

ESSENTIALISM AND FOLKSOCIOLOGY: ETHNICITY AGAIN*

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to show that essentialism in folksociology should be described and investigated more precisely than has usually been done. The empirical evidence suggests that no particular causal process of essence acquisition is constitutive for essentialism in folksociology. Innate potential and biological inheritance, however powerful they may be for the human cognitive mind in the domain of folkbiology, are far from necessary in essentialist folksociological classifications. If we have to specify how an essence is acquired in a particular folksociology, we should investigate this question empirically rather than assume it *a priori*. The main hypothesis of this article is that essentialism in folksociology is not defined by any particular causal process of essence acquisition. Even when we are able to detect the innateness in a particular folksociology, we should always look for other features of essentialism (inherence, sharp boundaries, immutability of identity, etc.). We have to devise and use a lot of empirical experimental tasks to describe a folksociological framework. To rely heavily on one of them (e. g. the adoption task) might lead to serious misunderstandings. The article reviews some influential cognitive proposals concerning folksociology (Astuti, Gil-White, Hirschfeld), and provides arguments and empirical evidence collected in Western Ukraine in favor of the claim that the innateness is not the constitutive part of sociology, let alone of psychological essentialism.

After the pioneering work of Lawrence Hirschfeld (Hirschfeld 1996, 1998, 2001), cognitive anthropological research and literature began to pay more attention to the origin, structure and functions of 'folksociology'. Folksociology is the way that humans of various cultures represent, acquire and communicate notions about human social groupings, together with how and which inferential patterns and reasonings are used in these processes. This branch of cognitive research has benefited from the very beginning from the fact that almost all the available empirical evidence was collected cross-culturally and/or with respect to cognitive development. This advantage has yielded a solid background for generalizations, with greater hope to avoid some ethnocentric exaggerations. Folksociological research is an outcome of close cooperation between anthropology and psychology.

During the last decade (1995-2005), at least two alternative accounts to Hirschfeld's work on folksociology have been proposed in cognitive anthropology (Astuti 1995, 2001; Gil-White 1999, 2001). Therefore we have (at least) three cognitive theories of folksociology, and as is usual in a developing discipline, those proposals are in disagreement with one another, both theoretically and empirically. This situation begins to bear close resemblance to the situation in ethnic and racial studies in the general field of anthropology and sociology, where we face dozens of radically different and mutually exclusive theories, and many scholars have already lost the slightest hope not only to unify them (there has never been such a hope), but even to find a way how to select among them. My opinion is that the reproduction of this situation in cognitive anthropology is far from desirable, and we should try to avoid it if possible. Therefore my intention is not to offer a fourth or fifth cognitive theory. Rather, I more moderately look for a way to reconcile and reformulate existing theories in such a way that we could end up with a general framework that could be theoretically coherent and also able to account for available empirical evidence. Perhaps this intention is not so modest after all...

To begin with, I present a few caveats to map the overall geography of my proposal:

(1) As far as the domain of folksociology is concerned, I will concentrate mainly on ethnic representations and thinking. Needless to say, the domain of folksociology is broader, including (the representation of) social groupings. Sometimes I will have to refer to various social groupings for the sake of providing examples and comparisons, but my argumentation will be concerned mainly with ethnic thinking. My justification is straightforward and clear:

my empirical fieldwork was based on the investigation of ethnic phenomena, and I do not wish to engage heavily in interpretations which my own empirical evidence would not support. Of course, I cannot exclude available empirical evidence collected by my colleagues, but I prefer to support my conclusions with my own specific data.

(2) All proposals to describe and explain folksociology have been closely interconnected with the problem of *essentialism*: for instance, as far as ethnic (and racial) classifications are concerned, there is little doubt that they are manifestations of essentialist thinking. The study of ethnicity can be understood (and within the cognitive perspective probably *must* be understood) as a contribution to the ongoing debate on essentialism. Of course, there are many non-essentialist social classifications too, and I cannot deny this obvious fact. The question is if these nonessentialist social classifications are sufficiently systematic, recurrent and homogenous to become an object of concise description and explanation. I think that they lack such a systematicity, and although they are interesting on their own and deserve careful study with detailed ethnographic descriptions, they are not constrained by a universal, domain-specific cognitive mechanism.

We have to be very careful here, since there are some (perhaps many) folksociological classifications which are taken to be nonessentialist only at the first sight. However, as we will see below, a more detailed account will dissolve this premature conclusion. My point is that essentialism (and even its presumed absence) deserves the serious attention, at least to make clear the necessary and sufficient condition of its presence in the domain of folksociology.

As far as essentialism is concerned, the debate about its origin and scope is still widely open (S. Gelman 2003; Sousa, Atran & Medin 2002; Strevens 2000; S. Gelman & Hirschfeld 1999). However, all the cognitive proposals concerning folksociology in general (Atran 1990; Boyer 1990; Hirschfeld 1996), and ethnicity in particular (Astuti 1995, 2001; Gil-White 1999, 2001) address the problem of essentialism as a core of this debate. Even authors who agree that (at least some) social classifications are essentialist express dissenting views about what essentialism is and what its constitutive features are. But if a strong disagreement and confusion about the nature of essentialism will persist, there is little hope to reach any general consensus about the domain of folksociology, given how intimately those problems are connected to one another. Any robust explanation of folksociology, to be of use, must be based on an equally robust construal of essentialism. Unfortunately, some authors *assume* rather than *make explicit* the properties of essentialism in the domain of folksociology, and such a habit leads all too often to theoretical confusions and empirical misinterpretations. My aim in this article is to provide a minimal characterization of essentialism by specifying its *constitutive* and *necessary*, rather than *empirical* and *variable*, properties. I will show later that the main source of confusion is the regrettable and widespread *pars pro toto* fallacy: some authors tend to choose an important, but empirical and variable feature of essentialism, which they in turn take for its constitutive, even defining characteristics.

(3) The essentialism I will address is of course *psychological* essentialism (see Medin & Ortony 1989; S. Gelman & Hirschfeld 1999; S. Gelman 2003), not metaphysical. Hence my object of study is systems of representations and beliefs, not the structure of the world. Although there are philosophical and epistemological works dealing with metaphysical essentialism (Ellis 2001), this domain of study falls beyond the scope of my article. Furthermore, my article will not contribute to the debate about the epistemological status of essentialism that Strevens initiated (Strevens 2000; see Ahn et al. 2001). In what follows, I will take for granted, therefore not prove, that essentialism is a real and pervasive psychological mechanism, not a (mistaken) epistemological tool.

(4) My empirical work has concerned exclusively adult subjects (15-65 years old), hence I have no empirical evidence at my disposal which could be used to tell

a developmental story. I fully agree that without such developmental evidence, my research is incomplete at best, but for the present I will limit my conclusions to what my own data on adult informants reveal.

(5) Although I endorse the claim that folksociology becomes a domain through standard processes of natural selection, I will resist the temptation to speculate about its evolutionary origins. A full-fledged evolutionary story would demand that we consider the ancestral environment, cost-benefit analysis, evolutionary stable strategies, primatological comparisons, and many other considerations which are far beyond my competence, not to speak of the scope of this article. To describe how folksociology works, we need a detailed account of its structure as a psychological mechanism, and of its causal relations to behavior in various cultures. In principle, such description is possible even without evolutionary considerations.

(6) Since my proposal will have to do with psychological essentialism and its role in ethnic and racial classification, and since such a proposal is part of the problem of why and how people in various cultures and societies acquire, share and communicate (essentialist) representations about social groupings, this proposal is part of the broader project of *epidemiology of representations*, outlined by Sperber (1985, 1996). His formulation has the immediate advantage over any alternative suggestions that it provides us with a general framework which permits us to formulate epistemologically and to test empirically various theories about the cognitive mind in cultural environment, even without postulating or hoping for any general and unified theory.

My argument that draws on epidemiology of representations is that there are many universal cognitive mechanisms, and that they interact mutually in various non-trivial ways depending on very variable cultural input. They surely can be subsumed under some general laws and regularities, but it is far from being true, or even remotely plausible, that those laws and regularities must create the one and only logically coherent and epistemologically transparent set. This entails the question of whether the principles of one cognitive domain that are applicable in another cognitive domain might be in principle always empirical and never constitutive. For instance, the putative similarity of some phenomena across domains (social groups vs. living kinds), together with the identity of some postulated beliefs (e.g. innate potential), is still *not* the argument that claims there is something like a borrowing and/or analogical transfer at work here. The logical, epistemological and empirical possibility exists that both sets of phenomena are the outcome of a broader mechanism instantiated in two different domains. I will return to this problem later in more detail.

In the first part of my article, I would like to specify some relations between essentialism and folksociology on the one hand, and on the other hand, some relations between folksociology and folkbiology. Both issues have been widely discussed (see Gil-White 2001; Astuti 2001; Atran 1990, Boyer 1990, Rothbart & Tylor 1990). My intention is to describe the respective levels of generalizability proper to any domain in order to distinguish clearly which features belong specifically to a particular domain and which are, on the contrary, features of some more general mode of reasoning. For example, the case could be made that causal thinking, essentialism, and folkbiology belong to very different levels of cognition, and therefore it is necessary to be explicit about their common features. We can expect that the more specific level will display and inherit the features of the less specific one (for instance, essentialism may be causal, or folkbiology essentialist), but not the other way around (for instance, there may be non-essentialist causal thinking, or non-biological essentialism). As a matter of epistemological and even empirical facts, we should not postulate the identity of domains even in the case that their properties reliably co-occur. That folkbiology is hardly to imagine without essentialism does not entail, nor even suggest that essentialism is inconceivable without folkbiology.

The second part of my article will deal with the particular theories of folksociology proposed recently in cognitive anthropology by Rita Astuti (1995, 2001), Lawrence Hirschfeld (1996, 1998, 2001) and Francisco Gil-White (1999, 2001). I will show that only Hirschfeld's theory is sufficiently general and precisely formulated to account for the empirical evidence, while Astuti's and Gil-White's proposals, far from being simply wrong, can be reformulated as specific approximations within this more general framework. However, without such a reformulation they are unable to account for even their own data.

(1) Causal Thinking, Essentialism, and Folksociology

I will begin this section with the notion of causal thinking, which is of particular importance for essentialism and folksociology, not to speak about folkbiology. Causal thinking (S. Gelman & Kalish 1993; Sperber, D. Premack & A. J. Premack 1995; Hirschfeld 1996; S. Gelman 2003: Chapter 5; Schulz & Gopnik 2004) allows us to introduce a distinction between causal and sortal essentialism (S. Gelman & Hirschfeld 1999); only the former is instantiated in the domain of folksociology. A causal essence enables humans not only to sort members of a particular kind according to their typical properties, but it is represented by humans as an inherent *cause* of the emergence and persistence of those properties. Although we can conceive of explanatory frameworks of this chain of events without causal thinking (for instance, a set of representations of a chronological sequence of events is not causal in principle), causal inferential patterns are constitutive for essentialism instantiated in the domain of folksociology. Social identity is always represented by people as a cause of overt behavior, properties, personality, and so on. Yet the precise relationship between causal thinking and essentialism is far from clear (see S. Gelman 2003: Chapter 5 for an important start). In fact, we can safely take for granted that causal thinking is far more general than essentialism:

Children's inferences about causes that cross the boundaries of domains are particularly interesting. Although these studies replicate previous research in demonstrating that children reason in a domain-appropriate manner, children performed as well on crossdomain screening-off tasks as on tasks within a single domain. Children's considerable domain-specific knowledge did not appear to constrain their ability to make formal causal inferences in violation of domain-appropriate ones. Indeed, the converse appeared to be true: Children's formal causal inferences influenced their baseline judgments about domain-specific causality. (Schulz & Gopnik 2004: 173)

If causal thinking is formal, more general than domain-specific principles of reasoning, and constrains them, we should expect a particular form and content of its instantiation in specific domains. Therefore any causal process which is *formally* similar and even identical in multiple domains cannot be used as the evidence and/or argument in favor of the claim that those domains in question have something in common. For example, if a property in a specific domain is acquired by the same causal process as in another domain, we still need evidence to confirm whether those domains are guided by the same principles. We need to show operation of those principles, not the presence of causal thinking, for causal thinking may be present in and constrain many different domains.

The *structure* of this argument is valid for the relations between essentialism and specific domains. Cognitive literature generally takes for granted that 'innate potential' is the constitutive feature of essentialism. This leads in turn to the claim that causal essentialism and folkbiology are the same as a matter of definition:

Is it suitable to call the full notion of causal essentialism a ‘folkbiology’? For us, this notion seems to constitute a specific set of intuitions regarding the properties of *living kinds*, including intuitions about internal structure, inheritance, relatedness, innate potential, and the development and maintenance of characteristics and identity (Sousa, Atran & Medin 2002: 25)

The essence placeholder would imply that categories permit rich inductive inferences, capture underlying structure (in the form of causal and other non-obvious properties), have innate potential, and have sharp and immutable boundaries (S. Gelman 2004: 404)

It goes without saying that in these proposals, the notion of innate potential seems to be implied by causal essentialism. Since we are within the realm of intentional explanation (note that essentialism in question is psychological – essence placeholder – and so is the notion of innate potential), this claim is identical with the postulation that the representation of essence is necessarily and constitutively connected to the representation of innateness. I will try to show that this is a misunderstanding, sometimes purely terminological (for example, in the case of S. Gelman 2003; Astuti 1995), sometimes epistemological (Sousa, Atran & Medin 2002; Gil-White 2001).

To begin with, the notion of causal essence is often elaborated within the framework of the ‘executive causation’: ‘... the causal essence is the substance, power, quality, process, relationship, or entity that causes other category-typical properties to emerge and be sustained, and that confers identity’ (S. Gelman 2003: 9; see also H. C. Barrett 2001). In other words, essence itself is (represented as) an internal *cause* of some category-typical properties and identity. But causal thinking is more general and is pervasive in the domain of essentialism – an essence does not play exclusively a causal role in a causal chain, but sometimes it may have an effect. To put it differently, essence does not only cause something, but it is caused by something as well. Most authors are very liberal as long as essence as cause is concerned: they take for granted that a very extensive, even open-ended list of properties may be (represented as) caused by the essence. On the other hand, the same authors are surprisingly restrictive in specifying properties and processes that determine the essence. There is a deep and pervasive temptation in cognitive literature to identify a singular process for how an essence is acquired. Considering the generality of essentialism, not to speak of the generality of causal thinking, this temptation is not very well grounded and should be resisted.

In short, my argument is that the specific causal process of essence acquisition *is not in any sense part of causal essentialism itself, but is specified in each particular domain*. If we can and do disentangle the notion of essence and particular properties caused by it, making it always empirical and never constitutive (no property, behavior, feature can be *a priori* said as caused by the essence), then we can and must disentangle the notion of essence and particular processes causing it, and for the same reasons. There is no reason why some particular causal process of essence acquisition should be mandatory and constitutive for essentialism.

I agree that this relation is asymmetrical, since one essence is a cause of many properties, while the cause of the essence in a given domain is always one and only process. This does not entail that it must be always the *same* process. For example, it goes without saying that some process of essence acquisition must be specified in any domain to meet requirements of causal thinking in causal essentialism. Yet I know of no conclusive argument that would show short of sheer *a priori* stipulation that this process must be always the biological process of reproduction and inheritance. S. Gelman, despite the fact that she sometimes tends to write as if the notion of innate potential would be somehow constitutive for essentialism, has expressed this argument brilliantly:

Many of the studies reviewed in this chapter [Chapter 4: Children's Conceptions of Nature/Nurture] are testing more than the idea that certain properties are inherent in an individual – they additionally test whether these properties are passed down from parent to child via inheritance. An inheritance model is not required of essentialism. One could be essentialist and believe that essences are transmitted by any one of a range of processes, including contact with land, or drinking breast milk, or eating special foods (processes that are invoked in some other cultures). (Gelman 2003: 105)

Causal essentialism is more general than the domain of folkbiology, where the notion of innate potential is central and pervasive. Even if we find some common elements in another domain (including the notion of innate potential itself), that would *not* suffice *in and by itself* as evidence of 'analogical transfer', 'exaptation', 'borrowing from biological domain' etc. Causal essentialism can be instantiated and developed simultaneously in various domains, some of them specifying innate potential as a cause of the essence and some of them not. Even the domains which specify the *same* process of causal acquisition of essence, and even the domains which specify *innate potential* as a process of causal acquisition of essence, may still be different. For example, both domains of folksociology and folkbiology can and do display essentialist reasoning, but despite that may still be separate:

We cannot deny the striking similarities between naive biological and racial thinking, particularly in folk expectations of underlying essence. Where do these parallels come from if not from transfer? Children and adults conceptualize biological difference in terms of a presumption of nonobvious essence... In much the same way, both adults and children conceive of racial types in terms of underlying essence... Yet I propose that these parallels are not the outcome of a process of analogical transfer. This is paradoxical only if we imagine that essentialist reasoning somehow 'belongs' to folk biology... I suggest that it does not. (...) Rather than borrow principles from causal reasoning from naive biology, I propose that young children's racial thinking is organized around the same biases to prefer certain kind of explanations over others (organized around the same mode of construal) that are embodied in naive biology. Thus, what naive biology and racial thinking share is not a commitment to a morphologically derived ontology but a common instantiation of an essentialist pattern of causal reasoning (Hirschfeld 1996: 117-118, 119).

In fact, my argument permits not only a common instantiation of an essentialist pattern of causal reasoning, but a common causal mechanism for essence acquisition as well, the main difference between them being that causal essentialism is more general and therefore *required* for both domains while a common causal mechanism for essence acquisition (e. g. innateness) is empirically contingent and therefore *possible* in both domains. What this argument does not permit is for any particular causal mechanism of essence acquisition to be constitutive for essentialism.

Now it becomes clear that classic nature vs. nurture tests (such as switch-at-birth / adoption task) can provide us with evidence for the particular causal mechanism of essence acquisition and/or category-typical property acquisition. What they cannot provide is proof of the presence or absence of essentialism itself, since *no* causal mechanism of essence acquisition is constitutive for essentialism. As we shall see below, most authors endorse this fallacy *pars pro toto* and interpret the prevalence of nurture over nature in these tests as an argument *against* the presence of essentialism. This can be true only insofar as they implicitly presuppose that innate potential is constitutive and necessary for essentialism.

The instantiation of causal essentialism in the folk-sociological domain cannot be properly understood if we *a priori* deny that such instantiation even takes place without inheritance. The concept of causal essentialism should be theoretically and empirically disentangled from notions of innateness and innate potential. We need different, more general formulations of causal essentialism to account for a broader set of phenomena. More importantly, to be able to test the presence or absence of essentialist reasoning properly, we have to develop more sophisticated experimental methods and not rely on the switch-at-birth story only. Even people who overwhelmingly would not allow the biological inheritance of identity could be still essentialists, contrary to our strong inclination. The acquisition of an identity by some process other than biological reproduction is in itself insufficient for claiming that there is no essentialistic reasoning involved. Such claims are ubiquitous in cognitive literature. I will try to show later that essentialism in the domain of folk-sociology does not require (although neither does it prohibit) any notion of the biological inheritance of an identity. If there is a possibility that people do not represent for themselves the biological inheritance of an identity, the better research strategy would be to examine if, rather than simply deny that, they do have essentialist reasoning after all.

If this argument is valid, we have to look for other features of causal essentialism, and not conclude hastily that no essentialist reasoning is involved if one of the contingent empirical features is lacking. For example, subjects might postulate the immutability of identity, sharp boundaries of the membership in a category, an intrinsic quality acquired during a brief period and difficult to remove. There would be no reason to deny them the application of essentialist reasoning solely in virtue of the fact that they do not represent for themselves this identity as inherited and transmitted by biological process of reproduction.

I would like to use and adapt a less restrictive notion of causal essentialism. Consider this construal of essentialism provided by S. Gelman:

[There are] central properties that essences share:

1. There is a nonvisible part, substance, or quality in each individual (as an individual or as a member of a category).
2. This part, substance, or quality is inherent and very difficult to remove.
3. The part, substance, or quality has the property of transferability – it is passed along from parent or host to offspring or client, typically at a specific moment or brief period.
4. This transfer from parent or host to offspring or client does not diminish the amount of essence or its consequences for identity in the parent or host.
5. This nonvisible part, substance, or quality has vast, diffuse, unknown causal implications.
6. The implications include authenticity and identity (S. Gelman 2003: 306).

No strict requirement of innate potential is included in this proposal. Therefore we need more experimental tests (to be performed together with the switch-at-birth task) to be able to confirm or rule out essentialist reasoning. The absence of the notion of inheritance in causal reasoning about identity cannot be used as substantiation of the absence of causal essentialism.

To summarize the argument so far: I have tried to show that there are strong reasons, both epistemological and empirical, to remove from both causal essentialism and folk-sociology the notion of innateness as a *constitutive* element. This move has many immediate advantages: for example, it enables us to account for the various forms of essentialism, such as essentialism concerning artifacts, substances, and so on. More specifically, it frees our ideas about folk-sociology from several unwarranted assumptions, closely connected to and/or immediately inferred from this notion. As a consequence, we will need to review the

arguments and the available empirical evidence in cognitive literature based on those unwarranted assumptions, such as in following claims: (1) People are *not* essentialists *because* they allow the acquisition of their identity in ways other than by biological processes of reproduction; (2) people *are* essentialists only *insofar as* they postulate the innate potential of an essence.

This is not to say that the notion of innate potential *cannot* be a part of folk-sociology; quite the contrary, it is sometimes instantiated in the folksociological domain, as the example of racial thinking suggests (Hirschfeld 1996). What I am arguing against is the tendency to make it a *constitutive*, and therefore *defining* part of folksociology, or even of causal essentialism in general.

Now I will turn to folksociology. Folksociology is the domain-specific way to organize and represent knowledge about social groupings. Causal essentialism in this domain leads to the representation of some social groupings as human kinds (Hirschfeld 1998) – members of a given social grouping presumably share an inherent essence which has been acquired by some causal process and is causally responsible for their identity, properties and behavior. We know that the causal process which forms an essence should be described empirically rather than postulated in advance. Moreover, causal essentialism is so pervasive a cognitive bias that it can be more ubiquitous than is generally expected. There is, for instance, a possibility that various forms of causal essentialism are applied in the very same domain. Consider objects and artifacts: essence acquisition might be specifiable as an intentional history (Bloom 1996; S. Gelman & Bloom 2000): as far as artifacts are concerned, their identity is constituted by the intention of their creator and/or user. But the very same artifact may causally acquire a separate, more narrow essential identity, for example when it has been owned by Jackie Kennedy, blessed by Pope, touched by Hitler (S. Gelman & Hirschfeld 1999; S. Gelman 2003: 307). This does not mean that the previous essence was somehow removed and replaced by another one. What changed was a shift in causal story about how the other essence is acquired. Being a sweater is a different essence (acquired by intentional history of the artifact) than being Hitler's sweater (this essence is acquired by the individual history of ownership). Multiple essentialism is therefore normal even in the very same domain.

Inferential essentialist patterns may be activated in various ways even in the very same domain. What is important to describe are not only elements and particular causal stories but rather the overall structure of the patterns in a given domain. Causal essentialist thinking is more general and formal than is often expected. We might reasonably expect that the domain of folksociology is a good candidate for various instantiations of causal essentialism. Racial thinking and ethnic thinking, for instance, may sometimes overlap or even be identical. However, we should avoid assuming that this is a general rule.

Note that the central notion of folksociology is a representation of a social group as human kind. Since essentialism is a more general cognitive framework, we might be able to detect individual essentialism, or even group essentialism, which could be applied to aggregates of humans rather than to human kinds. For example, drinking breast milk has been often essentialized, although there is a substantive difference in how a target group is represented: if the notion of essence which is acquired by drinking maternal milk is connected to the representation of a social group *as a kind*, we are safe to postulate causal essentialism instantiated in the domain of folksociology. On the other hand, if the notion of essence is connected to the representation of a social group *as sharing some particular property* (temperament, personality, mood, appearance etc.), we are safe to postulate causal essentialism, but no folksociology is involved. We can easily imagine essentialization of tall or fat people: for example, we can assume that they are tall or fat because of inheritance. But folksociology has nothing to do with mere groupings, nor even with essentialized groupings. Essence in question must be identity-determining, not only property-determining.

To conclude, I would like to summarize my main arguments. (1) Causal essentialism has no constitutive connection with any particular causal story of essence acquisition: the acquisition of essence is specified *within* a given domain. (2) The notion of innate potential is hence neither a necessary nor sufficient characterization of causal essentialism. The absence of (the representation of) innate potential is no argument for the absence of causal essentialism itself. (3) There is no *a priori* privileged and/or constitutive causal story of essence acquisition in the domain of folksociology. (4) The core notion of folksociology is the universal representation of (at least some) social groupings as essentialist human kinds. An aggregate of people created and represented as sharing any essentialized individual property does not fall within the scope of folksociology.

(2) Cognitive Theories of Folksociology

The work of Rita Astuti (1995, 2001) is a significant contribution to the debate about the status of folksociology. The empirical evidence she has collected is impressive and most of her theoretical points are well taken. Nevertheless there is some need to review her arguments since at least part of her evidence allows a different interpretation of folksociology than she has proposed. In what follows I will try to stress some points which have remained unnoticed. My intention is to reformulate slightly some of her theoretical conclusions. I will start with her most recent paper (Astuti 2001) because of its generality and theoretical importance, and then I will turn to her earlier article (Astuti 1995) where she has proposed her theory of Vezo folksociology. I will not discuss all the problems Astuti has discussed in her works; my concern is solely with her claims and evidence about folksociology, i.e. about the ways how people organize their knowledge and represent social groups.

Astuti's recent article summarizes her previous findings concerning how adult Vezo on Madagascar represent their folksociology. Socialization plays a central role for them in it:

The criteria Vezo adults use for classifying people are explicit and can be summarized as follows: people are what they are because of the place where they live, which in turn determines the activities they perform; group affiliation, as well as the difference between 'us' and 'them', are established through the actions that different people perform in their physical and social environment... This definition of what it means to be Vezo...implies that the process of social classification is not mediated by birth. Birth is *not* the mechanism that transmits group affiliation between generations: one does not need to be *born* Vezo... to be one; all one needs is to learn to do Vezo... things. Vezo social classification is thus based on activity criteria: vezo use the performance of certain activities as the criterion for classifying people (Astuti 2001: 437).

For the moment I leave aside whether the social classification of the Vezo is really based on criteria of activity, since this crucial point I will discuss later. Astuti shows that the adult Vezo use their theory of ethnic identity consistently and apply it even in new circumstances. Her argument is as follows. If they really represent their identity as acquired by socialization, and if their beliefs are really theory-like, i.e. they form a set of implicit and coherent assumptions, then when facing a task of adoption where an infant is raised by parents who are not her own biological parents, they should consistently and significantly show a bias: the ethnic identity of this child should match the ethnic identity of her adoptive parents, but not her birth parents. Astuti's results have shown that this is really so (Astuti 2001: 438), not only in the case of the familiar Vezo/Masikoro divide, but also in the case of less familiar Vezo/Karany difference.

Her results were surprisingly and interestingly different for the Vezo children: when answering the same adoptive questions as adults did, namely about ascription of identity along the lines Vezo/Masikoro and Vezo/Karany, children reproduced the adults' result only in the former task (adoption bias 65 %), but not in the latter one (birth bias 73 %). Astuti has explained this divergence as follows. According to her, children did not reproduce the performance of adults at all, even if it seems so because their answers are similar. Children have just imitated the overt statements made by adults without really understanding them. Since the adult Vezo frequently speak to children about the Vezo/Masikoro divide, children are able to store such statements in their memory and produce them if they are primed to do so. Astuti claims that children do not have a consistent folksociology in the form of an implicit theory, and therefore they are unable to reason analogically if they face novel situations. Their preference for the identity of birth parents as a source of a child's ethnic identity shows, in Astuti's view, that they did not have any consistent folksociological theory at their disposal because they 'failed to comprehend the chain of causal mechanisms (i. e. place of residence and specialized activities) that underlies the adults' theory of social classification' (Astuti 2001: 440). In other words, Astuti claims that children are just duly imitators of adults' statements in the first task (Vezo/Masikoro divide), and totally inconsistent in the second one (Vezo/Masikoro divide): 'In sum, these inconsistencies suggest that children... were simply mimicking statements that they did not fully comprehend. Thus, even children who appeared to give the 'right' sort of answer – that is, the same answer as that given by adults – display no understanding of the theoretical underpinnings implied by their judgements' (Astuti 2001: 440). Astuti's general conclusion is that there is no consistent folksociology among the Vezo children:

Indeed, children's inconsistency is the key to understanding their response to the Vezo-Karany task. In this task an overwhelming 73 per cent of children judged that the adopted boy will be Vezo or Karany like his *birth* father. Thus, unlike adults, children did not extend to Karany the same activity criteria for social classification normally applied to Vezo and Masikoro people. This confirms that such principles are still beyond their grasp. Children did not mobilize and extend their knowledge of how people come to be Vezo or Masikoro, because their knowledge is still atheoretical and dependent on specific statements they have heard in specific contexts. Children were unable to resort to theoretical principles and to reason analogically about Karany, because, as yet, they do not have a causally integrated theory of social classification to underpin what they say (Astuti 2001: 440-441)

Astuti did not take into account all the obvious theoretical possibilities in her interpretation. I fully agree with her that the results for children are inconsistent with those for adults. I am even prepared to agree that children do imitate statements of adults in the first task. However, I propose to consider another possibility of interpretation which can account for all the data and be consistent with the above mentioned conclusions without claiming that children lack any folksociological knowledge. It may be the case that children *do* have an implicit folksociological theory, but their theory is *different* than the theory of adults, and therefore both theories are mutually inconsistent. Atheoretical, fragmentary thinking would be surely inconsistent with *any* implicit theory; but a different implicit theory would be inconsistent with it as well. I believe that Astuti herself has collected the empirical evidence which can support this claim. My proposal is that children try to apply an implicit folksociological theory, but that theory is inconsistent with the theory of adults. The conceptual change in the domain of Vezo folksociology does not proceed from fragmentary, atheoretic and chaotic pieces of knowledge entertained by children, to the full-fledged

folksociology of adults. Rather, my hypothesis is that children begin with an implicit proto-folksociology which they apply consistently as long as it does not contradict the statements of adults (although sometimes even then). The conceptual development in this domain consists in adjusting and upgrading this prototheory to the theory of adults by means of cultural input. This assumption is supported by the following empirical evidence, provided by Astuti:

(1) If children do not have any implicit folksociological theory and if their knowledge about identity is fragmentary and inconsistent, why did they not respond at random in the Vezo/Karany adoption task? Why did they display a birth bias at a statistically significant rate (73 %)? Note that the Vezo/Karany task is completely new for them, and they do not have any conversational input to imitate: ‘The cross-over along the Vezo-Karany divide is not an occurrence that my informants have ever experienced in real life, nor do they ever contemplate it in their conversations’ (Astuti 2001: 439). In this light, the presence of the birth bias among them is mysterious, unless they have any guide for their reasoning. And since Astuti insists that we have to rule out cultural input, the only guide I can think of is an implicit theory.

(2) Astuti reports an interesting piece of evidence in favor of this assumption. It seems to be that in the first task (Vezo/Masikoro) children have imitated the statements of adults only nominally and mechanically: when Astuti asked them to justify their claims, their *implicit* inferences consistently projected all the properties (except of nominal identity) according to the *birth* parents: ‘Having stated that the boy would be Masikoro like his adoptive father, for example, the same children stated that he would know how to sail and fish like his birth father’ (Astuti 2001: 440). Astuti has interpreted this explanation as a wild inconsistency, but it is such only insofar as we judge it according to the standards of the adult theory. On the contrary, it seems to be crystally clear that the constant evocation of birth bias shows *the internal consistency* in children’s reasoning. What children imitate is only the nominal ascription of identity, but not the proper causal mechanism of its acquisition (proper in the sense of being consistent with adults’ construal). But this does not mean that children do not have any causal mechanism at their disposal – they do have the causal mechanism of identity acquisition on their own (inheritance) and do apply it very consistently. Only later in the process of cognitive development are they able to remove and replace it with socialization.

(3) Furthermore, even children who did *not* imitate adults’ utterances and display a birth bias followed consistently and even overgeneralized the causal mechanism of inheritance: ‘Thus, for example, children who judged that the boy would be Vezo like his birth father, explained that this is because the boy knows how to fish and sail, despite of the fact that he was raised in the interior surrounded by cattle and cornfields’ (Astuti 2001: 440).

These results are very interesting and it is crystally clear that they are far from inconsistent and atheoretical. On the contrary, all the available evidence shows that there is more theory in them than we would expect. According to Astuti, *all* children have insisted consistently that the boy in question would inherit the properties of his *birth* parents, including their skills and knowledge, and independently his nominal ethnic label. The children’s folksociology is apparently connected to the notion of innate potential and this notion implicitly guides their reasoning even in the case when they imitate the nominal ascription of identity. When they are forced to reason about identity in the absence of the appropriate cultural input (the Vezo-Karany divide), they still rely on this principle of their implicit folksociology.

I agree with Astuti that the acquisition of full-fledged folksociology requires the specification of relevant causal mechanisms (nature vs. nurture) and their distribution according to their proper ontological domains (bodily traits vs. beliefs). We differ only in the structure of social knowledge with which children start. I disagree that children just acquire and memorize fragmentary and chaotic pieces of knowledge atheoretically – my proposal is that they have implicit folksociology from the very beginning and what they do during their

cognitive development is adjust and upgrade this implicit folksociology according to relevant cultural input. Therefore I think that Astuti's proposal requires substantive reformulation, since the following conclusion is untenable: 'Because children's factual knowledge is not yet integrated with the theoretical presuppositions that underpin the way adults classify people, this knowledge is applied randomly and inconsistently' (Astuti 2001: 442). This reformulation might begin something like this: 'because children's factual knowledge is not yet integrated with the theoretical presuppositions that underpin the way adults classify people, this knowledge is applied according to some other theoretical presuppositions to avoid random and inconsistent reasoning.'

Note that this proposal is consistent with my above presented theoretical considerations concerning the relationship between folksociology and notions of innate potential. I have assumed that the notion of innate potential is not a condition for folksociology. Such an assumption implies that children can replace this notion with another notion of causal mechanism (socialization) without giving up or even changing radically their folksociology (not to speak about essentialism). My proposal allows this change, and therefore it can explain Astuti's own data better than her interpretation. I do not suggest that this proposal is a description of such a change: to provide it, we would need firstly to describe the folksociology of Vezo adults (Astuti has made an important start in Astuti 1995), and secondly, to describe folksociology of the Vezo children together with its process of development. Although I recognize and acknowledge the significant contribution of Astuti in this respect, it seems that she has underestimated the theoretical resources children have at their disposal in the domain of folksociology. Anchoring the interpretation to the assumption that the mind of children is inconsistent, fragmentary and atheoretical in some domains neither seems to be a good research strategy, nor is it often successful.

The last remark I have to make is a word or two about the task of adoption itself. Despite its usefulness, I do not think that we can rely so heavily on it, especially if try to draw far-reaching conclusions about folksociology and essentialism. Sousa, Atran & Medin (2002: 218-219) have raised principled objections about the exaggerations of findings obtained by means of this empirical task. The problem is that these results allow the detection of only a causal mechanism responsible for the transmission of properties and/or identity (innate potential vs. socialization, nature vs. nurture). However, it cannot detect many other important principles. For example, ontological commitments concerning a mind/body divide can pass unnoticed through the task of adoption because subjects might postulate the predominance of the particular causal mechanism of transmission (e. g. innate potential) for *both* bodily traits and beliefs, even with a mind/body divide. Therefore it may well be true that 'children do not appreciate the difference between birth and nurture as causal mechanisms for the transmission of ontologically distinct traits of person' (Astuti 2001: 442), but not because they are unable to make prior dualistic ontological commitments (mind/body divide), as Astuti suggests, but rather because they prefer *one* causal mechanism for the transmission of *both* ontologically distinct traits. Hence it is still widely open whether they do or do not make such ontological commitments. Their inability to apportion particular causal mechanisms to the proper ontological traits does not entail, or even suggest, that they do not make ontological commitments. However, the results of the adoptive task, specifying the causal mechanisms for the transmission of traits only, tell us nothing about ontological commitments. I do not deny *a priori* that children might lack these commitments, I just cast substantial doubts whether the task of adoption is the proper way to detect them.

To return to folksociology, I think that the inconsistency between the social knowledge of children and adults, respectively, is not based on the difference between full-fledged folksociological theory with ontological commitments, on the one hand, and atheoretical, fragmented pieces of knowledge on the other. I would rather suggest that this

inconsistency is the outcome of the difference between two mutually incompatible folksociological theories. Moreover, they are mutually incompatible not in virtue of the fact that one of them is able to make ontological commitments which the other one is unable to make: this incompatibility results from the difference between causal mechanisms responsible for the *transmission* of the traits and identity. Hence my interpretation is that Vezo children do have a folksociological theory, Rita Astuti's approach to the contrary notwithstanding. This folk-sociological theory is essentialist and based on the notion of the biological transmission of ethnic identity. Sousa, Atran & Medin seem to express a similar view:

It is as if, guiding each type of answer, there were respectively a conception of nature and a conception of interaction with the environment as the main causal mechanisms responsible for the acquisition of properties and identity, however vague these mechanisms... it is possible to hypothesize that adoptive-parent answers in the adoption task are driven by a similar conception — a causal mechanism that mixes nature and nurture. (Sousa, Atran & Medin 2002: 2, 3).

They even warn against the identification of the body/mind opposition with the nature/nurture opposition:

...the intuitions delivered by the notion of causal essentialism can crosscut the mind and body folk dualism. It is for this reason that the conflation between the body/mind and nature/nurture oppositions is misleading. These oppositions constitute rather two different dimensions of our biological intuitions: the notion of causal essentialism is fundamentally linked only to the latter; the former deals with the vital nature of the body in contraposition to the mind (and to matter, for that matter) (Sousa, Atran & Medin 2002: 218-219).

I fully agree with the *structure* of this argument, although not with its terminology. Sousa, Atran & Medin take for granted, as we have seen above, that the very notion of causal essentialism is 'fundamentally' linked to biological intuitions; I tried to make an argument that such an approach is all too narrow: causal essentialism is broader and more general (S. Gelman & Hirschfeld 1999; S. Gelman 2003). When we replace the phrase 'causal essentialism' with the phrase 'innate potential' (these two notions being conflated in Sousa, Atran & Medin 2002, but disentangled in my account), this quotation is probably the best explanation of Astuti's data:

It is possible that young children initially apply the notion of causal essentialism [read: innate potential, added by M. K.] indifferently to any type of property, and only later, when the notion is modulated by a larger biological framework (and also by a specific concept of learning), do they exclude beliefs (Sousa, Atran & Medin 2002: 219).

Of course, another replacement is necessary: the change need not occur in the domain of folkbiology only, given that I do not admit the idea of analogical transfer or borrowing from biological domains whenever and wherever the notion of innate potential does emerge. Hence this change may occur in the domain of folksociology as well. Children apply the notion of innate potential as causal mechanism of transmission indifferently to any type of property and to any type of identity, and only later, when the notion is *removed from their folksociological theory*, do they replace it with another *causal essentialist* story, more similar or identical to one entertained by adults.

This move might seem suspicious since to be an even remotely plausible account, the Vezo adults should have some version of causal essentialist folksociology to serve as a model for children's acquisition of social knowledge. Rita Astuti (Astuti 1995) claims that there was no essentialist folksociology among Vezo adults, something I would like to challenge. Her earlier article (Astuti 1995) investigated Vezo folksociology in detail. To assess her claims, we need to review her theoretical commitments step by step, since she has formulated a bundle of interesting hypotheses which are not necessarily interconnected. The basic formulation has to do with the causal mechanism responsible for the acquisition of identity. Astuti defines ethnicity as a 'set of ideas that is expressed in the proposition that people are as they are because they were born to be so' (Astuti 1995: 464), and her aim is to show that Vezo ethnotheory is not an ethnic theory, since

the Vezo maintain that they are not what they are because they were born to be so. Their alternative model of identity and difference stresses instead that Vezo become what they are through what they do; both identity and difference result from activities that people perform in the present rather than from a common or distinct origin they acquired at some point in the past (Astuti 1995: 465).

As far as Vezo folksociology is concerned, my primary concern is not with the term ethnicity, but with whether or not this theory is essentialist. Astuti's investigations are of a decisive importance here since they can be considered as a key test for the universal presence of essentialist folksociology. My point is not to speculate whether the Vezo display essentialist reasoning, since it is patently true that they do, at least in the case of living kinds (Astuti 1995: 467). Neither is my point whether they are able to process social groups in an essentialist way at all, since Astuti has proven that they make essentialist claims concerning ancestral groups (Astuti 2000). My point is more ambitious in this respect: I would like to show that the Vezo routinely apply an essentialist mode of reasoning even in their ethnotheory. In other words, my aim is to show that the Vezo do represent their own and other groups in an essentialist way, even when they do not allow the inheritance of ethnic identity.

The essentialist hypothesis in Vezo folksociology would of course be refuted if Vezo ethnic identity were based on 'activity criteria' as Astuti has suggested. Note that the essentialist hypothesis can survive the absence of innate potential as a causal mechanism responsible for the transmission of ethnic identity. The essentialist hypothesis therefore permits the activity criteria in the acquisition of ethnic identity: what is crucial here is not *how* identity is to be acquired, but which one. In other words, the key question is whether the Vezo have representation of an essence in their folksociology, or if they only postulate a 'transient', malleable, punctuate identity based on activity and performance. It goes without saying that activity may create essence, and that this essence could be in turn represented as the underlying cause of identity. Yet the set of activities may be in itself represented as the cause of identity, without the mediation of an essence. Astuti defends the latter position, if I am interpreting her text correctly.

The question of innate potential we can put aside because I fully agree with Astuti that the Vezo do not apply this notion in their construal of ethnic identity. However, this removal also does not rule out automatically essentialism, since we already know that the connection between essentialism and a particular causal mechanism is always empirical and never constitutive. We have to look for constitutive traits of essentialism in Astuti's data, namely if it is the case that (1) there is a nonvisible, nonobservable quality shared by the members of a group; (2) this quality is inherent and difficult to remove; (3) it is transferable, typically at a brief period; (4) it has vast and diffuse causal implications; (5) it (neither causal mechanisms leading to its acquisition, nor its effects) is identity-defining only (according to S. Gelman,

2003: 306). If the Vezo implicitly allow and refer to such considerations, we are safe to declare that they do have essentialist folksociology. I do not claim that this is the case; what I do claim is that the available evidence provided by Astuti does not rule out such a possibility.

To begin with, Astuti's account generally does not distinguish clearly between the *acquisition* of identity and identity *itself*. I have already pointed out that the acquisition of identity might be based on activity criteria ('people are who they are because they do what they do') without being the case that activities have to permanently sustain and perpetuate identity itself. First of all, it is clear that learning is the decisive acquisition procedure for the Vezo. Yet the procedure described as leading to identity acquisition is not one of real learning: according to the Vezo, 'learning came as an abrupt transition (a 'jump' rather than a process), from a state of not-yet-knowing to a state of full knowledge' (Astuti 1995: 468-469). The question is whether this *representation* of learning is tied directly to identity, or if instead the Vezo learn a Vezo-ness, some inherent essence which in turn causes their identity.

Astuti describes how the Vezo consistently use activity criteria in ascribing ethnic identity:

...people are Vezo if they behave Vezo-like, Masikoro if they behave Masikoro-like. This minute differentiation of behaviors into Vezo and Masikoro... is derived from a far more basic contrast between two distinct types of livelihood (*fiveloma*); as we already know, the Vezo are people who struggle with the sea, while Masikoro are cultivators' (Astuti 1995: 473).

The problem is that we still do not know and therefore cannot take for granted that the activity criteria are used as *identity-determining* instead of *typicality-recognizing*. With such statements the Vezo might approve typicality: one is pleaded to as long as she actually behaves like a *typical, exemplar* Vezo, a *real* Vezo. However, the recognition of typicality (as any recognition) may evoke precisely the properties which are *caused by*, rather than are *causes of* the identity. The central question therefore remains: is this 'livelihood' (*fiveloma*) something inherent, or rather something transient and punctuate? Note that this question has little to do with how precisely this quality is causally acquired, or how we know/recognize that one is in that condition. People can and do use recognitional criteria in deciding about the membership of an individual within a given kind; it does not entail that these recognitional criteria automatically constitute identity. It might be that activity criteria are used to detect typicality, even in the case that these criteria were causally decisive in acquiring the identity.

There are some interesting passages where Astuti describes that the Vezo (and Masikoro, for that matter) have some sort of *inherent* livelihood, and hence *inherent* ethnic identity:

The Vezo... do not have fields (*tsy mana tanim-bary, tsy mana baiboho*); they would be wasting their time (*tsy misy dikany*) if they did. My informants explained that the Vezo will guard their fields for a few days when a rice or maize crop is almost ripe and the fields need constant supervision to scare off the birds, which can destroy an entire harvest in a few hours; as soon as they hear that the fish are biting well at sea, however, they will take off to fish for the day. On that one day, their harvest will be totally destroyed and all their previous efforts will have been in vain (Astuti 1995: 474).

This is at odds with the notion of transient, punctuate identity: for when the Vezo will actually guard their fields, they will *be* Masikoro during that period, according to Astuti's activity-based identity – there is *nothing* inherent in them which might possibly distort them, since the activity of the moment fully determines their identity. However, this is contrary to

facts since they are able to abandon the activity which is not proper to them for another activity. If something inherent exists that is deeper than present activities and enables people to select among various activities, then activity criteria *cannot* constitute their identity. The Vezo cannot *be* what they actually *do* (although they can be *recognized* as Vezo according to what they actually do). That is the core of the difference between occupational groups (which are not processed by the domain-specific folksociological theory here) and essentialist groups: the inherent essence may be the body of acquired knowledge, since it may be anything at all, but it must be more than that: this inherent quality must shape and create personality as well as act causally with almost irresistible force. Astuti in fact reports (Astuti 1995: 474-475) that the Vezo make such claims: for example, they describe themselves as inherently incapable of managing money, planning in advance, engaging in long-term activities, and so on. What could prevent them from doing so if not something ‘in them’ (something acquired, of course, but still inherent)? They could just do it, and *be* Masikoro when doing it, if only their identity were *constituted*, and not merely *acquired* by activity.

A transient, punctuate identity based on criteria of actual activity is problematic in more than one way. Consider the case of the Vezo who are travelling to inland: did they lose their Vezo identity just during their short trip? What I propose here is to renounce the notion of a transient, punctuate identity based on particular, present activities, and to adopt the notion of (acquired, non-innate, but inherent) essence *created/acquired* by these activities. I do not see anything in the data presented by Astuti that would be incompatible with this proposal, quite on the contrary. Essence may be something like an inherent, identity-defining body of knowledge, acquired by activities performed at the determined place; in fact, essentialism allows anything to be an essence, provided that it is inherent, identity-defining, causally responsible for overt behaviors, promoting exclusive membership in a kind, and transmitted across generations by some causal process.

On the one hand, I do not claim for sure that the Vezo have such essentialist notions. Further research is necessary to address this problem, although by now the available evidence is compatible with such a proposal. On the other hand, I tried to show that the notion of transient, punctuate, activity-based ethnic identity is tremendously problematic. Astuti has described a Vezo person as ‘transparent,’ for they ‘that [lack] the residues deposited by the passage of time, a person with no intrinsic essence to it. Vezo-ness itself is not and does not become such a residue or essence since it is made anew and from scratch every day, through every act performed in the present’ (Astuti 1995: 477). I think that this interpretation goes too far and cannot account for the data. We need to follow the advice given by Astuti herself (2001: 429): since there is a significant discrepancy between people’s explicit statements and their implicit theoretical knowledge, we cannot rely so heavily on the Vezo’s *explicit* claims that Astuti described so brilliantly. She has described precisely the explicit social knowledge of the Vezo; however, I suspect that this explicit social knowledge, here as elsewhere, is shaped by an implicit essentialist folksociology which sometimes erupts to the surface.

I admit that local cultural knowledge affects and shapes local folksociological theories. My hypothesis is that the universal essentialist skeletal framework constrains all local *implicit* folksociological theories. This framework does not require innate potential as the causal mechanism for the transmission of essence; what it does require is the representation of an inherent, hidden quality, that the members of the social group in question share. This quality (essence) is causally responsible for their overt behavior, and is difficult to remove once it is acquired.

To conclude, Astuti did not show that the implicit folksociology of the Vezo would not be essentialist. What she did show was that this folksociology is not based on the notion of innate potential; I agree with that finding and I will elaborate on it later.

Francisco Gil-White (1999, 2001) belongs to the large group of cognitive anthropologists (Atran 1990; Boyer 1990; Rothbart & Taylor 1990) who try to make the case that social classifications are processed by a cognitive module which evolved originally to handle biological taxa. However, only Gil-White has provided the theoretical construal and available evidence to cope directly with social classifications. His target is ethnicity: 'I will defend the hypothesis that ethnies (and similar social categories) are processed by the machinery which evolved to deal specifically with 'natural living kinds' of the 'folk-species' rank-level such as BEAR or MOUSE. Other social categories will typically not be processed in this way' (Gil-White 2001: 517). The core of his thesis is that the representation of an ethnic group is always centered around notions of descent and normative endogamy – if people really represent ethnic groups in that way, and if ethnic groups are sufficiently different one to another as far as their cultural norms are concerned, then, Gil-White claims, these groups are likely to be essentialized as species, and this essentialism will generate the right behavioral predictions:

Suppose that (1) people have cultural norms very similar to those of their parents, (2) the norms of their parents are those of their ethnic group, (3) norms differ rather sharply across ethnic boundaries, and (4) ethnies are at least normatively endogamous and fairly endogamous in practice. If these obtain, treating an ethnie as a 'living kind' will generate the right behavioral prediction most of the time: your 'nature' (the norms you automatically and sometimes even unconsciously adhere to) is a function of your 'kind' (the ethnie you belong to), which in turn is the 'kind' of your parents (since ethnies are largely endogamous) (Gil-White 2001: 518).

This proposal is interesting only in its strong form. First of all, I would like to preserve its radicality, since Gil-White sometimes admits the views which seem to trivialize his point. For example, it is unclear what epistemological role 'normative endogamy' and 'descent-based membership' play in his story. The trivial prediction would assume that *if* some social groups display normative endogamy and descent-based membership, *then* such groups are more likely to be essentialized. The problem is that it is hard to imagine that the representation of a social group as endogamous and based on biological descent would not imply essentialism. The very notion of biological descent, *so far as it is supposed to be a principle of group membership*, clearly presupposes and even entails essentialism. However, this is not to say that this inference is valid also the other way around: essentialism does not imply the innate potential, since essentialism is a broader and more general notion (and it is likely that essentialism is more general as a psychological mechanism as well).

Any social group (and natural species, for that matter) with membership based on biological descent, is therefore essentialized as a matter of psychological necessity since no notion of biological descent is representable without the notion of something hidden which passes across generations through the process of biological reproduction. But no such necessity is required to instantiate essentialism itself: something hidden and inherent may be represented as passing across generations by means of a completely different causal process of acquisition than inheritance. Any predictions from biological descent to essentialism are trivial and immune to empirical testing:

The prediction is that those social categories which show normative endogamy and descent-based membership will be the ones more likely to be essentialized and essentialized more strongly. The prediction is about such categories, not narrowly about what any particular scholar may insist is an 'ethnie,' and is thus applicable to castes and any other category that has the stated properties. (Gil-White 2001: 518).

Fortunately, Gil-White has more tendentious and non-trivial predictions to offer. He suggests sometimes that biological descent is not the premise of his prediction, but its empirical consequence to be tested: ‘The ethnographic literature suggests that all over the world – no matter how culturally marked ethnic actors may be – the ‘rule’ for making ethnic ascriptions is based on blood much more than on enculturation’ (Gil-White 2001: 523). This prediction has nothing to do with the nominal use of the label ‘ethnie’: the prediction is that *if* there is *any* ethnic ascription at work whatsoever, it is likely to be based on biological descent rather than on socialization. That prediction is far from trivial and is worth empirical testing as well.

Note that Gil-White cannot declare that the processing of ethnies as living kinds leads to the prediction that ethnic ascription is based on biological descent, and *at the same time* claim that *only* biological descent and normative endogamy are themselves *permitted* and hence *required* to define an ethnie. If the prediction is that ethnic ascription is *based* on biological descent, then an ethnie cannot be *defined* as a group with descent-based membership. Such a story would be patently circular and we can safely put it away. In what follows I will comment on the non-trivial and non-circular version of Gil-White’s story:

...a theory that human cognition is innately designed for *intuitive* processing of ethnies as natural living kinds makes the nontrivial prediction that a majority of cultures in the world will turn out to have blood-based models of ethnic transmission and acquisition. (Gil-White 2001: 526).

My intention is not to reject Gil-White’s proposal altogether. Although this theory is an almost exact opposite of Astuti’s theory discussed above, I would like to show that both proposals share a key feature, namely being particular cases within a more general framework. Both proposals have confused the specific causal story of acquisition of an essence (activity in Astuti’s story, biological descent in Gil-White’s one) with folksociology in general, with the result that Astuti has rejected seeing an underlying essentialist framework behind the overt explanations of her informants, while Gil-White has confused a particular causal story with the constitutive property of essentialism in general.

Now I will examine Gil-White’s proposal more closely. He tries to sum up his argument as follows:

Suppose that (1) people have cultural norms very similar to those of their parents, (2) the norms of their parents are those of their ethnic group, (3) norms differ rather sharply across ethnic boundaries, and (4) ethnies are at least normatively endogamous and fairly endogamous in practice. If these obtain, treating an ethnie as a ‘living kind’ will generate the right behavioral prediction most of the time: your ‘nature’ (the norms you automatically and sometimes even unconsciously adhere to) is a function of your ‘kind’ (the ethnie you belong to), which in turn is the ‘kind’ of your parents (since ethnies are largely endogamous) (Gil-White 2001: 518).

Suppose for now that we would remove the last item from the list of Gil-White’s assumptions, which is to say that we would remove his requirement of normative and/or practical endogamy while preserving the rest (I reserve the right to doubt that the ‘real’ existence of cultural norms is of crucial importance here. But I will put this doubt aside for the sake of argument). What would happen with the prediction? Treating an ethnie as ‘essentialized human kind’ will generate the right behavioral prediction most of the time as well, since your ‘nature’ (manifested in the norms you adhere to) is a function of your ‘kind’

(the ethnies), which in turn is the ‘kind’ of your parents *not* because ethnies are (represented as) largely endogamous, but because your ethnic membership was acquired by a causal process of socialization. In other words, people can essentialize human kinds (ethnies, for example) even without representing them as descent-based and/or endogamous.

Gil-White, as so many authors before him, has confused essentialism with biological descent without realizing that although the notion of biological descent implies essentialism, the opposite is not true. Consider this paragraph:

What is specific to the cognition of ‘species’ categories is our intuition about (1) how the category essence is acquired/transmitted, which has implications for (2) how it can be established that something has one essence rather than another. In species categories, the possession of an essence of X, I argue, promotes a strongly held intuition that one mates with X and produces Xs in reproduction. Thus, whether a token has an essence of X answers to the questions (1) Does it produce Xs in reproduction? (2) It is descended from Xs? And (3) Does it mate with X? (Gil-White 2001: 522).

This argument is perfectly sound while its *structure* and predictive power is valid even in the event that we get rid of the notion of ‘species.’ Important for the study of essentialist folksociology is an intuition about how the category of essence is transmitted, and how it can be established that someone has one essence rather than another. It is empirically true that in categorization by species, the possession of an essence of X ‘promotes a strongly held intuition that one mates with X and produces Xs in reproduction.’ But what if we do not take for granted that folksociology has something to do with species’ categories? What if we require an argument, rather than simple tacit assumption, that this is the case? If no ‘species’ representation is involved, no biological process of reproduction is involved either. The argument that the notion of species presupposes innate potential, and empirical evidence of the presence of a notion of innate potential does not even begin to substantiate that folksociology is an exaptation of folkbiology. This argument is clearly flawed, since the inference on which it is based is patently non-demonstrative.

If there are various ways to acquire/transmit an essence, detecting essentialism in folksociological thinking does not provide us with evidence that an essence *is* or even *must be* acquired by the process of biological reproduction, as Gil-White seems to suggest. As we have seen, even detecting the notion of innate potential will not do, since this notion specifies exclusively a causal process of essence acquisition, and it is possible that the very same causal process may be represented in different domains.

In fact, I think that Gil-White is inclined to ascribe to people far more illusions than they are actually obliged to entertain in the domain of folksociology: ‘...because much of culture is acquired at a young age and is developmentally stable, expert practitioners of a group’s norms – when groups are endogamous – would tend to be those born of two member parents, creating the illusion that their cultural mastery was biologically inherited...’ (Gil-White 2001: 532). The one and only illusion they must entertain is the essence-placeholder and its causality – this is enough for essentialism to perform its effects together with any causal process of essence acquisition whatsoever. Hence people can have the idea of essence which is acquired by socialization (or by any causal process): the very idea of inherent essence causing their cultural mastery is surely an illusion, but they do not need to refer to the illusory causal process of its acquisition, namely to the innateness.

I do not claim here the opposite – that they *always* have to specify socialization at a young age as an obligatory causal process of essence acquisition: in fact, I claim repeatedly that they have to specify some causal process or another, and this specification is *always* an empirical issue and is *never* constitutive for essentialism in folksociology. Perhaps the

specification of biological inheritance is somehow constitutive for essentialism in folkbiology – but even so, this has nothing to do with ‘species thinking’ in folksociology: if the connection between essentialism and causal process of acquisition of essence is empirical in principle, then even the evocation of biological descent in the domain of folksociology would not be evidence for ‘species thinking’ and/or analogical transfer from the domain of folkbiology. If *any* process of acquisition of an essence may be evoked in folksociology, biological descent may be evoked *inter alia*, but of course not as a matter of necessity. I am afraid that the adoptive task that Gil-White uses will be in and of itself of no help here, and must be combined with more fine-grained research methods.

Yet Gil-White does realize that the notion of biological descent as a causal mechanism responsible for ethnic ascription can be disentangled from the notion of essentialism. He contemplates this idea not as an epistemological option, but as a purely *nominal* possibility, namely as a possibility that his Torguud informants just *verbally describe* the very idea of biological descent as ethnicity-ascription. Therefore the question about their ethnic identity might simply trigger the question of their biological origins:

One could argue that so far there is no demonstration of Torguuds’ processing their local ethnic categories as ‘species.’” What the data show is that one assumes the ethnic ascription of one’s biological parents. It could be that, for them, an ethnic group is simply a descent group and that the question ‘What is the child’s *ündersten*?’ (*ündersten* is the Mongolian word used to describe groups at the level of contrast between Mongols and Kazakhs) is understood simply as ‘What is the child’s descent group?’, as in ‘Which group is he/she biologically descended from?’” Indeed, the root morpheme of *ündersten* (*ünder*) means ‘root.’” To show that ethnic groups are processed as natural kinds one must go beyond the above evidence to show that putative essences are attached to the labels. (Gil-White 2001: 524).

That is the most important point in Gil-White’s theory. Everything that I propose to do here is to reverse the priorities of argumentation. Since essentialism is logically, epistemologically, and even psychologically prior to and more general than the notion of biological descent, what we must do first is show that social groupings are processed in an essentialist way (to show that putative essences are attached to the labels), and *then* to continue in specifying which causal mechanism is responsible for the acquisition/transmission of an essence. Failing to do so we would be in danger of presuming, as Gil-White did, some particular features of biological essentialism. A line of reasoning in a form such as ethnic – endogamy – biological descent – essentialism, brings all too many assumptions with it uninspected, and there is practically no possibility to verify them empirically, for a strong intuition emerges that they imply one another. This intuition is corrupt and is in fact based on *part pro toto* fallacy: ‘To show that Torguuds are essentialists, the data must reveal their cognition of groups such as Kazakhs and Mongols to share important similarities with the features of essentialism described above, provided we can agree that the preceding section presents a plausible picture of species essentialism.’ (Gil-White 2001: 526). Even if we can agree that Gil-White has described species essentialism (folkbiology) correctly, and if we can agree also with the fact that the cognition of the Torguuds concerning Kazakhs and Mongols *does* share important similarities with folkbiology, those similarities still might have had their source in *essentialism* as a general skeletal framework, instantiated in the domain of folksociology, instead of in ‘species essentialism’ primed by the input of social groups. In fact, both interpretations are compatible with Gil-White’s evidence, since his evidence is based only on the adoptive task, and the results that it obtained make no difference here. Gil-White’s response quoted above, which clearly tries to trivialize this point by limiting his

research exclusively to ethnies which are *defined* by means of biological descent, is highly unsatisfactory.

The notion of folksociology as an exaptation from folkbiology creates as many problems as it solves, if not more. This notion is all too narrow to explain the available evidence, and it forces us to exclude or distort it by suggesting that many social classifications might be essentialist without endorsing the notion of biological descent as an exclusive means of the transmission of essence, not to speak of (real or normative) exogamy. For example, when Gil-White has discovered that his Kazakh informants would overwhelmingly prefer socialization as the way to acquire ethnic identity (Gil-White 2001: 528), he was forced to make up a complicated interpretation to save his theory. After discovering some individual and idiosyncratic dissenting views among Kazakhs (and such views must have been there, since no implicit intuitive theory is ever overtly manifested as a unexceptional law), he has suggested that the Kazakhs (together with his Mongol friend Tsooloo who had admitted that witchcraft abilities are innate rather than acquired) have an different implicit folksociology. This is in fact the exact opposite of their explicit statements because

...*intuitions* are different. They tell him that the girl in my example would still somehow be different inside, despite all outward appearances and ascriptive practices. These experiences convince me that the formal questionnaires significantly underestimate the degree to which people are *intuitively* inclined to think about ethnic groups in essentialist terms. (Gil-White 2001: 529).

He failed to realize that folksociology, which tolerates socialization as a causal mechanism of identity acquisition, does *not* deny thereby the biological transmission of *some* properties. Gil-White has presented a classic example of the false dilemma: you prefer either socialization or innate potential, and if there is any evidence that you permit innateness in explaining at least some properties, then you cannot have implicit folksociology with socialization, although you can claim it in your explicit statements. But this dilemma is unnecessary: since essentialism is more general than folksociology, and it may be instantiated together with various causal mechanisms of essence acquisition, some typical properties can be acquired by various causal mechanisms. For example, one can believe at the same time that (1) Danes are blond, (2) the property of being blond is innate, (3) to be a Dane, socialization from childhood is required. If a Danish couple reared an adopted Ukrainian dark-haired boy, he could still become a Dane, although perhaps atypical. People can believe that Slovaks are tall, that to be tall is innate, and to become a Slovak you have to be socialized. Tsooloo can safely believe that Kazakhs are typically good at witchcraft, that abilities of witchcraft are innate, and still maintain that ethnic identity is acquired by socialization. There is no contradiction, since folksociology organizes the knowledge about *some* social groupings and the same folksociological principles do not necessarily process every essentialized social group. In any society, we can have many essentialized social groupings. We can easily imagine groups by personality traits, temperament, witchcraft, occupation, mental disorders, and so on, some or even all of them essentialized and based on biological descent. Even in that extreme case, the empirical question concerning folksociology still remains widely open: how do people represent their overall (ethnic) identity? Which causal mechanism is responsible for the acquisition of this identity? Being good at witchcraft might be a typical Kazakh trait that Mongols ascribe to them; being good at witchcraft might be innate and inherent; and still, being Kazakh might be acquired by socialization.

Folksociology has evolved precisely to cope with this situation: if there are all too many social groupings to which one can and does belong, it could be adaptive to represent the overall social group as essence-based, that essence being somehow 'over and above' other

essences, not to speak of non-essentialist social groupings. If this story is remotely plausible, we can easily see why the putative ‘real’ cultural norms which Gil-White takes to be the ultimate evolutionary cause of essentialist folksociology are rather its effect and creation:

Processing an ethnies as a species, with the attendant penchant for assuming that any hidden properties true of one member will be true of all, is adaptive because members of an ethnies – like members of a species – share many important ‘properties’ (norms) specific to the ethnies. (Gil-White 2001: 531).

My argument is very different: precisely because members of an ethnies – unlike members of a species – do not really share many important properties/norms, for there are all too many heterogenous social groupings with their own particular norms, processing an ethnies as an essentialized group with the attendant penchant for assuming that any hidden properties true of one member will be true of all, is adaptive. Scott Atran defends a similar view, as far as cultural norms are concerned (although he does agree with Gil-White that folksociology is an exaptation from folkbiology):

...species essentialization of human groups *creates* (through a looping effect) human kinds together with inferential means for making reliable predictions about them (if only as self-fulfilling prophecy). Norm markers for ethnic boundaries are culturally created and manipulated to trigger the living-kind module in certain contexts... Derivative norm markers may be even more critical – and more ‘real’ – for group differentiation than the normative behaviors they are supposed to signal. For some important markers there may be no underlying normative behavior or consensus to speak of (Atran 2001: 538)

If we substitute the term ‘living-kind module’ with the term ‘essentialist folksociology’, I fully accept Atran’s formulation of how a cognitive module creates cultural norms . This is at the same time the answer to Gil-White’s question posed to Hirschfeld:

Hirschfeld (1996) has demonstrated that biological phenotypic differences (i.e., ‘racial’ differences) lead children to essentialize, and he acknowledges that this promotes inductive generalizations. However, he does not argue, as I do, that norms have anything – directly or indirectly – to do with it. On the contrary, he thinks that we have evolved machinery to essentialize ‘human kinds’ even though, according to him, there is no clustering of cultural information that such essentialist inductions would help bootstrap (1996: 21–22). In this context it is difficult to see what purpose or function social-category essentialism serves. Why did it evolve? (Gil-White 2001: 534).

The purpose of social-category essentialism (or folksociology) is clear: to create, by means of essentialist representation of the overall social group, cultural norms as products of some underlying essence shared by *all* members of this group, and to avoid or at least minimize the in-group uncertainty, risk and constant competition emerging from the presence of too many heterogenous sub-groups, with their own norms and rules, inside of this overall group. If folksociology contributed significantly to the evolution of these cultural norms, they of course cannot be evoked as a cause of this folksociology. However, Gil-White does argue a tone point in terms quite close to my proposal, namely where he admits that causal essentialism is more general than and prior to folksociology. I will quote his argument in some length to make clear how minimal a change is required in it to converge with my view:

Suppose that at first children assume merely that the unseen and hidden essence exists and is somehow causally responsible for typical surface features and yet-to-be-discovered ‘hidden’ properties (i.e., all they initially have is an ‘essence placeholder’ [Medin and Ortony 1989: 184–85]). The thing which initially primes a child to essentialize may be nothing more than certain key surface appearances... But any specific content about what the essence is, how it works, the ‘hidden’ properties it implies, and how it is acquired remains mostly to be filled in, for children start with little beyond the ‘essence placeholder’ itself. ... endogamy is merely something that shared living-kind essence is supposed to imply, and this supposition is part of what is waiting to be filled in. When children learn that members of species categories mate only with each other and that by so doing they reproduce the kind, they learn an explicitly *causal* story for the production of tokens of the class that is then naturally tied to the causal essence that they have assumed from the start is there. To think of members of a living kind mating and reproducing is practically to *see* the essence in the process of being transmitted; children’s brains are waiting for just this kind of information, and the ‘essence placeholder’ is what makes them wait in the right way. If we find that young children deploy essentialism when presented with cues that are usually good markers for social categories that ought to be essentialized, but later – once endogamy and descent-based membership have been linked to ‘living kindness’ – categories lacking these two key properties *cease* to be essentialized, this will be consistent with the present argument. (Gil-White 2001: 550-551).

What would happen in this scenario if children did not embrace any notion of living-kind essence? I fully agree that endogamy is merely something that shared living-kind essence is supposed to imply, hence endogamy would be out. Still, there is something waiting to be filled in. If we replace endogamy with socialization, the result would be as follows:

When children learn that members of species categories *socialize* only with each other and that by so doing they reproduce the kind, they learn an explicitly *causal* story for the production of tokens of the class that is then naturally tied to the causal essence that they have assumed from the start is there. To think of members of a living kind *interacting* is practically to *see* the essence in the process of being transmitted; children’s brains are waiting for just this kind of information, and the ‘essence placeholder’ is what makes them wait in the right way.

I propose arguments and empirical evidence to show that the conditions mentioned in the last sentence of Gil-White’s paragraph quoted above actually could be challenged:

If we find that young children deploy essentialism when presented with cues that are usually good markers for social categories that ought to be essentialized, but later – once endogamy and descent-based membership have been linked to ‘living kindness’ – categories lacking these two key properties *cease* to be essentialized, this will be consistent with the present argument. (Gil-White 2001: 550-551).

I will try to show that categories lacking endogamy and descent-based membership *do not* cease to be essentialized, and hence Gil-White’s argument is inconsistent in this form. In his recent paper (Gil-White 2005: 27) he has proposed without even realizing it, the more acceptable formulation: ‘[An ethnie is] a collection of people who, at a minimum, *represent themselves* as a self-sufficiently and vertically reproducing historical unit implying cultural peoplehood.’ He is still heavily invested in ‘an ideology of membership by descent’ and

‘category-based normative endogamy’, but we can safely put these specifications aside and admit only the more general and theoretically perfect formulation of ‘vertical reproduction’. A folksociological essence, at a minimum, must be acquired and transmitted through generations, i. e. vertically. My hypothesis is that we can show that there are essentialist classifications with this vertical acquisition of an essence without the notion of innate potential, biological descent and normative endogamy.

Lawrence Hirschfeld (1996, 1998, 2001) has been more careful. While concentrating on racial thinking, his account of folksociology distinguishes very clearly among levels of generality. Although the notion of innate potential is central in racial classifications, Hirschfeld did not make it constitutive for folksociology. He speaks instead about ‘a particular range of collectivities, ones that people believe arise out of the *inherent* and *intrinsic* nature of collectivity membership’ (Hirschfeld 1996: 41). The notion of an inherent, intrinsic nature is more important than any particular natural process. Hirschfeld points out that some underlying mechanisms were ‘in fact thought to be natural (although not biological)’ (Hirschfeld 1996: 50). Hirschfeld assumes that

there are a myriad of human kinds that people recognize, ranging across categories based on physique, personality, occupation, gender, nationality, and so on. Among these human kinds, there are some that are construed as intrinsic – as flowing from some nonobvious commonality that all members of the kind share (Hirschfeld 1996: 196)

I think strongly that only this proposal among the three I have reviewed is sufficiently general to guide a successful research program in the domain of folksociology. An inherent, intrinsic nature is constitutive for essentialist classifications, and so is a nonobvious commonality that all members of the kind share. The representation of social group as a whole, as a human kind, even as a ‘corporate individual’ (see P. Bloom & Veres 1999), together with the representation of an inherent, intrinsic, causal essence acquired by some causal process, is constitutive of folksociology. Essentialism in folksociology cannot be reduced to the notion of innate potential and endogamy, as Gil-White did, nor denied when no innateness of an identity is postulated by informants, as Astuti did. Such proposals rely heavily on empirically contingent properties of essentialism and folksociology, and hence limit drastically our ability to see how pervasive and ubiquitous this cognitive bias may be. In the next and final part, I will follow Hirschfeld’s account of folksociology.

(4) Testing the hypotheses

It is not so easy to test so many conclusions of such a complexity. There are several methodological problems to be solved. Firstly, while biological descent is a well-defined and univocal notion, socialization is far from it. Its ambiguity requires a careful selection of variables to avoid possible confusion. More about this problem below. Secondly, to collect cross-cultural data is an inherently difficult enterprise. I tried to avoid standard questionnaires since my informants have displayed remarkable reluctance towards them. This comes as no surprise when one points out that the Ukrainian village Storozhnyca where I have spent several months in 2001 and 2002 was a part of 6 political units during the last hundred years (Austrian-Hungarian Empire, first Czechoslovak Republic, Hungaria, second Czechoslovak Republic, Soviet Union, Ukraine), and the State authorities were not always very friendly to inhabitants, to put it mildly. Hence I have applied the standard anthropological method of participant observation and introduced my questions in the form of short, obvious stories during informal talks. I have tried to tell those short narratives as if they were stories from everyday life about people I personally knew. The aim of this presentation was to obtain the

maximum of spontaneity, and to avoid the risk that my informants would treat them like some abstract riddles. Thirdly, I choose this village because of its multiethnic composition and tolerance: a lot of ethnies lived there for centuries without hatred and violent conflicts.

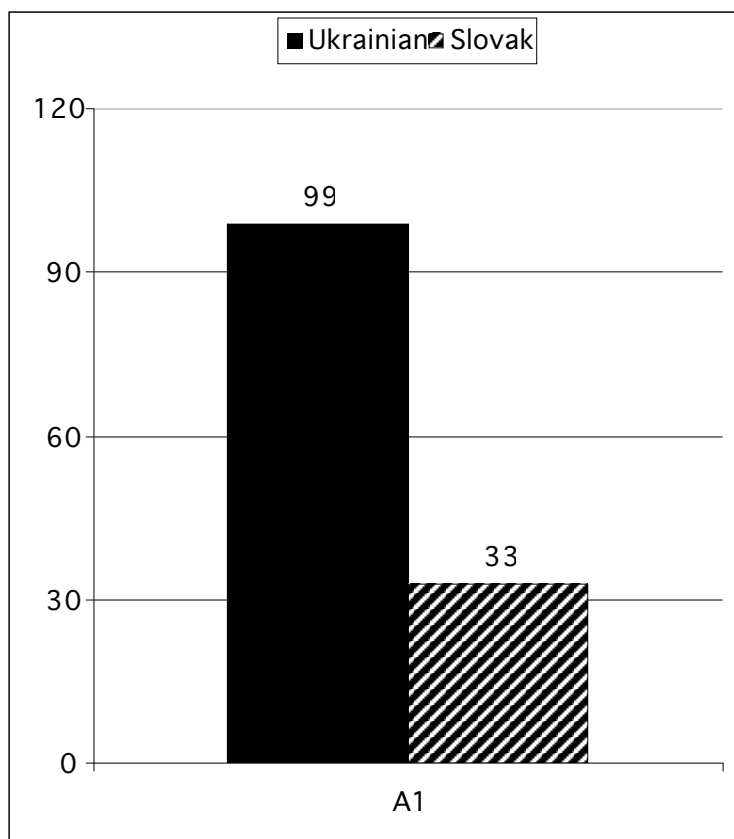
Storozhnyca has about 2,200 inhabitants, is located in Western Ukraine practically on the border with Slovakia and Hungary. The Polish and Romanian border, respectively, are not so distant either. The ethnic structure of the village is 61 % Ukrainians, 22 % Slovaks, 15 % Hungarians and the rest are Romani (Gypsies), Russians and Rusyns. Ethnically mixed marriages are not exceptional, and the vast majority of inhabitants are bi- or trilingual. My sample of informants ($n = 132$) was composed of 60 Ukrainians (46 %), 40 Slovaks (30 %) and 32 Hungarians (24 %). It was balanced in relation to age (15-65). Occupation and social conditions of informants were not taken into account; the vast majority of them was lower middle class or peasants.

a) Descent vs. socialization 1

As I have mentioned above, while biological descent is a well-defined and univocal notion, socialization is not. There are two possibilities how to determine biological descent: one's biological parents can be of the same or of different ethnicity. In this first battery of tests I have specified different ethnicity for biological parents for the sake of comparison. Both Gil-White (1999: 795, 2001) and Astuti (2001: 437-440) have used cross-ethnic divides. For socialization I have specified two parameters in this first study: language and country of residence. Ethnicity of biological parents remained unchanged in this first study, while parameters of socialization varied. According to Gil-White's prediction, changes in parameters of socialization should have no influence on the ascription of ethnic identity, but we will see that the pattern of answers was interestingly different.

A1: 'I know a family. The father is Ukrainian, the mother is Slovak. They live in Ukraine and speak Ukrainian. They have a son. What is the ethnicity of the son?'

Fig. 1.



$n = 132$

Ukrainian = 75 %

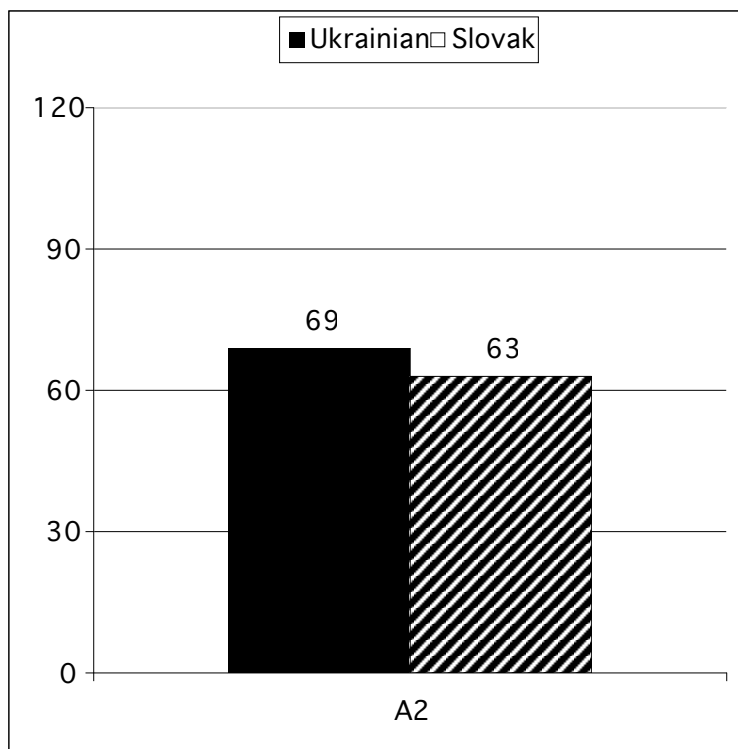
Slovak = 25 %

Significantly above chance

A2: 'I know a family. The father is Ukrainian, the mother is Slovak. They live in Slovakia and speak Ukrainian.'

They have a son. What is the ethnicity of the son?’

Fig. 2.



n = 132

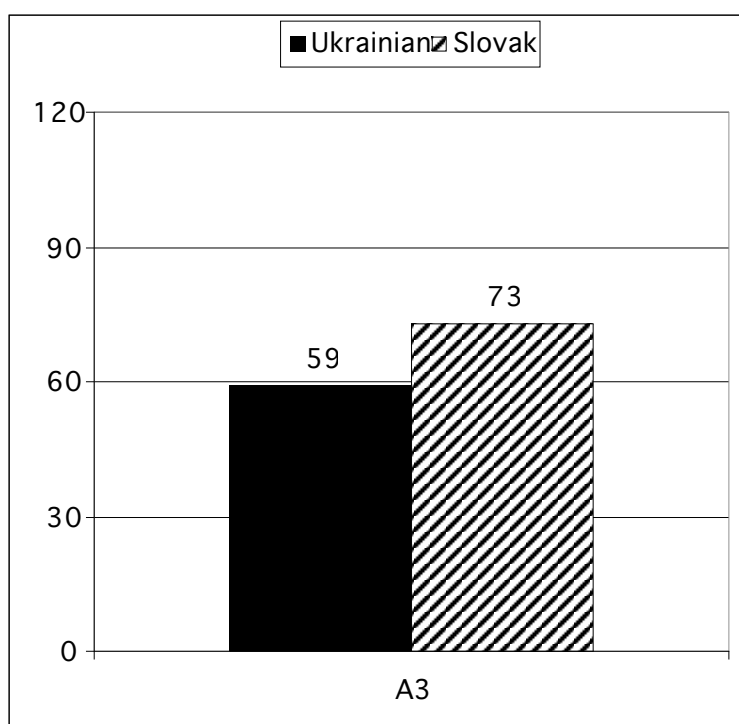
Ukrainian = 52 %

Slovak = 48 %

At random

A3: ‘I know a family. The father is Ukrainian, the mother is Slovak. They live in Ukraine and speak Slovak. They have a son. What is the ethnicity of the son?’

Fig. 3



n = 132

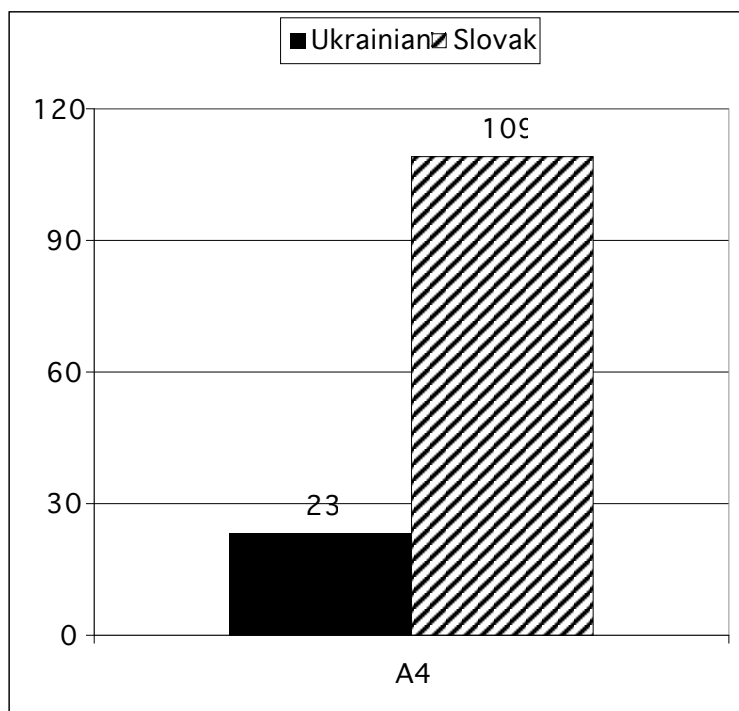
Ukrainian = 48 %

Slovak = 52 %

At random

A4: ‘I know a family. The father is Ukrainian, the mother is Slovak. They live in Slovakia and speak Slovak. They have a son. What is the ethnicity of the son?’

Fig. 4



n = 132

Ukrainian = 17 %

Slovak = 83 %

Significantly above chance

Discussion

These results are interesting, yet difficult to interpret. Firstly, it is clear that socialization plays a most important role in ascription of identity. If socialization parameters are convergent (A1, A4), people overwhelmingly choose the criterion of socialization for ethnicity-ascription. If socialization parameters diverge (A2, A3), informants are confused and respond at random. Yet we cannot draw the conclusion that socialization is a crucial parameter in essentialist folksociology since we have no confirmation that people reason in an essentialist way. Firstly, they might ascribe ethnic identity in a *non-essentialist* way, stressing socialization and circumstances as decisive factors. Secondly, an objection can be made that they were simply misled by the stories and could resort to some kind of heuristics: note that the information about biological parents is ambiguous (they are of different ethnic origin), and facing uncertainty, people could simply choose the option which is more coherent, their reasoning being of the form: if one of the biological parents is X and both socialization parameters are X as well, opt for X, regardless of the biological origin and socialization. We need more empirical evidence.

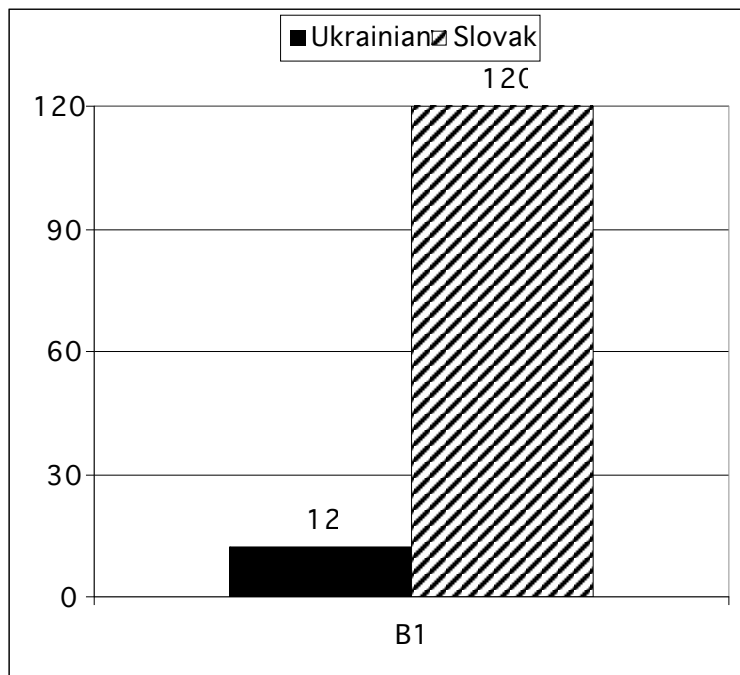
b) Descent vs. socialization 2

In the follow-up study, I have decided to provide my informants with unambiguous information about biological parents: both of them had the same ethnic origin. Secondly, I have included the task of adoption into my study. Thirdly, I have tried to test the presence of essentialist reasoning by testing the presence of one of its key features, namely the immutability of identity. The significance of socialization cannot be used as a confirmation of essentialism, since any non-essentialist, circumstantialist reasoning could use socialization as well. However, if socialization is a causal process of essence-acquisition, this essence must be immutable and difficult to remove. To test it, I have made up another three stories. First of them (B1) is the classic adoptive task. The second one is the 'immutability task': its aim is to detect if people allow for change in identity. The third story is about a bilingual child whose biological parents (both of them of the same ethnic origin) changed the country of residence. This is the negative test of the importance of socialization: note that both socialization

parameters are ambiguous (bilingualism and the change of the country of residence), while ethnic origin of biological parents is univocal.

B1: ‘I have a buddy. Both his parents were Ukrainian. When he was three months old, his parents had a car accident and both died. He was adopted by a Slovak couple and reared in Slovakia. What is his ethnicity?’

Fig. 5



n = 132

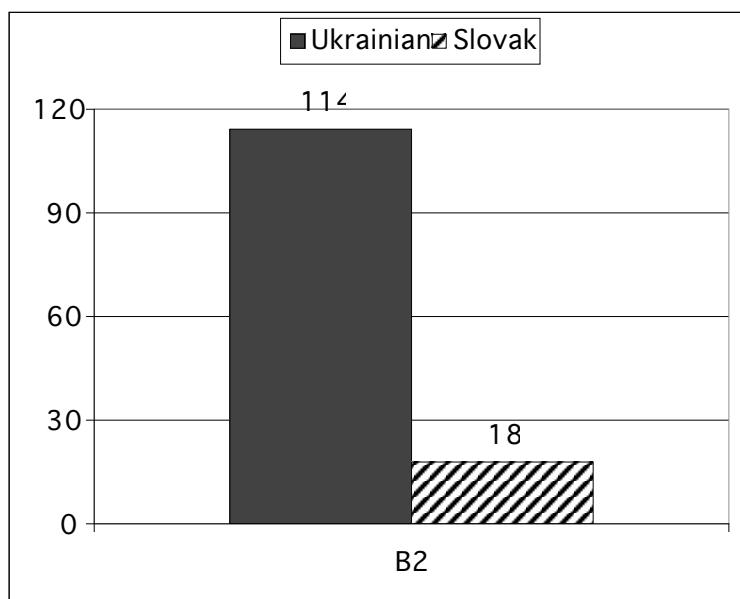
Ukrainian = 8 %

Slovak = 91 %

Significantly above chance

B2: ‘I have a friend. Both his parents were Ukrainian. He was born and lived in the Ukraine. When he was thirty years old, he moved to Slovakia to work there. He has mastered Slovak language perfectly. What is his ethnicity?’

Fig. 6



n = 132

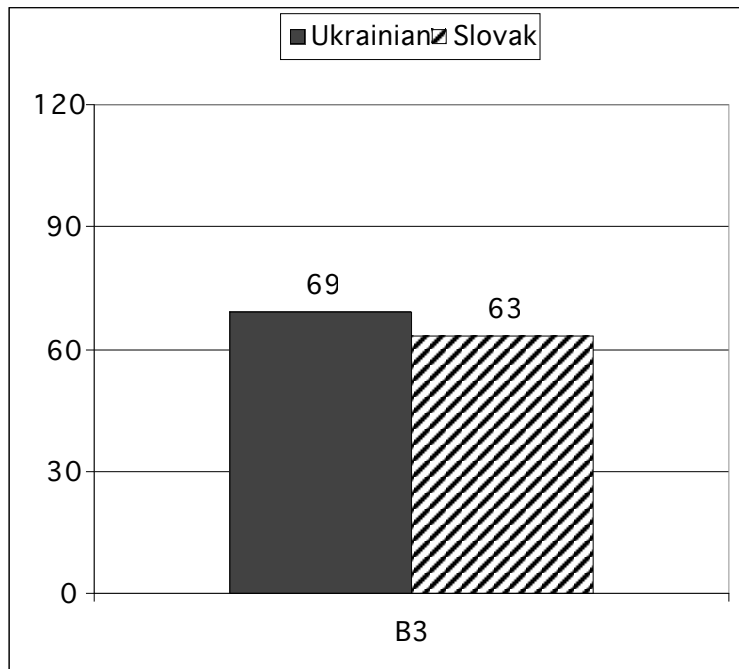
Ukrainian = 86 %

Slovak = 14 %

Significantly above chance

B3: ‘I know a guy. Both his parents were Ukrainian. When he was three months old, his parents moved to Slovakia to work there. He has mastered both Slovak and Ukrainian language perfectly. What is his ethnicity?’

Fig. 7



n = 132

Ukrainian = 52 %
Slovak = 48 %

At random

Discussion

These results confirm the hypothesis that socialization is the decisive factor in the ascription of ethnic identity. First, the task of adoption (B1) showed that people significantly prefer socialization over biological origin. Secondly, the immutability task (B2) showed that they do not allow the change of ethnic identity: there is no possibility to ‘de-socialize’ or ‘re-socialize’ in another society. This is the evidence in favor of the claim that they reason about ethnic identity in an essentialist way. Finally, the third task (B3) definitely ruled out the role of biological descent in ethnicity-ascription: people are confused when the input of socialization is ambiguous, even in the case that biological descent is straightforward and univocal.

Apparently the role of socialization as the causal factor in the acquisition of ethnic identity is decisive. Yet the presence of essentialist reasoning in Ukrainian folksociology might be a source of doubts: only one of the tests (B2) was designed specifically to confirm essentialism. To detect only one of the features of essentialism (the immutability of identity) is undoubtedly a weak support for essentialism. Hence I have a burden to provide further evidence to claim that essentialism is instantiated in Ukrainian folksociology. During my last stay (September 2002) I conducted the last follow-up study to detect the presence of another important feature of essentialist reasoning: sharp boundaries. My research question was whether people allow multiple ethnic identities. This question is far from banal and is of particular interest in my field. This point deserves a more detailed elaboration.

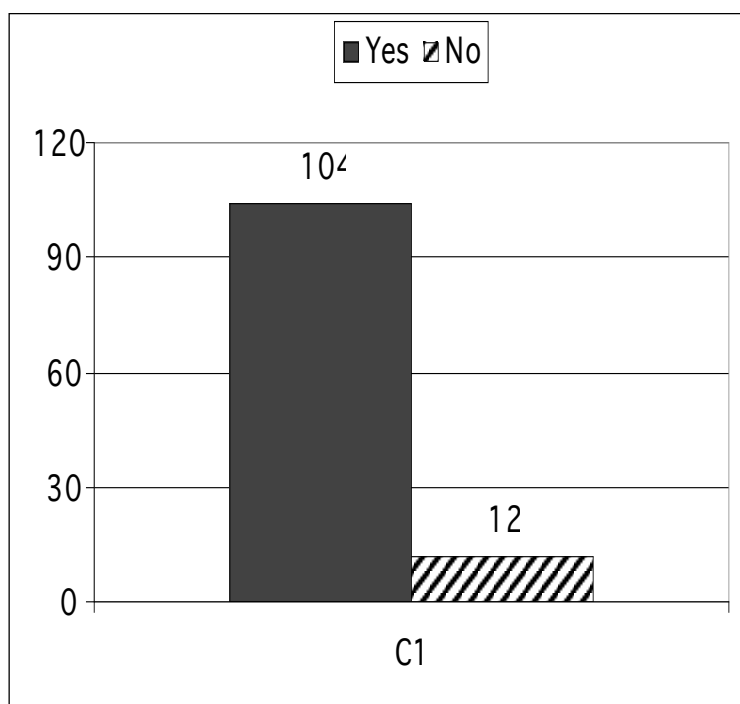
c) Multiple ethnic identities?

At first glance, my informants seem to admit that one may have many ethnic identities. Some of the neighbouring states – namely Slovakia and Hungaria – have enacted laws (Act

No. 62/2001 in Hungaria, Act No. 70/1997 in Slovakia) that established the possibility for the members of ethnic minorities abroad, including Ukrainian citizens, of claiming special status. As a consequence, many of my informants have actually claimed both Slovak and Hungarian identities to obtain some advantages in those countries (including, for instance, social benefits, eased visa procedures, financial support for cultural activities, the right to study in the respective country, etc.). This might suggest that an ethnic identity with fuzzy boundaries of membership is a plain normal situation. However, a closer look reveals that such an interpretation is oversimplified. My informants allow a multiple identity exclusively as a matter of pragmatic declaration, that is to say, as a way to obtain benefits. Declaring an identity for Hungarian or Slovak authorities does not mean providing them with ‘correct’ information: one is free to declare *anything* to obtain some pragmatic advantage. When I asked my informants to specify (self-declare) their ethnic identity, they *never* declared double identity. After I protested that they had both an Expatriate Slovak Card and a Certificate of Hungarian Nationality, they smiled and explained that this does not matter at all, since ‘here everybody knows who I am, but officials do not know.’ In other words, pragmatic ethnic identity has nothing to do with putative ‘real’ ethnic identity. To confirm my tacit hypothesis that this ‘real’ ethnic identity is essentialist after all, while a pragmatic identity is not, I put to my informants two very simple questions:

C1: ‘Could somebody be both a Ukrainian and Slovak citizen at the same time?’

Fig. 8



n = 116

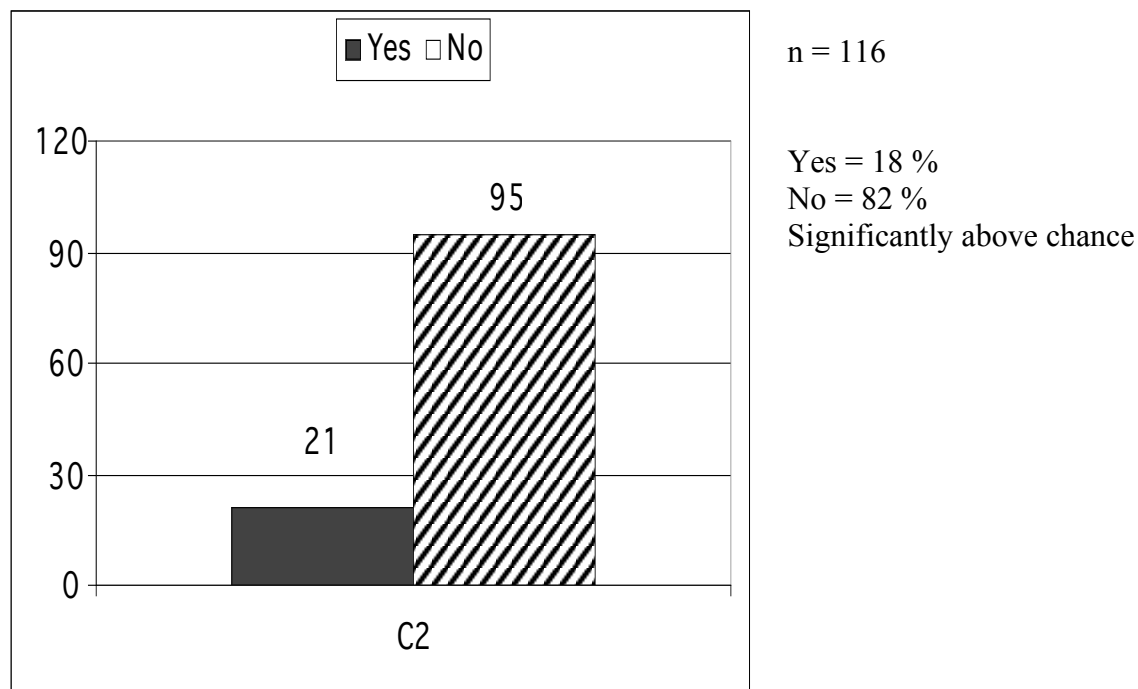
Yes = 90 %

No = 10 %

Significantly above chance

C2: ‘Could somebody be both Ukrainian and Slovak at the same time?’

Fig. 9



Discussion

It is clear that people distinguish sharply between pragmatic, political, and self-ascriptive identities and deeper, inherent ones. Only the latter are essentialist, while the former are not. The difference between those identities is not only along an essentialist/non-essentialist line: it is also along an implicit/explicit one. Making an ethnic identity explicit is often a tricky procedure, for such a communicative situation is heavily context-dependent. Many anthropologists have rightly pointed out that almost all official records (census, passport data, birth records etc.) and a great deal of standard questionnaires are far from being reliable sources of identity ascription. Political and pragmatic circumstances play an important, perhaps decisive role. But we can see that over and above (or rather beneath and beyond, to be more precise) pragmatic identities, there is a deeper, inherent, implicit identity which is unaffected by pragmatic decisions. Or, to put in a more exact way, this inherent essentialist identity *does* depend on cultural and political processes, but it is not *created* exclusively by them, as pragmatic identities are. Essentialist social identity is an outcome of the interaction between social processes and psychological ones, and should be investigated as such.

This is not to say that essentialist identities are more important, or somehow fatally deterministic: they are only easier to conceptualize and acquire, for their psychological support facilitates such processes. We are in no need to look for some special, intricate and designed socio-political and historical processes to explain them and/or account for their presence. This is not to deny that such processes are at work – they almost always will be even if they are not there in their strong manipulative form, or if they are fragmentary and poorly organized. There is nothing historically and socially *special* required to trigger the essentialist bias – it is cognitively so pervasive that almost any implicit and consistent verbal and behavioral discrimination directed towards social groupings will do. The roles of political power and social input are undoubtedly very important, but there is not the slightest chance

that political power, history and social input might exhaustively explain social identities. The state of ethnic studies in anthropology and sociology is the best evidence for that: the more detailed descriptions of ethnic phenomena we have, the weaker the explanation we obtain from the theories they are supposed to support.

Conclusion

My aim in this article has been to show that essentialism in folksociology should be described and investigated more precisely and in a more detailed way than has usually been done. I have tried to show that causal thinking in essentialism does not affect only the effects of an essence, but also its causes, namely the processes by which an essence is acquired. My empirical evidence suggests that no particular causal process of essence acquisition is constitutive for essentialism in folksociology. Innate potential and biological inheritance, however powerful they may be for the human cognitive mind in the domain of folkbiology, are far from necessary in essentialist folksociological classifications. If we have to specify how an essence is acquired in a particular folksociology, we should investigate this question empirically rather than assume it *a priori*. Essentialism in folksociology is not defined by any particular causal process of essence acquisition. Even when we are able to detect the innateness in a particular folksociology, we should always look for other features of essentialism (inherence, sharp boundaries, immutability of identity, etc.). We have to devise and use a lot of empirical experimental tasks to describe a folksociological framework. To rely heavily on one of them (e. g. the adoption task) might lead to serious misunderstandings.

Gil-White's theory of ethnicity has to be drastically reformulated to be more generally applicable and satisfactory. Its insistence on normative endogamy and biological descent should be replaced by his more moderate proposal of vertical transmission of essence. Astuti's theory has to be tested again in her own field to rule out the possibility that Vezo folksociology is essentialist after all. The empirical data she has provided are not decisive in this respect. They allow an essentialist interpretation as well, since Astuti has assumed (as Gil-White did) that essentialism and innateness are mutually interdefined. Only Hirschfeld's theory has avoided the trap of overestimating any particular notion of folksociology. Dealing with American racial thinking in children, Hirschfeld has been able to distinguish carefully the general properties of essentialist folksociology from particular properties of racial thinking. Therefore his theory provides the best general background with which to begin.

To conclude, we should admit that to describe folksociology as a cognitive domain we urgently need more empirical evidence, since this domain is patently more complex and complicated than we have expected. To avoid misunderstandings and oversimplifications which could be even more dangerous for a discipline *in statu nascendi*, we should collect our empirical evidence very carefully and without assumption that it will confirm some very simple explanations.

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