

# “That’s All You Really Are”: Centering Social Identities and Essentialist Beliefs

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## 1. Introduction

Current political and social culture in the US is dominated by an identitarian strand. We routinely center social identities in political discourse, in our social affiliations, and in everyday interactions. One unfortunate aspect of this is that members of marginalized groups often find themselves treated as if they are “just” tokens of those groups: as “nothing more” than a woman, a black person, a Muslim, a wheelchair-user, etc. Correlatively, people who are not members of those various groups often find those identities “popping out” in their intuitive thinking about and interactions with individuals who are such members, sometimes despite their best efforts.

Centering social identity in this way can be deeply pernicious. It motivates the use of slurs, generic claims, and essentialist beliefs. Further, it leads even those who avoid such words, claims and attitudes to regulate their thoughts and actions in accord with entrenched stereotypes. For example, people are more likely to interpret a black man reaching into his pocket as reaching for a gun than for a wallet (Correll et al. 2002, Eberhardt et al. 2004, Payne 2001); or to sit further away from a black woman than a white one (Amodio & Devine 2006, Nosek et al. 2007). Such identity-based expectations and reactions render us complicit in enacting oppressive social norms in subtle and unreflective ways, and can lure us into enforcing them more overtly, through political action, hate crimes or genocide.

Crucially, not every case of identity-centric thinking is pernicious: among other things, it can play a key role in self-construction and progressive politics. Nor do all of identitarianism's pernicious effects originate in our minds: social identities are implemented in and perpetuated by institutional and material structures that extend beyond any individual person's psychology. But psychology is one key factor in producing these effects. Thus, unless we can understand the psychology of identitarianism, the prospects for addressing and correcting such effects are dim.

At the same time, identity-centric thinking is itself highly heterogeneous, in ways that make delivering a coherent theory of identitarian psychology challenging. Most obviously, it encompasses a wide range of identity categories, which have varying social, material, and cognitive significances. Agents can also center any given identity *I* in a variety of ways, ranging from merely feeling moved by inchoate, implicit and unwanted affective responses to instances of *I* to explicitly endorsing *I*'s causal centrality on the basis of a developed theory. Agents can also center identity through a range of modalities, including perceptual “pop out,” cognitive stereotypes, and visceral emotional and aesthetic reactions. And they can center identities in these various modalities via diverse mechanisms, including imagistic imagination, inference, and unconscious association.

We will argue that despite its variety, this dauntingly wide range of contents, states, and processes can be subsumed under a unified explanation. To do so, we appeal to *frames*, or representations with the function of guiding intuitive interpretation. More specifically, we propose:

**The Frame View:** An agent’s patterns of identity-centric thought and action are explained by their identity-centric frames (at the limit, just perspectives) about the relevant social group.

In a nutshell, a frame is a representational vehicle (e.g., a sentence, picture, or symbol) that organizes an agent’s overall thinking about a topic by encapsulating a perspective on it (Camp 2019a). Perspectives, in turn, are open-ended, intuitive dispositions to notice, explain, and respond to some portion of the world (Camp 2013, 2014, 2019b). The Frame View thus holds that patterns of identity-centric thought and action are explained by an agent’s tendency to interpret others in a way that focalizes the relevant identity, where this tendency is typically anchored in representations of that identity. Such representations can take a variety of forms, including slurs and other derogatory terms (“fag,” “slut”), generics and slogans (“Boys will be boys,” “Make America Great Again”), memes (Pepe the frog), and visual tropes (Barbie dolls).

The Frame View is a non-intellectualist view. That is, while believed propositional contents can encapsulate and guide interpretation in an open-ended intuitive way, not all frames are believed. And even for those that are, the characteristic function of belief doesn’t adequately explain their cognitive role as frames. More generally, identity-centric thought and action do not result primarily from endorsing the ascription of a property to an individual or group. Rather, they result from regulating attention and interpretation in terms of a social identity. Thus, we claim that in order to understand identitarianism, we need to examine the resources that ordinary agents bring to intuitively interpreting the world, and not merely the theories they construct or endorse about it.

We proceed as follows. In §2, we describe the cognitive phenomena involved in centering social identities in thought and action. In §3, we articulate the Frame View. In §4, we argue that it can explain the emergence of full-fledged essentialist theories out of inchoate, implicit identity-centric thinking. In §5, we discuss what sorts of non-intellectualist interventions on pernicious forms of identitarianism the Frame View might support.

## 2. Centering Social Identities in Thought and Action

Though it should be independently plausible that as a culture we routinely center social identities, it is less clear just what “centering identities” involves in terms of cognition and behavior. In this section, we outline what we take to be the central strands of identity-centric thought and action.

For expositional clarity, we focus on traditional gender categories (“woman” and “man”), which are familiar targets of such thinking. However, part of our ultimate point is that the interpretation of different social categories is cognitively implemented in very different ways, and hence that caution is called for in extrapolating from any particular case.

Gender categories are highly *salient*. We notice gender immediately and involuntarily and treat it as a basic fact about a person. This salience is reflected in gendered pronouns, which route the vast majority of our thought and talk through gender (Dembroff and Wodak 2018, 2021). It is displayed in the fact that many people find it unsettling to interact with gender non-conforming people (Lopes 2019). More prosaically, the salience of gender is manifested by the ubiquity of the question “Is it a boy or a girl?” to expecting parents, and in the tradition of ‘gender reveal’ parties.

One reason knowing someone’s gender matters is that we employ different *patterns of behavior* toward women and men. These range from explicit, culturally conventionalized scripts, such as men

paying for women's drinks on dates, to subtle, highly contextual patterns in seating distance and amount and type of physical touch. We can proceed more smoothly in our daily interactions if we use gender to coordinate these patterns.

Less practically, we tend to cognitively *project* properties along gender lines: we expect women to share important properties with other women that they don't share with men, and vice versa. That is, gender functions as a category for induction via complex, socially shared gender *stereotypes*, which often find expression in generics like "women are cooperative" or "men are assertive." Such stereotypes carry rich descriptive imputations. But they also often have a normative dimension: they don't just capture what we think women and men are in fact like, but how they ought to be (Knobe et al. 2013, Leslie 2015, Newman and Knobe 2019).

Descriptively, stereotypical properties play a pervasive role in social interpretation. The behaviors we observe around us don't wear their causes on their sleeves. Stereotypes guide our interpretation of the token acts and events we encounter by influencing which categories we subsume them under, and what other past, present, and future properties we expect on their basis. Thus, the same request for a raise may be described as 'aggressive' in a woman but 'assertive' in a man. Rejecting flirtation may be perceived as an invitation to further pursuit in a woman but as disinterest in a man. And socially coerced cooperative behavior, such as shouldering service roles at work, is likely to be interpreted as originating out of a caring nature in a woman but as the result of prudential motivation in a man.

On the normative side, we have a clear intuitive sense of what sorts of behaviors are appropriate for women and men, ranging from what to wear to how to structure one's career, relationships, and sexual life. For many, violations of these norms are jarring. In some, they provoke moral criticism and intense emotions, such as anger and contempt. They often also provoke strong aesthetic responses. For example, women's voices may sound shrill and annoying; or body hair on women may seem crude and disgusting while long painted fingernails on a man may seem garish and alien. These moral, emotional, and aesthetic responses are often immediate and automatic, in a way that makes them appear obvious and natural.

To *center* gender, it isn't necessary to attend to gender above all other categorical features in every situation, or to project all of an individual's unobserved features in terms of gender. One merely needs to find gender significantly salient, to project some range of features on its basis, and to behave differently toward individuals as a result. Moreover, people differ in how much, and in what ways, they center gender. In the extreme case, womanhood is treated as an all-encompassing, rigid category regulating every aspect of a woman's life; but nearly everyone centers gender to some extent, even if begrudgingly.

Gender provides a particularly clear example of identity-centric thought and action. But we also center other broad identity categories, including race, class, sexual orientation, religion, and disability status; as well as more specific identities such as mother, professor, and athlete. Summarizing and generalizing, we can say that the following are characteristic of a subject  $S$  whose patterns of thought about and action regarding a group  $G$  are  $G$ -centric:

- **Salience:**  $S$  finds  $G$ -membership significantly salient.
- **Stereotypical Thinking:**  $S$  employs a stereotype for what  $G$ s are like.
- **Induction:**  $S$  expects individual  $G$ s to possess  $G$ -typical properties.

- **Action Interpretation:** *S* interprets the behavior of individual *G*s by appeal to *G*-stereotypical features.
- **Normative Judgment:** *S* is disposed to criticize *G*s for failing to conform to norms for stereotypical *G*s, and is disposed to offer behavioral prescriptions based on *G*-membership.
- **Emotional Reaction:** *S* experiences negative emotional reactions to *G*s who do not conform to stereotype, and positive, or less negative, emotional reactions to *G*s who do.
- **Aesthetic Reaction:** *S*'s aesthetic responses and evaluations to individual *G*s and *G*s in general are guided by conformity to the stereotype for *G*s.
- **Patterned Interaction:** *S* interacts with *G*s and non-*G*s in different ways.

We take these eight features together to offer a theoretically perspicuous but relatively uncontroversial description of the most important elements of an independently familiar phenomenon of identity-centric thought and action. But more than just describing identity-centricism, we are interested in understanding its roots, partly with an eye to designing interventions for addressing its more pernicious manifestations. Thus, our central questions for the next section are: what is the psychological basis for these patterns of thought and action? What kinds of mental states, processes, and dispositions underlie and explain them?

### 3. The Frame View

Given that identity-centric thought and action encompass such a wide class of thoughts and behaviors, one might think it can have no explanatorily unified psychological basis. Instead, explanations will be heterogeneous and piecemeal: *this* behavior is explained by the agent's endorsed beliefs and deliberations, *that* by implicit bias, the other by a primed image, and so on.

In our view, such pessimism is unwarranted. It is true that identity-centric thought and action are produced by a wide and diverse range of mental states, processes, and dispositions. Nonetheless, we can understand identity-centric thought and action in a unified way by focusing on the resources that agents employ to *interpret* the social world. Further, in typical cases, these disparate mental states, processes, and dispositions are all regulated by *frames*: representational devices (linguistic or non-linguistic) that function to guide an agent's intuitive interpretation of some aspect of the world.

In this section, we will argue for:

**The Frame View:** An agent's patterns of identity-centric thought and action are explained by their identity-centric frames (in marginal cases, perspectives) about the relevant social group.

It is easiest to grasp the Frame View by considering a specific identity-centric frame and how it regulates thought and action. Take "Boys will be boys," which we think expresses a perspective on masculinity that disposes agents to interpret a range of aggressive and transgressive behaviors by boys and men as natural, exuberant, and playful.

Insofar as the slogan functions as a frame for you and you are a competent member of the culture in which it circulates, it will affect your intuitive perspective on male behavior to some degree, however subtly and fleetingly. *Inter alia*, it will render you more inclined to characterize male behaviors in positive or at least exculpatory terms, to highlight endearingly boyish features of males, to link them together as originating from a common source, and to empathize with male motivations. At the limit,

you might end up characterizing Brock Turner, who raped an unconscious woman behind a dumpster at a fraternity party, as “happy go lucky...with an easy-going personality and a welcoming smile,” and experiencing outrage at the severity of the justice system for condemning a young man for “20 minutes of action.”<sup>1</sup>

Treating the slogan “Boys will be boys” as a frame – as an interpretation-orienting device – explains its cognitive power to regulate thought, feeling, and action in a holistic, ongoing way. By contrast, merely attributing the belief that boys will be boys to the agent cannot explain this. The slogan’s semantically encoded propositional content is tautologous, or nearly so. Inferences from this proposition are poor candidates for producing the rich, affect-laden characterizations and evaluative responses just discussed. Nor is there any obvious, stable, determinate propositional content that is pragmatically associated with the slogan which would explain these effects.

Of course, this is just one example. To establish the Frame View, we need to show that identity-centric thought and action in general are explained by frames and perspectives. In §3.1, we discuss the cognitive role of frames and perspectives in more detail, arguing that they are ubiquitous in our thinking and that they powerfully shape our behavior. In §3.2, we show how frames and perspectives can explain the wide variety of forms of identity-centric thought and action canvassed in §2.

### 3.1. Frames, Perspectives, and Interpretation

Frames are representations that orient interpretation. These representations include slogans such as “Boys will be boys”; mantras such as “I am a magnet for wealth”; slurs such as ‘libtard’; flags such as the Pride flag; pictures such as Tank Man in Tiananmen Square; and instances of well-trodden cultural tropes such as *Pretty Woman’s* hooker with a heart of gold. What makes these otherwise disparate representations into frames is how they function: they orient interpretation in an open-ended, intuitive way by regulating what you notice, how you classify it, what you project from it, and how you evaluate and respond to it. In short, frames are representations that function to express a focal interpretive principle which organizes an agent’s overall intuitive thinking about a topic.

The focal interpretive principles expressed by frames are *perspectives*. For instance, the slogan “Boys will be boys” expresses a perspective on masculinity. A perspective, in turn, is an open-ended disposition to interpret (parts of) the world: to notice, connect and respond the world in certain ways. More specifically, we analyze perspectives as clustered dispositions to parse, select, and prioritize to certain kinds of information; to explain and connect information by centering certain factors and grounds of connection; and to evaluate features and situations in certain practical, moral, aesthetic, and emotional terms (Camp 2017, 2019b).

Agents interpret some aspect of the world from a given perspective by forming a *characterization* of it. Where perspectives are dynamic, open-ended tools for interpretation, characterizations are their content-laden deliverances. Characterizations collect a complex body of information, often including experientially vivid, affect-laden features, into a holistic multidimensional structure (Camp 2015, 2019). We form characterizations of many types of objects: groups (e.g. Americans, quarterbacks), places (e.g. the New York subway, Paris), individuals (e.g. family members; Donald Trump, Notre Dame Cathedral),

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<sup>1</sup> These descriptions are from Brock Turner’s father’s letter, read out at his sentencing hearing. See: <https://www.stanforddaily.com/2016/06/08/the-full-letter-read-by-brock-turners-father-at-his-sentencing-hearing/>

particular events (e.g. the hike where I got bitten by a snake, our wedding), periods of our lives (e.g. high school), historical periods (e.g. the Great Depression), and so on.

Stereotypes, as culturally entrenched characterizations of social types, are the most familiar instance. For example, many people outside of the United States share a stereotype of Americans as, among other things, beefy and tall; constantly wearing sneakers and workout clothes; speaking loudly and with gratingly open vowels; gulping down burgers, large sodas, and frozen ready-made meals, often in front of a TV; largely oblivious to their surroundings but highly impressed by anything over 200 years old; and endorsing individualistic, libertarian or quasi-libertarian politics.

This stereotype illustrates the aspects of characterizations and perspectives mentioned above. First, this characterization results from the selective patterns of *attention* that constitute the relevant perspective. These patterns of attention parse lower-level features into repeatable categories relative to a presupposed taxonomy: for example, a non-US-residents' perspective on Americans parses utterances' phonological patterns into various accent categories. Attention also selects among and assigns differential degrees of prominence to parsed features (Tversky 1977): for example, it selects open vowels as a highly prominent feature, but not other phonological elements.

Second, a stereotype of Americans is not just a list of attributed properties. Many of its constituent features, like having a grating accent, are experientially vivid and affect-laden. Some, like having a distinctive accent, are more prominent than others, in being more initially noticeable and accessible to recall. And these parsed features are connected into networks of centrality (Thagard 1989, Sloman et al 1998). Some features are treated as more explanatorily central: for instance, individualism may explain eating frozen meals in front of the TV, instead of lingering over raucous family meals. What counts as explanatorily central can be a matter of causation, correlation, and material implication; as well as moral, aesthetic, and or otherwise normative justification.<sup>2</sup>

Third, perspectives encompass dispositions to evaluate. *Evaluation* responds to particular attributed constituent features and to the overall subject in ways that are appropriate given the characterizing agent's presupposed categories, values and priorities. For example, the non-US-residents' perspective on Americans might include more general dispositions to construe individualism as selfish and myopic, and to value subtlety, restraint, and complexity over straightforward, explicit representation and communication. These evaluative aspects also figure in the resulting characterization of Americans.

Crucially, characterizations require actual cognitive implementation, in an intuitive way that is partly but not entirely under voluntary control. Thus, it's not enough to characterize Americans according to the stereotype that one explicitly entertain or even accept the claims "Americans have a grating accent," "Americans are loud and boorish," and/or "Americans like to go it alone." Rather, one must actually hear Americans' accents as grating, notice their sneaker- and sweats-wearing, and explain their particular behaviors by appeal to individualist libertarianism.

Putting these components together: agents have open-ended, clustered dispositions to interpret the world in certain ways (*perspectives*). Exercising those dispositions generates *characterizations*: rich,

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<sup>2</sup> These dimensions of prominence and explanatory centrality are independent. For instance, individualism is not particularly noticeable but is highly explanatory, and sneaker-wearing is noticeable but not highly explanatory.

implemented, multi-dimensional, holistic, experience- and affect-laden representations of specific subjects. Most perspectives and characterizations are inchoate, interpersonally variable, and contextually shift. *Frames* are representations with the function of expressing a focal interpretive principle which organizes an agent's overall thinking about a topic, by crystallizing a perspective into a coherent, stable, and easily shareable form. In diagrammatic form:



### 3.2. Frames and Perspectives Explain Degrees and Types of Identity-Centric Thought and Action

This discussion of frames and how they fit into our larger cognitive economies puts us in a position to argue for the Frame View. We argue that appealing to *identity-centric frames* can explain all aspects of identity-centric thought and action identified in §2, including the variety of ways in which people can center social identities that we discussed in §2. Moreover, we argue that variations in types of frame explain variations in identity-centric behavior.

A frame is identity-centric if the characterizations it generates are ones that reliably center a socially relevant kind. Specifically:

An **identity-centric frame** is a frame that tends to generate

- (a) characterizations of a relevant social group  $G$  which impute a high degree of stability, cohesion, and uniformity among the features attributed to individuals within the group; and
- (b) characterizations of individual  $G$ s on which  $G$ -membership is highly central to many of those individuals' further features (where centrality may be material, causal/explanatory and/or normative).

Employing an identity-centric frame does not require having higher-order, propositional beliefs about the stability of  $G$  as a kind or about the centrality of being  $G$  to the further features possessed by individual  $G$ s. Rather, agents who employ identity-centric frames may simply be disposed to interpret people they encounter in terms of  $G$ -membership. These dispositions can make a functional difference in how the agent experiences, explains, and engages with the relevant portion of the world, without necessarily being explicitly encoded as such or even affecting what they take to be actually true about it. Given their functional flexibility, such dispositions are well-poised to explain the diverse range of ways of thinking and acting outlined in §2.

First, employing identity-centric frames leads to tokening characterizations of social groups. When those frames are culturally shared characterizations of social groups, such frames amount to *stereotypical thinking*. And given that those characterizations tend to impute high stability, cohesion, and

uniformity to the represented categories, we expect to find robust *induction* via *G*: generalizing from features attributed to previously encountered *G*s to those possessed by new individuals who are *G*.

Employing such a frame will also lead to characterizing individual *G*s in a way that centers membership in *G*. It renders *G*-membership highly salient in thinking about those individuals. It leads agents to parse features of those individuals in *G*-congruent terms. And it involves connecting and explaining many of the disparate features possessed by individual *G*s to the fact of their being *G*. When the features attributed to those individuals are actions, such frames will generate *action interpretation* in terms of *G*-membership.

As we saw above, the connections among features that a characterization imputes often track moral or aesthetic justification. Characterizations resulting from identity-centric frames often impute *affective* and *normatively-laden* features, in an intuitive way that prompts visceral response. Finally, by parsing and evaluating a host of features of multiple individuals in terms of their membership in *G*, while not interpreting other individuals in those terms, identity-centric frames induce *patterned interaction* with members and non-members.

In a paradigmatic case of identity-centric thought and action, an agent centers *G*-membership in all of their thinking about that social kind, about individual members of *G*, and about otherwise associated people and topics, at both intuitive and reflective levels, and across a wide range of contexts. Such an agent scores highly on all the dimensions of identity-centering canvassed in §2. This kind of pattern of thought and action is most likely to be generated by a frame that is rigid, universally applied, and fully endorsed.

The most obvious instances of this are uses of a slur *S* by committed bigots in contexts where a (more) neutral counterpart term is available (Camp 2013; cf. Jeshion 2013, Neufeld 2019). Such a bigot believes that *S* is the most appropriate term for referring to members of *G* across the board, because it expresses a stereotype that they think captures the ‘essence’ of *G*s. They employ the slur because it imputes a categorial ground *G* that naturally disposes members of *G* to possess a rich range of properties and behave in certain ways. Because they take *S*’s associated stereotype to have this metaphysical basis, they also take it to establish a certain warranted social status for members of *G* and to justify social structures that enforce this ‘place’, sometimes violently. Further, they take the stereotype to warrant distinct practical, moral, emotional, and aesthetic responses to features possessed by individual *G*s depending on whether they conform to the stereotype. They also take it to warrant distinct responses to the same feature when it is possessed by members of *G* and non-members. In its clearest incarnation, the bigot hurls the slur as a weapon at a target member of *G*, shouting “You *S*!” or “You’re nothing but an *S*!” to enforce that target’s conformity to *S*-stereotypical properties and roles.

While committed bigots’ use of slurs offers the clearest case of frame-supported identity-centric thought and action, not all identity-centric frames fit this model. First, not all uses of slurs exemplify this pattern (Camp 2013). Some slurs (e.g. ‘midget’) lack robust culture-wide stereotypes. Some (e.g. ‘libtard’, ‘snowflake’) aren’t culturally associated with a robust (putatively) natural basis. And some slur-users don’t exhibit particularly strong normative and emotional responses toward members of *G*, instead employing the slur casually in expressions of (putative) affection and praise. Second, not all frames are linguistic: pictures, flags, and other iconic symbols are among our most powerful framing devices. Third, not all frames perform their framing function as a matter of convention. (Live)



metaphors are non-conventional by definition; and in principle, any representation can be pressed into service to express and regulate perspectives within a given community, agent, or context.

More importantly for current purposes, the same frame – that is, the same representational vehicle used to express and regulate the same focal interpretive principle – can vary significantly in how it operates in the minds of its users. And this variation matters theoretically, insofar as it explains differences among the patterns of thought and behavior displayed by those different users.

First, an agent may or may not reflectively *endorse* the frame. For instance, while the committed bigot believes members of *G* ‘just are’ the way the stereotype purports them to be, his targets and their allies may actively reject the stereotype. Even so, once it has been injected into the context it lingers as a “threat in the air” (Steele 1997), affecting their own interpretation and action in systematic ways that are difficult to combat, or sometimes even to notice. In other cases, we may be unsure or ambivalent about whether we truly endorse or reject a frame’s perspective. Sometimes, this may be partly because we suspect the perspective contains a grain of truth; but almost always, it is at least partly because perspectives cannot be translated into stable, substantive propositional contents suitable for assessment (Camp 2006).

Second, a frame’s deployment varies in how *thickly* its effects extend beyond generating new beliefs or intentions. Non-propositional frames like pictures, flags and movies are especially prone to affect perception and emotion in intuitive ways. Thus, while a framing term like “Oriental” might tend to produce richly descriptive stereotypes and deliberative patterned behavior towards Asians, a *Sports Illustrated* photograph of a swimsuit model is more likely to make stereotype-conforming and -violating features of women pop out in perception and recall, and to generate visceral emotional and aesthetic responses.

Third, an identity-centric frame may vary in its *inferential centrality*. That is, within the characterizations produced by the frame, membership in *G* may explain a wider or narrower range of features of individual members of *G*. At the high end, an agent might employ the frame “Motherhood is the world’s most important job” to generate a series of specific characterizations in which the fact that an individual is a mother explains many of their personality traits, concerns, preferences and behavior, and which project many unobserved frame-conforming features to them. By contrast, an agent might, upon hearing this slogan, find it highly salient whether a person is a woman with children without imputing a wide set of further shared features on that basis.

Fourth, an identity-centric frame may vary in its *norm centrality*. Thus, for one agent seeing a woman wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with “This mom runs on coffee, wine and Amazon Prime” might activate a demanding set of prescriptions for motherhood, which lionize mothers who successfully fulfill those demands, to sympathize with mothers who struggle but manage to achieve such frame-relevant goals as hosting a themed children’s birthday parties, and to denigrate mothers who reject such prescriptions. By contrast, for another agent, seeing the same T-shirt might lead them to classify the wearer as a mother and to attribute a similar set of descriptive features, but merely as a set of observations and expectations, without evaluating her in terms of conformity to any particularly robust prescriptions.

Fifth, an identity-centric frame may vary in its *cross-contextual application*. Some agents employ a given frame pervasively. Thus, a dedicated social conservative might employ “Motherhood is the world’s most important job” as a touchstone for thinking about individual women, women in general,

and the best way to organize society's social, material, and capital structures. At the other extreme, a person could find this frame temporarily affecting their intuitive construals and patterns of response when it is repeatedly uttered at a family event, without it playing a significant role in the rest of their life.

Relatedly, an identity-centric frame may also vary in its *evidence-resistance*: an agent's perseverance in employing it despite evidence of its being a poor fit for the current context. For example, consider someone whose primary frame for gay men is an image of the TV trope of the flamboyant "gay best friend". If, upon meeting their gay neighbor and finding that he is in fact a shy, bookish parent-of-two, our hypothetical agent "can't help but think" that the neighbor must love *Glee* and have watched it repeatedly, then that frame is highly evidence-resistant for them. Alternatively, an agent might be able to navigate flexibly and fluidly among multiple frames for women, or for gay men, as they interact with various individual members of those groups, and to construct new, tailor-made frames for the group and for those individuals on the basis of their experiences.

These six dimensions of variation – endorsement, non-cognitive thickness, inferential centrality, norm centrality, cross-contextual application, and evidence-resistance – are separable. An agent's deployment of a frame can score high on some and low on others. This will produce a wide array of identity-centric thought and action, where these variations in cognition and behavior can be traced to variations in the agent's relation to the frame. At one extreme lie intellectualist, inferential- and norm-centralizing frames which an agent reflectively endorses and deploys ubiquitously. Perhaps Phyllis Schlafly, or someone working at a right-wing think tank writing white sheets on family leave policies, might employ frames about motherhood in this way. At the other end lie imagistic frames that an agent entertains fleetingly and resentfully, and whose effects are primarily visceral and aesthetic. For example, a barrage of Calzedonia swimsuit ads might lead a committed body-positive feminist to feel a momentary flash of repugnance looking down at her own ankles, which fades as soon as she exits the subway station where she encountered them.

Though frames can powerfully account for many cases of identity-centric thought and action, they do not account for all such cases. Specifically, agents can interpret other people in ways that center identity, and thereby instantiate the patterns of thought and action outlined in §2, without a particular frame driving this interpretation.

To see this, recall from §3.1 that frames are representational vehicles that function to crystallize perspectives, which are themselves open-ended dispositions to interpret a target domain in certain ways. Frames facilitate identity-centric thought and action by providing stable access to a perspective which renders a social identity highly salient and explanatory, and often normatively and affectively resonant.

Insofar as frames are socially shareable, they facilitate the transmission and perpetuation of culturally based patterns of thought and action about social identities. Given how pervasive such shared patterns of thought and action are in constructing and enforcing the identity of marginalized social groups, we should expect that most thought and action which centers such identities will be explained by culturally dominant identity-centric frames. However, in general not all perspectives have correlative frames. Some perspectives are too complex and contextually enmeshed to be encapsulated in pithy slogans or images; this is one reason we turn to fiction and other extended forms of art. Some perspectives await a great articulator who can find or create the *mot juste* for their expression. But even those perspectives that can be crystallized by a frame may not be actually accessed through a frame: an

agent may simply implement the cluster of dispositions that constitute the relevant perspective, without employing or encountering any particular representational devices that scaffold those dispositions.

In particular, an agent may be disposed to notice, respond, and evaluate in ways that center a certain social category without deploying any explicit vehicle that anchors or regulates those dispositions, whether knowingly or not, or willingly or not. Such cases are instances of the same theoretical kind as frame-driven cases of identity-centric thought and action. For both frame-based and frame-free identitarian thinking, the key unifying factor that explains the behavior we outlined in §2 is that the agent *interprets* the world in ways that center a social category: they attend to, explain, and (dis)value individuals in terms of their membership in a social group *G*. Because so much identitarian thought and behavior is frame-based, and because frames amplify the basic effects of identitarian perspectives, we take frame-free identitarian thinking to be a limit case of the Frame View.

#### 4. Frames, Beliefs, and Theories

We have argued that identity-centric thought and action is paradigmatically the result of employing identity-centric frames to regulate our thinking. This does not require correlative identitarian beliefs about the relevant social groups. At the same time, beliefs about social groups abound, and clearly play a significant role in producing and maintaining social hierarchies. In this section, we address the relationship between frames and beliefs in the context of identity-centric thought and action. We argue that frames do not reduce to beliefs. More importantly, we argue that we need to appeal to frames to explain the emergence and stickiness of beliefs and theories that center identity.

Frames are actually implemented rules for interpretation. In general, implemented rules need not be believed; indeed, they cannot all be, on pain of regress (Carroll 1895). While it is true that beliefs often guide intuitive interpretation, neither frames nor perspectives can simply be analyzed as beliefs.

On the one hand, not all frames have the right sort of content to be believed. Many frames, like “Think globally, act locally,” are imperatival, and thus plausibly express a content that is something more like a hyperplan (Starr 2020) or an ordered To Do list (Portner 2004) than a propositional cut in the space of possibilities. Some, such as the iconic 1989 photograph of ‘Tank Man’ in Tiananmen Square, have a content that is only propositional given a more specific, structure-based understanding of propositionality (Camp 2019). Others, including memes such as Pepe the Frog, Notorious RBG, or Bridezilla; and tropes, such as Julia Roberts’ 1990 “hooker with a heart of gold” role in *Pretty Woman*, lack any determinate content, propositional or not. And still others, including slogans like “#blessed” and dictums such as “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way,” are taken by their subjects to be aspirational, apt, ironic, or funny despite being literally false.

On the other hand, any representation, whether propositional or not, can function to guide interpretation in an open-ended, intuitive way without being believed or endorsed. Thus, the merely hypothetical assumption that there are innate differences in intelligence between racial groups tends to affect your interactions with people from different racial groups. Likewise for asking yourself whether women were admitted to your graduate program just because of their gender, or imagining that a black man with a gun is walking behind you on your way home (Steele 2011). Frames do not function primarily to determine *which* contents we represent to be true. Instead, their cognitive role is to orient attention, explanation, and evaluation in an ongoing, intuitive, relatively effortless way. While an

agent's beliefs affect which frames they find intuitively compelling, and the frames they employ affect which beliefs they form, neither functional role can be reduced to the other (Camp 2015).

Nonetheless, people often do have beliefs about the world that center social identities. Psychologists and social theorists have often imputed *essentialist* beliefs—beliefs that “that members of categories share a fundamental nature that grounds a range of common properties” (Leslie 2014, p. 211)—to ordinary people, and have argued that these beliefs play an important role in explaining discrimination and bigotry. On this view, as Gordon Allport (1954, 174) put it, prejudice arises once “...a belief in essence develops. There is an inherent ‘Jewishness’ in every Jew. The ‘soul of the Oriental,’ ‘Negro blood,’... ‘the passionate Latin’—all represent a belief in essence. A mysterious mana (for good or ill) resides in a group, all of its members partaking thereof.”

Given our commitment to Frame View, we think this story about the emergence of prejudice is false. Prejudicial thought and discriminatory action can and often do arise in the absence of such beliefs, merely in virtue of employing identity-centric perspectives. Indeed, as we will now argue, appealing to frames and perspectives is crucial for understanding the emergence and stickiness of essentialist beliefs. Echoing Hume, we will argue that perspectives generate beliefs by “gilding and staining all [social] objects with the colors” of one’s perspectival lenses (Hume [1751] 1983: 88).

Let us begin at the most inchoate and least stable end of identity-centric cognition: cases where we behave in identity-centric ways without any correlative identity-centric belief or even frame. This happens when an identity-centric frame one doesn’t endorse is activated, or when a frameless identity-centering perspective is operative.

Such cases are common. Indeed, a large body of experimental evidence (under the header of intergroup theory; see Sidanius and Pratto 2001 for an overview) shows that it is quite easy to produce identity-centric perspectives by classifying people in terms of clearly trivial features. For instance, when elementary school children are split into groups based on the color of their t-shirt and that classification plays some practical role, the children attend more to differences between groups, take those not in their group to be significantly different, and evaluate their own group more positively and the other group more negatively, as compared to a control group (Bigler et al. 1997; see Tajfel 1970 for the canonical studies).

For sufficiently young children, it is plausible that they classify, evaluate, and respond in these ways in the absence of any accompanying metaphysical beliefs about the groups, and without explicitly representing the groups as deeply different. For older children and adults, it is plausible that they display these patterns of attention and response without believing that e.g. t-shirt color has suddenly taken on metaphysical significance. Thus, in general identity-centric perspectives can arise from intergroup divisions without attributing robust, causally efficacious properties to the relevant groups.

However, even for (initially) arbitrary groups, perspectives that regularly center group membership tend to become crystallized through frames. As discussed in §3.1, frames serve as handy handles for storing, accessing, and sharing perspectives. For this reason, frames in general facilitate social coordination on a shared perspective, which in turn smooths coordination in communication and action. Because perspectives centering social identities are especially likely to figure in social coordination, identity-centric perspectives are especially likely to crystallize into frames.

Once such frames are available, they easily ossify along the dimensions discussed in §3.2. Frames are double-edged swords: the very effects that make frames and perspectives so cognitively

useful also make them self-reinforcing in ways that can be dangerous (Camp forthcoming). Thus, frequent use of a frame inculcates cognitive habits which are only partly under voluntary control and which become harder to dislodge the more they are exercised. And, when a frame's deployment leads to practical success, this may appear to the agent who uses it as evidence that it is inferentially and metaphysically warranted. This can encourage the agent to project its applicability across an ever wider range of situations and properties.

Further, our general desire for a world that coheres in a meaningful, comprehensible, and justifiable way can lead us to impute deeper justificatory and normative connections between a frame's perspective and the individuals and events to which we apply it than is actually warranted. Among other things, we are prone to impute causal connections on the basis of mere correlation, to overestimate correlations, and to impute moral principles in order justify intuitive feelings of disgust (Haidt and Joseph 2004).

Similarly, our general desire for coherence can also lead us to treat highly prominent features as highly central. With respect to identity-centric thought in particular, it can lead us to treat a superficial feature like skin color as diagnostic of an explanatorily powerful essence, or "a fundamental nature that grounds a range of common properties" (Leslie 2014, p. 211; Haslam et al 2000, Gelman 2005). Specifically, essentialist beliefs appear to be generated at least in part through an *inherence heuristic*: "an intuitive tendency to explain patterns in terms of the inherent properties of their constituents" (Salomon and Cimpian 2014, p. 1297). For example, we tend to explain patterns of inequality between social groups in terms of stable, enduring features of members of those groups as opposed to extrinsic factors, such as historical causes.

All of this suggests that essentialist beliefs typically arise as a consequence of perspectival aspects of cognition, rather than the reverse. We are powerfully motivated to move from detecting patterns to ascribing inherent properties which explain them, and thence on to essentialist beliefs about kinds that generate and unite those properties, through something like the following schematic sequence:

1. Regulation of thought and action about a social group by an identity-centric **perspective**.
2. Crystallization of this identity-centric perspective into a **frame**.
3. **Ossification** of this identity-centric frame into a highly stable, relatively simple principle for regulating attention, explanation and response across a wide range of otherwise disparate contexts.
4. Production via the inherence heuristic of **essentialist beliefs** that don't merely regulate cognition and behavior, but are taken to represent members of the social kind as they really are.
5. Construction of an explicit, reflectively endorsed **essentialist theory** about that social group.

In proceeding through this sequence, it is not merely that perspectives transform over time into theories. Rather, each step of this process adds an additional functional structure: frames, then beliefs, and finally theories. Each of these renders the initial perspective more stable, more internally well-confirmed, and more resistant to counterevidence.

In societies like ours, essentialist or quasi-essentialist theories about social kinds are ubiquitous and widely articulated and transmitted. Thus, most people are at least familiar with such theories, often deeply so. But being acquainted with or even endorsing such a theory does not suffice to generate identity-centric thought and action on a significant scale. One must also internalize the assumptions embodied by that theory, so that it guides one's ongoing, intuitive interpretations and interactions in a pervasive way. For this reason, perspectives continue to play a substantive explanatory role even in agents who explicitly endorse essentialist theories.

In our view, then, rather than being the causal root of identity-centric thought and action, essentialist theories serve a primarily *justificatory* role for such patterns of cognition and behavior. Armed with such theories, agents can justify centering social identities in their thought and action by arguing that these patterns of thought and action reflect the nature of our social world: that's "just the way things are," however much we might wish it were otherwise. In this way, essentialist theories contribute an additional layer of ossification, blindness, and inaptness to the myopia we bring to many of our patterns of engagement with the world (Camp forthcoming).<sup>3</sup>

## 5. Theory Change and Frame Shifts: Prospects for Amelioration

Many instances of identity-centric thought and action are morally and socially troubling. Centering social identities can lead to treating others as "nothing more than" a token of some social group, often with an accompanying negative or dehumanizing stereotype.<sup>4</sup> Armed with an understanding of the cognitive implementation of such behavior, we can begin to consider how to address it in causally efficacious ways. In this section, we argue that this will centrally involve promoting perspectival shifts by promulgating new frames. In slogan form: we need memes, not (only) arguments.

The Frame View gives us reason to be suspicious of a range of dominant approaches to addressing identity-centric thought and action. Interventions that focus solely on changing beliefs, without considering the wider interpretive resources that agents are liable to employ, are blinkered. Beliefs are not the only or even primary mechanism through which we interface intuitively with the world. Identity-centric thought and action are liable to persist, especially in their affective and behavioral manifestations, even once essentialist beliefs are eliminated. And eliminating essentialist beliefs will be difficult so long as identitarian perspectives retain their intuitive pull. Thus, targeting identity-centric thought and action requires shifting frames.

This point gains bite when we consider interventions such as theory critique and conceptual engineering. Theory critique focuses on exposing flawed arguments, or false assumptions, behind dominant theories of social groups and oppression.<sup>5</sup> For example, feminist theorists have argued against

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<sup>3</sup> This echoes *systems justification* (Jost & Banaji 1994, Jost et al. 2004, Jost & Hunyady 2003, Yzerbit 1997) and *ideological* (Althusser 1970/2006, Eagleton 2014, Marx & Engels 1846/1970, Shelby 2003) views of essentialist beliefs, where such beliefs function to justify unjust social hierarchies.

<sup>4</sup> At the same time, as we noted in §1, centering social identities can also be important for building solidarity among members of marginalized social groups, embracing stigmatized aspects of one's sense of self, and engaging in meaningful political action against identity-based oppression. See Camp and Flores (forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> Our criticism here only applies to theorists who think of ideologies as sets of propositions or beliefs. Others construe ideology critique as involving the "reorganization of our society around different values, a restructuring of our practices so that we are positioned to recognize the value of new or different kinds of thing and coordinate

essentialist theories of gender, in particular against the view that gender is a biological property or that there are innate psychological differences between men and women (e.g. De Beauvoir 1952, Grillo 1995, Haslanger 2000, Spelman 1998, Witt 1995). Similar projects have also been undertaken concerning race (e.g. Appiah 1994, Mallon 2004, Shelby 2003, Zack 2014).

Such projects are indeed crucial for achieving a more accurate understanding of gender, race, and other social categories. However, if we are right about the relative importance of frames in contrast to beliefs, these projects should not occupy center stage in attempting to change behavior. Rejecting such theories or abandoning essentialist beliefs does not imply a fundamental shift in one's operative frames for gendered or racialized interactions. Indeed, in the absence of shifting frames and perspectives, theory critique is likely to produce resistant counter-theory-building, in the service of justifying one's intuitive, gut perspective (Lord, Ross, and Lepper, 1979, Taber & Lodge, 2006).

Conceptual engineering, as standardly construed, is likely to be similarly ineffective. Conceptual engineering involves proposing new extension-determining representations to attach to politically significant terms (Burgess and Plunkett 2013a, 2013b). Perhaps the most influential example is Sally Haslanger's (2000) proposal that we should, for social and political purposes, employ the term 'woman' such that "S is a woman iff S is systematically subordinated along some dimension, and S is 'marked' as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction" (p. 39).<sup>6</sup>

If the Frame View is right, we should be on the lookout in the first instance for bad *characterizations* of social kinds, as generated by inapt pernicious frames, and only secondarily for bad *concepts* (see Camp 2015 for the contrast between concepts and characterizations). Someone's concept of woman, understood as the representation they deploy in classifying persons around them and in forming reflective judgments and drawing inferences about them, could be maximally politically sophisticated even as that same person is also pervasively disposed, at a more intuitive level, to characterize women in sexist ways. Conceptual engineering, much like theory building, is useful for theoretical inquiry on the social domain. But on its own, it is unlikely to produce meaningful changes in identity-centric behavior in ordinary life.

Rather than focusing primarily on intellectualist interventions like theory critique and conceptual engineering, we should use frames to target perspectives directly. Our goal should be to produce perspectival shifts: to get people to actually and persistently notice different sets of features, to spontaneously explain those features on different grounds and connect them in different patterns, and especially to alter their normative evaluations and gut affective responses to members of any target social group, especially marginalized groups.

As we have argued, frames are at the root of much dangerous perspectival cognition. But their cognitive power also makes them our best allies in the project of amelioration. Because frames crystallize perspectives into portable packages that can be easily distributed and employed to express

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on just terms" (Haslanger 2017, p. 169). On that expansive view, shifting perspectives is a component of ideology critique, rather than an alternative to it.

<sup>6</sup> In later work (Haslanger 2020), Haslanger rejects the view that we should employ the term "woman" in these ways, which exclude some trans women, maintaining only that this concept is useful for the political purposes of capturing the social formation of our current public gender categories.

perspectives across contexts, they can function as touchstones for reorienting one's whole mode of engagement with a topic.

Examples of positive frames include positive narratives that center members of marginalized groups; photographs, symbols, and other visual media; memes; and slogans. Of course, this is not a novel point: it is reflected in calls for better representation of members of marginalized groups in mainstream media, in the value placed on role models from such groups, and in the development of now-ubiquitous frames combating bigotry, such as the "Black Lives Matter" slogan and Pride flag.

What makes for a politically good frame is highly context-sensitive. A minimal constraint on good frames is that they be epistemically apt, reliably generating characterizations that are accurate at least in relevant respects (Camp 2019). However, epistemic aptness does not suffice to render a frame politically effective. Inculcating a new perspective can be cognitively costly. It requires shifts in deep-seated habits of interpretation – habits that smooth social coordination among all members of society, and that make it especially comfortable for privileged agents to navigate the world. Given this, it is especially crucial that ameliorative frames also be intuitively appealing, especially emotionally and aesthetically – catchy, poignant, funny, or relatable.

Simply generating new alternative frames for social identities is not enough to shift identity-centric thought and action. We also need to circulate those frames, and to help others work their way into a full, intuitive appreciation of their perspectives. We need to loosen the intuitive grip of old pernicious frames. And we need to motivate people to move from merely achieving more perceptive interpretation and toward enacting forceful, often risky interventions on material and cultural reality.

Ultimately, such changes can only be achieved through systemic effort. Still, we can take substantive steps to alter our own perspectives and those in our immediate vicinity, in order to bring them into closer alignment with what we reflectively believe to be true. Among other things, we can prioritize a practice of questioning the relevance of appeals to group membership in explaining individual people's actions; we can avoid accentuating differences between categories (Prentice and Miller 2007); we can highlight counter-stereotypical features of members of marginalized groups; and we can point out both non-obvious similarities between people from different social groups and non-obvious differences between people in the same social group (Gelman 2005).<sup>7</sup>

Our point here has been that abstract argumentation without concern for intuitive perspectival interpretation is unlikely to be effective. That said, perspectival framing and argumentative theorizing should be deeply intertwined. If we are only concerned about shifting perspectives, we risk eroding important epistemic values. We need ultimately to provide substantive factual and normative justifications for concrete policies, structural changes, and perspectival changes. Theories and arguments, rather than frames, are the most appropriate tools for performing such justificatory work. Still, even once such theories are on the table, we still need to habituate to the ways of seeing things that they support. And we need to probe and refine those theories, in ways that frames and perspectives are ideally suited to help us accomplish (Camp 2020).

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<sup>7</sup> There are complicated empirical questions about what conditions need to be in place for such interventions to succeed. For instance, highlighting counter-stereotypical kind members is only likely to be effective where the group is already perceived as encompassing trait variability, or where many different exemplars with a range of counter-stereotypical traits are presented specific circumstances (Richards & Hewstone 2001).



We should, in other words, make space for rational argument, albeit on a more capacious and warm-blooded view of rationality and argumentation than philosophers have traditionally employed. Effective rational argument does not target isolated beliefs in specific propositions. Instead, it advocates for accurate and fruitful taxonomies for parsing the world and allocating attention, for empirically well-grounded explanations, and for normatively justified emotional and practical responses. Frames are an important tool for both inquiry and advocacy.

## 6. Conclusion

We live in an identitarian culture. In particular, we often center social identities in ways that are reductive and inapt, and that contribute to discriminatory behavior. In this paper, we have investigated the psychological basis for forms of thought and action that center social identities. We argued that identity-centric thought and action are largely the result of how we regulate attention and interpretation at an intuitive level. Rather than looking to essentialist beliefs or theories about social groups to explain instances where agents treat others through the lens of social identity, we should look first to the frames we employ and the perspectives we occupy. Such an appeal to frames enables us to explain highly heterogeneous and otherwise theoretically baffling cases of identitarianism, ranging from the inchoate, fleeting, and emotional to the overt, committed, and theoretical. It also enables us to see why, in order to dislodge pernicious identitarian habits of thinking, we need more than just arguments: we need memes, images, slogans, and other frames that move us beyond seeing others in reductive and tokenizing ways.<sup>8</sup>

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