Abstract

Past research illustrates that one barrier to stakeholders’ support for organizations’ diversity policy is essentialism—their beliefs that certain groups possess fixed and meaningful differences. In the current research, we explore the possibility that essentialist views of social groups may also have benefits for diversity policy support. Because essentialism justifies the existence of meaningful intergroup boundaries, we propose that it helps affirm the distinct experiences and needs of members from different groups, increasing perceived legitimacy of, and in turn, support for, diversity policies serving minority groups. To test this hypothesis, we recruited 319 US full-time workers to participate in an online survey. Based on past work, eleven social categories were examined in this study: age, diet, disability, education level, ethnicity, gender, interest, political orientation, race, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status. Essentialism was measured by asking participants to rate the extent to which each group membership was fixed, biological, informative, and uniform. We then measured perceived legitimacy and favorability of policies targeting each group. In line with our hypothesis, for some social groups such as interest, diet, politics, education level, socioeconomic status, and age, essentialism was positively correlated with perceived legitimacy and favorability. However, there were no significant relationships between essentialism and legitimacy for other groups. For gender, essentialism was negatively correlated with legitimacy and favorability. Overall, the results offered evidence to support our hypothesis while revealing heterogeneity in the relationships between essentialism and perceived legitimacy across groups. These results highlight the importance to understand moderators and nuances in the relationships between essentialism and policy outcomes.