, erm, migrants expect from each other?'
2.   *5B:* 'Nothing, nothing'.
3.   *5C:* 'Each to his own'
4.   *5G:* 'Yeah, you can't, you can't turn a Turk into a Dutchman, or a Dutchman into a
5.   Turk. You simply can't, it's very difficult'.
6.   *5C:* 'Yes, that's true, there'll be always a difference'.
7.   *5B:* 'You can't expect Turks to change and become just like the Dutch'.
8.   *5C:* 'And why should we change. We've got as much as a right to our culture, just like
9.   everybody else'.
10.   *5B:* 'Yeah, exactly. Our culture's really important to us'.

In lines 4–7 a similar line of essentialist argumentation is used as by the Dutch speaker in Extract 1. However, here cultural essentialism is not used for explaining social arrears of minority groups but to argue for separation. Each ethnic group is different and therefore each group has a right to live in its own way. The use of this cultural discourse is consequential because it involves accounts and claims that are being related to multiculturalism. Multicultural notions promote the value of diversity as a core principle, and insist that all ethnic groups have a right to their own culture. Acknowledgement of and respect for different cultures implies that the argument of cultural identity can be used to justify claims and to make accusations. These multicultural notions did play a role in the ethnic minorities' discussions. An example is presented by lines 13–15 in Extract 7 where the speaker argues that having to forget one's culture amounts to discrimination. The negative reactions towards the statement presented by the moderator were strongly related to the verb ' have to'. The partici-pants argued that they were under no obligation to do anything of the sort. The use of an essentialist discourse combined with multicultural notions is more explicit in the last three lines of Extract 9.

Hence, in the discussions, ethnic minorities did use a cultural essentialist discourse and deployed the recognized right to cultural identity to make claims and justify their behaviour. Acknowledgement of and respect for other cultures implies that ' one's own culture' can function as an acceptable argument and explanation. In the discussions there were different examples of ethnic minorities claiming social recognition and actual provisions for the uniqueness of their culturally distinct practices and beliefs. These claims were made in relation to education, the workplace, religion and the law. It was argued that one's own culture should be taken into account and that it constitutes a legitimate basis for wanting to have, for example, Islamic schools, multicultural work units, and changes in the legal system. These claims were also made in relation to social work and health care. The next extract has been taken from a discussion where the participants were arguing about the need for changes in existing care provisions. It was argued, particularly, that a great deal more ethnic minority members should be employed in these sectors and that culturally sensitive approaches were needed to provide adequate care.

Extract 10 (group 7)

1. *7E:* 'My doctor also knows a lot about our culture you know, it makes you feel
2.   like, erm, well, he understands what you're about, but if you go with
3.   somebody who doesn't understand your culture then, I've also got a social
4.   worker she works here now, but she gives me nothing. It makes me feel like
5.   there's no point in coming. It's very important to understand. I mean if I've got
6.   to explain, you've got to explain all about your culture, if people don't understand,
7.   it doesn't work. His or her culture is very different from mine. A Turkish social
8.   worker will understand straightaway, but if you tell a Dutch, or a Surinamese
9.   person or whatever, he or she will have to take in your culture first before she
10.   can help you. And that plays a really big part'.

In this extract, deep cultural differences are emphasized by using extreme case formulations (Pomerantz, 1986). Furthermore, people are presented as *having* their own culture, which has shaped their feelings, understanding and problems. Ethnicity is equated with culture, making ethnic group members basically the same and group membership inductively potent. To provide adequate help and care it is necessary to ' take in' (Dutch ' *innemen*') the culture. There are several examples in the discussions where it is argued that psychological, medical and social problems are culturally specific, making separate provisions necessary.

Cultural de-essentialism

Ethnic Dutch

In the Dutch discussion groups, there were various examples where essential cultural differences were presented as incompatible and the cultural ' other' was argued to constitute a threat to the Dutch way of life. The mixing or coexistence of different cultures was presented as leading to social conflict and the dissolution of Dutch identity. The next extract is an example.

Extract 11 (group 19)

1. *19A:* 'I think they should adopt our values and norms. They simply have to adapt. If
2.   that doesn't happen, not a single country will have its own identity, you'll end up with

3.   a messy mixture of all kinds of different cultures and all'.
4.   *19B:* 'Yeah, definitely, I, well, I think that they should adapt to Dutch culture, they've
5.   got to, erm, integrate and if they don't stick to our norms and values then erm, it'll
6.   become a mess and, erm, well, you'll get criminality and suchlike, and well, they've
7.   got to adapt'.

In this extract a case is made for assimilation: ' they' should take over ' our' norms and values. The interesting thing here is that such a claim rests on the idea that cultural change is possible and therefore that culture does not inevitably mould people. Cultural essentialism is useful in talking about segregation and deportation but less so in arguing for assimilation. For this, a more de-essentialist notion of culture is needed in which change is stressed. As one might expect, for de-essentialism, a variety of different claims, arguments and stories emerged during discussions. Elsewhere I have examined how ethnic Dutch speakers deal with minority group cultural claims by arguing over the meaning of culture itself, questioning whether particular kinds of behaviours are instances of minority group culture, and restricting these claims to the private sphere (Verkuyten, 2001). In addition to these strategies, giving examples of ' good' minorities and stressing out-group differences are useful strategies.

Several times, references were made to minority group members who had fully adapted to the Dutch way of life. This next extract is an example.

Extract 12 (group 2)

1.   *2K:* 'My children also play with a Turkish boy from, erm, what I could call a
2.   Dutch family. They are Turkish people but they've just become westernized,
3.   turned into Dutch people, they don't go to the mosque any more, they've just
4.   turned into Dutch people, that kid also likes to play indoors, erm that kid is also
5.   working hard at his homework, erm working hard at his homework and at least
6.   they keep an eye on him all right'.

There is not only a condemnation of different customs here but there is also the message that as long as foreigners behave like Dutch people it is all right, and in that case they can even be categorized as Dutch. The equation between ethnicity and culture is dissolved. The ethnic origin of the family is Turkish, but culturally they are Dutch. Examples of ' good' minorities prove that it is possible to adapt if there is willingness. Additionally, the ' good' minorities were said equally to disapprove of the behaviour of members of their ethnic group. These ' good' minorities are entitled to judge because of their expert knowledge, thus justifying and validating the speaker's opinion about the possibility and need for adaptation (Edwards & Potter, 1992).

The examples of ' good' minorities demonstrate that the participants implicitly used the notion of change and also referred to the idea of self-determination. Examples of ethnic minorities who are said to have integrated in Dutch society imply the idea that culture does not determine people's understanding completely. People may distance themselves from their culture and their own immediate contexts. They are able to consider alternatives, to plan their actions, and they themselves determine what they think, say or do. This notion of self-determination is needed when claiming that ethnic minorities should adapt and bear responsibility for (not) doing so. Such a claim would be unrealistic and reproaches would become difficult if people are presented as completely determined by their culture.

A case was also made for the possibility and need for cultural change and adaptation by pointing out inevitable differences that arise between ethnic minorities' first and later generations as well as other differences within ethnic groups. These presentations are also useful for criticizing separate treatment of and actual provisions for ethnic minority groups. The following extract has been taken from a discussion about the growing number of Islamic primary schools. One participant is in favour of these schools, as opposed to his fellow participants who present Islamic schools as a fairly futile attempt by the parents to control their children because in reality changes are already taking place.

Extract 13 (group 4)

1. *4C:* 'There's conflicts as it is in those families between children and parents, once the
2.   children start growing up they'll Dutchify anyway'.
3. *4B:* 'Yeah, that's true'.
4. *4C:* 'It's happening now, those children just go on Dutchifying. It's a process that
5.   can't be stopped. So once those kids grow a little older. They'll rebel against the
6.   limiting side of their parents' culture'

Here, the first speaker presents cultural change among ethnic minorities as inevitable and normal. The older generation may stick to their culture but the ' Dutchification' (in Dutch ' *vernederlandsing*') of their children is a fact. This claim is made factual by using an empiricist discourse that presents the changes as law-like (Edwards & Potter, 1992). The problems the children are thought to face are mainly related to their parents.

There also is an implicit equation between ethnicity and culture. The children are said to distance themselves from their parents' culture and to become like the Dutch. Furthermore, the two cultures are presented as incompatible in that quarrels and conflicts between parents and children are bound to appear. Hence, children are not inevitably moulded by their parents' culture. Rather, change, and particularly, becoming increasingly Dutch, is presented as the normal and natural process, calling into question the need for separate Islamic schools.

Ethnic minorities

In some contexts, cultural essentialism is not only criticized and denied by ethnic Dutch participants but also by ethnic minorities. Extracts 4 and 6 and the last three lines of Extract 7 demonstrate this. The interesting thing about the talk in these extracts is that the question of adaptation becomes more problematic. In a discourse about cross-cutting ties, cultural changes and mixings, the ethnic us–them distinction breaks down and, with it, the question of cultural adaptation. Similarly, emphasizing human similarities or unique personal differences makes questions of culture differences both less relevant and more problematic. For ethnic minorities, discourses that stress personal determination and responsibility are also available for situated purposes.

The former discourse may be used to challenge homogeneous and often negative majority group representations and behaviour. The next extract stems from a discussion about the way ethnic Dutch people treat all ethnic minorities as though they were the same. The first speaker tells a long story about Dutch people she had met and who did not differentiate between Turkish and Moroccan people. She ends her story as follows:

Extract 14 (group 8)

1.   *8D:* 'So I said no, Turkish people's culture's very different and they didn't even know
2.   stuff like that and like them, a lot of people just don't know the difference between
3.   foreigners'.
4.   *8E:* ''cos we're Muslim, right, they think we're all the same'.
5.   *8I:* 'But there are lots of differences among the Turkish themselves'.
6.   *8D:* 'Yeah, a lot'.
7.   *8B:* 'A lot, indeed'.
8.   *8D:* 'But it is difficult for Dutch people to differentiate between a Turk and a Turk'.
9.   *8F:* 'Yeah, they'll say, like, you're a Turk, why aren't you wearing a headscarf'.
10. *8G:* 'If they aren't wearing headscarves they think they're not Turks'.
11. *8D:* 'Yeah, they act like we're all the same, but people from the city for instance,
12.   you can't compare with those coming from the country. It really is completely a
13.   different thing'.

Modalizing terms such as ' a lot', ' really' and ' completely' (Pomerantz, 1986) are used to argue that there are differences among Turkish people (lines 6–13), and that some groups of Turks are actually not comparable (lines 13–14). Dissolving the equation between ethnicity and culture is useful here to challenge uniform conceptions and treatment by the Dutch. Turks are presented as people who differ greatly from one another. Furthermore, presenting in-group differences as factual and contrasting to the false beliefs and ignorance of the Dutch acts to substantiate the challenge further. Note also how in line 8, the ignorance of the Dutch (lines 2–3) is softened by an understanding of their difficulty in distinguishing between different Turks.

Furthermore, not only was a discourse used about cultural determination and being, but also about personal determination and doing. There are several examples where speakers distance themselves from their ethnic minority group. In an essentialist discourse, culture is presented as inevitably determining people's understanding and behaviour, making them easy to identify. It entails a concomitant loss of individuality. People are pictured as more or less passive carriers of their culture, whereby their attitudes, beliefs and achievements are supposed to reflect typical cultural patterns. It is difficult to reconcile this discourse with the idea of personal agency and responsibility, whereby attitudes and beliefs are seen as resulting from personal experiences and interpretations, and achievements as depending on one's own efforts and perseverance.

Particularly among student participants, there were several examples where it was argued that one's ethnic identity is based on personal experiences and individual choices and less so on culture and tradition. By stressing personal choices and responsibilities, culture was presented as something that may or may not be maintained, rather than as something somebody happens to ' have'. The next extract stems from a discussion about the participants' future in the Netherlands and the inevitable cultural and religious changes. When talking about their future, the speakers deployed a liberal-individualist conception of the person in which personal choice and responsibilities were emphasized. In this discourse you are not inevitably moulded by your culture but it is up to you to maintain your culture or distance yourself from it.

Extract 15 (group 14)

1.   *MOD:* 'Should you maintain your own culture?'
2.   *14B:* 'That's your own choice, erm it's your own future, you know'.
3.   *14C:* 'Yeah, if you don't want to, you don't'.
4.   *14B:* 'It's up to you to decide or to do'.

Discussion

Scholars from different countries have noted that the dominant discourse on ethnic minorities has shifted from biological theories of inferiority to essential and incompatible cultural differences. Social psychologists studying group cognitions are showing a growing interest in essentialist beliefs (e.g. Haslam *et al*., 2000, 2002; Yzerbyt *et al*., 1997, 2001). People are said to be inclined to treat many social categories, such as ethnicity, as reified and natural kinds by assuming that these have an underlying essence. Essentialist beliefs are thought to rationalize oppressive social arrangements (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Yzerbyt *et al*., 1997). These studies focus on cognitive processes and are not concerned with the actual practices people are involved in.

Critical discourse studies on racism examine the way that specific constructions function to essentialize and legitimize patterns of social power and racial dominance (e.g. Brah, 1992; Essed, 1991; Van Dijk, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). The socially constructed nature of identities is emphasized, and in the social sciences, anti-essentialism has emerged as a liberating discourse. However, most of these studies focus predominantly on majority group members and tend to ignore the possible emancipating effects of essence-related beliefs.

In the present study, an analysis was presented demonstrating that both ethnic Dutch and ethnic minority members living in the same locality used both cultural essentialist and de-essentialist discourses. The main conclusion of this paper is that essentialism is not by definition oppressive and that de-essentialism is not by definition progressive. The power of cultural (de-)essentialism depends on the way it is used and the context in which it appears. The implication of the analysis is that cognitive–social psychological studies as well as studies examining dominant discourses on ethnic minorities should pay close attention to the various ways in which differences are defined and (de-)essentialized by various groups.

Using focus groups, it was shown that participants engaged in a cultural essentialist discourse in which an intrinsic link between culture and ethnicity was made. The ' own' culture was thereby as readily essentialized as ' other' cultures. Furthermore, participants used a mechanistic model of early socialization in order to present people as inevitably moulded and marked by their culture, supposedly making them easy to identify. However, the discursive competence of the participants also included a de-essentialist discourse that challenged and denied the equation between culture and ethnicity. This availability and use of both discourses is not specific for the present study but has also been found in ethnographic research on, for example, neighbourhoods in the London area (Back, 1996; Baumann, 1996; Mac an Ghaill, 1999). In addition, using survey data, Haslam *et al*. (2002) found that individual differences in sexism and racism were not consistently associated with essentialist beliefs about these categories. Furthermore, anti-gay prejudice was found to be related to a mixture of essentialist *and* anti-essentialist beliefs.

The variable use of cultural (de-)essentialism was examined in terms of the discussion's context. The Dutch participants used essential cultural differences in a ' new racist' discourse which presented the mixing and coexistence of different cultures as inherently problematic (e.g. Barker, 1981; Hopkins *et al*., 1997; Wieviorka, 1995). However, there were also many examples where ethnic minority groups engaged in a cultural essentialist discourse. Cultural essentialism is very useful for challenging assimilationist ideas. In agreement with multicultural notions, the right to cultural identity and the recognition of fundamental differences was claimed. Furthermore,

ethnic minorities argued for provisions and measures that would meet the uniqueness of their culturally distinct practices and beliefs. Cultural essentialism is an important political tool for ethnic minorities (Morin & Saladin d'Anglure, 1997; Roosens, 1999). Essentialist arguments that legitimize one's identity are becoming increasingly difficult to challenge or ignore. These arguments are related to ideas about multiculturalism and group rights that have been adopted in most Western countries and which featured in the focus group discussions.

Hence, cultural essentialism is not just oppressive, just as de-essentialism can have limiting and legitimizing effects. Different Dutch participants pleaded in favour of the assimilation of ethnic minorities. In order to do so, a more de-essentialist notion of culture must be employed in which differences among ethnic minority members are emphasized as well as the possibility for change. Providing examples of ' good' or assimilated minorities and stressing inevitable differences between generations were strategies used to argue for the possibility of change and minorities' own responsibilities. The argument for assimilation is unrealistic and reproaches become more difficult if people are presented as completely determined by their culture. The notion of self-determination enables minorities to make themselves responsible and accountable for their position in society. Furthermore, it may be used to challenge claims for ethnic categorical or culturally sensitive measures. In contrast, ethnic minorities may present culture as inevitably having shaped them. In a cultural essentialist discourse, the emphasis is on the inability or impossibility to adapt, turning the questions of adaptation or keeping one's culture into factual issues instead of moral ones. In other words, cultural essentialism can be used by ethnic minorities to counter assimilationist ideas and to claim group rights.

On the other hand, cultural de-essentialism can also be a useful strategy for ethnic minorities. Stressing in-group differences, for example, was used to challenge homogeneous and often negative majority group representations and behaviour. Furthermore, a discourse that presents culture as inevitably moulding people is difficult to reconcile with ideas of personal agency. Cultural essentialism presents people as personifications of the ethnic group. This implies a form of social control (Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995) and tends to ignore individuality. However, in discussing their future, ethnic minority members also stressed their personal experiences and efforts, deploying a discourse about self-determination and cultural choice. They claimed an active and constructive role and presented themselves as agents with a future, plans and responsibilities of their own. Ethnic minority group members are not ' locked' inside their group or incapable of taking various subject positions, but discursive competent agents who may claim their own responsibilities.

Cultural essentialism and de-essentialism are discourses available for situated purposes. The present analysis focuses on talk in interaction that is taken to be important in itself and not as merely reflecting underlying cognitive and motivational processes. However, this and other discourse studies do not, of course, show that proposed psychological tendencies and mechanism do not exist or are secondary.

There are different positions concerning the relationship between discourse and social cognition. For example, discursive psychologists acknowledge that there are basic mental capacities for discourse work to occur, but they have a particular understanding of the inner or psychological (e.g. Edwards, 1997; Edwards & Potter, 1992). Psychological processes are seen as constituted through discursive social activity and substantive cognitive claims are rejected on epistemological grounds. In contrast, cognitive–social psychology focuses on psychological tendencies and mechanisms. For

example, people are seen as having a tendency to treat many social categories as natural kinds, and to favour entitative in-groups because these meet basic needs (Hirschfeld, 1996; Yzerbyt, Castano, Leyens, & Paladino, 2000). Cognitive theories try to explain why essentialist beliefs are omnipresent and why they have such profound consequences. However, these theories tend to neglect how groups are discursively defined. Language is crucial in understanding how people come to understand themselves and others, and discourse approaches examine the use of discursive devices and specific constructions. But the important observation that language is constitutive and strategical does not imply that theorizing about cognitive processes must be rejected. Reicher and colleagues (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001; Reicher, Hopkins, & Condor, 1997), for example, have argued and shown that the antecedents of social categorization can be examined in discursive rather than cognitive terms, whereas the social-cognitive consequences can be understood by self-categorization processes. Groups constituted as entitative may engage psychological mechanisms that have other than discursive consequences. That is, groups defined in essentialist terms may have different cognitive implications compared with groups that are construed as variable and changeable. Hence, both discursive and cognitive approaches may be part of a general endeavour to explain essentialist beliefs, and human activity in general. Each may provide what the other lacks and together they can offer a better understanding of human thinking and doing.

The present paper has focused on essentialism in terms of conversational issues. The analysis relates to current debates on, for example, multiculturalism, (anti-)racism, and identity politics. Essentialism and anti-essentialism are central but contested notions in these debates (e.g. Modood, 1998; Sampson, 1993; Werbner, 1997). The stance known as ' strategic essentialism', for instance, has been proposed as a solution to the question how the political power of essentialism may be salvaged from the logic of anti-essentialism. Also, anti-racism and critical social analyses have been criticized for subverting their own anti-essentialist project by defining majority group members as essentially oppressive and racist (Bonnett, 2000). Similarly, there are critiques of forms of multiculturalism that merge the concept of culture with that of ethnic identity, which reify cultures as separate entities, ultimately rationalizing and justifying segregation and separation (e.g. Turner, 1993). Rather than continuing to ignore most of these debates, social psychology should try to make a contribution. The present study has tried to do so by examining the variable and active ways in which both ethnic majority and minority group members use cultural (de-)essentialist discourses for different situated purposes. Future studies could examine essentialist beliefs in other settings and by trying to combine discursive and social–cognitive concerns. For example, the use of both cultural essentialist and de-essentialist discourses could also be examined as context-sensitive cognitive processes. In addition, analysis could focus on the perceptual and evaluative consequences of (de-)essentialist group definitions.

Acknowledgements

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