



# Age of Identity for Social Categories

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## Introduction

Recent research on religious affiliation suggests that it is an important part of social cognition and that, like many essentialized social categories, it may be seen as innate, informative, and unalterable. For example, Rule, Garrett, and Ambady (2011) found that participants could distinguish Mormon from non-Mormon faces at better than chance levels. Haslam, Rothschild, and Ernst (2000) found that the categories Catholic and Jewish were highly essentialized along the entitativity dimension (i.e., that people believe members of these categories are very similar). Similarly, Toosi and Ambady (2011) found that several religious categories are essentialized.

Religion is an especially interesting social category because it possesses attributes of both essentialized and non-essentialized categories. Like political ideology, it is often thought of as a set of beliefs; yet, like race, it is acquired early in life and passed on from parent to child. Religion is also possibly unique in that, in addition to being inherited, it is also acquired through rituals such as baptism. Given the complexity of acquisition of religious affiliation, lay beliefs about its innateness are not well understood.

We hypothesized that those religious categories that are traditional (i.e., are well-known, stable, and long-lasting religious categories) will be seen as more innate than non-traditional religious categories (i.e., newer or marginalized religious categories), that both types of religious categories would be seen as less innate than race but more innate than political ideology.

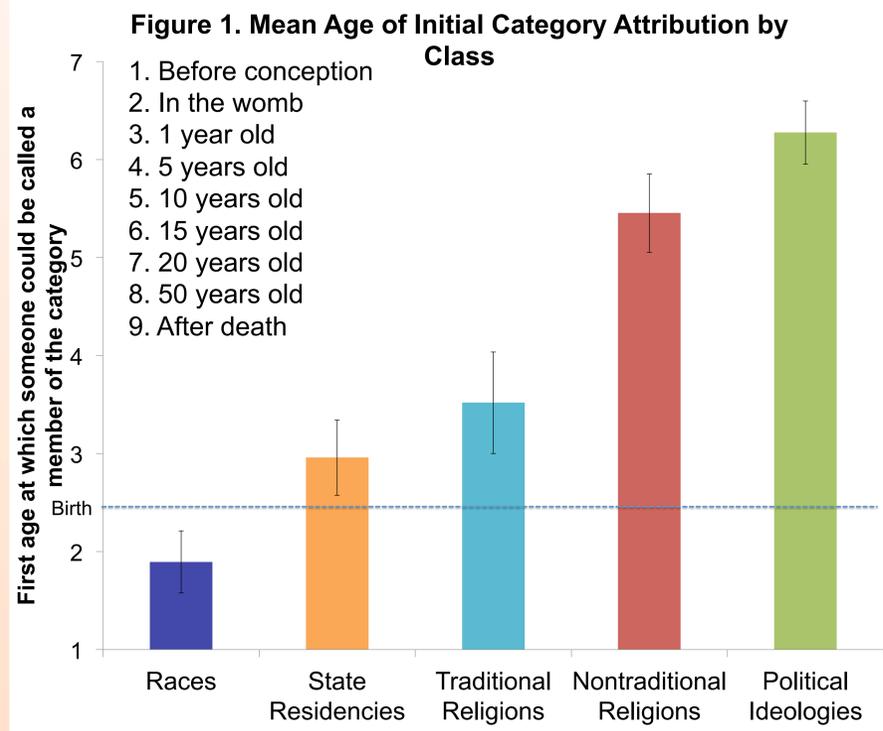
## Method

Forty undergraduates completed a survey asking them to identify the ages at which someone could be a member of 34 social categories. They were presented with the categories one at a time and asked to check all of the ages at which it would be appropriate to say someone is a member of the category. Response options were *before conception*, *in the womb*, *1 year old*, *5 years old*, *10 years old*, *15 years old*, *20 years old*, *50 years old*, and *after death*. The dependent variable is the first age at which a participant attributed the identity.

The categories presented fell into five major classes: races, state residencies, traditional religions, nontraditional religions, and political ideologies. The full list of categories is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Categories presented to participants.

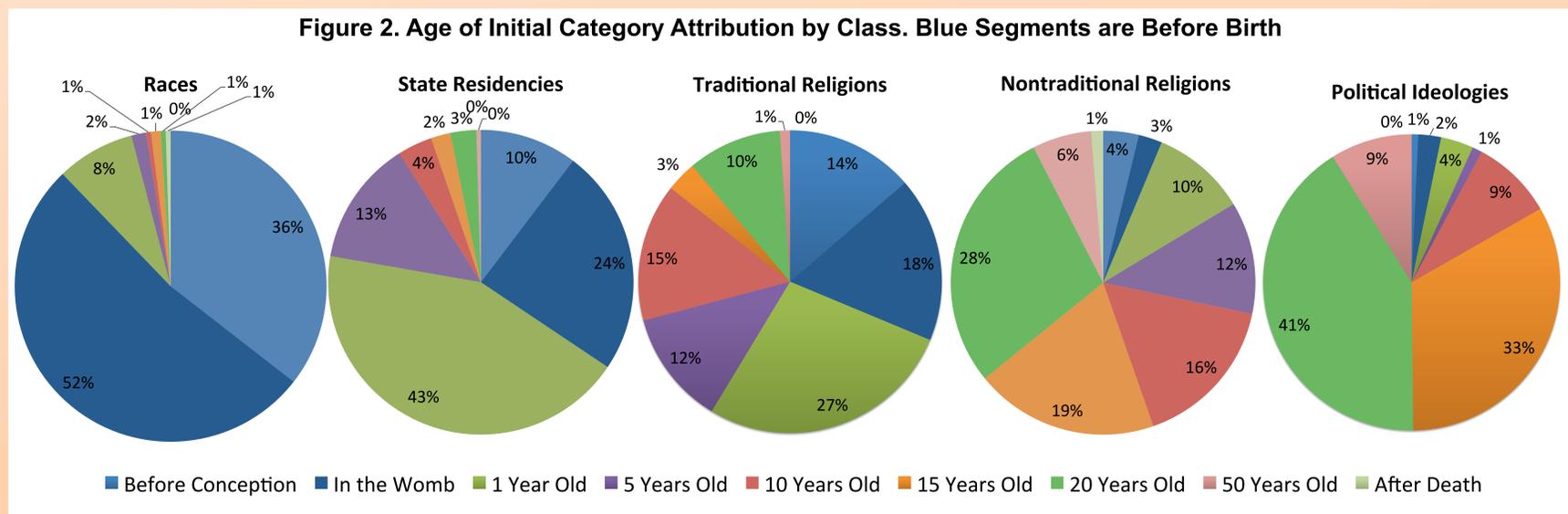
Class	Categories
Races	Asian, African American/Black, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, European American/White
State Residencies	Alabaman, Alaskan, Arizonan, Californian, Floridian, Idahoan, Iowan, Louisianan, Montanan, New Jerseyan, Texan
Traditional Religions	Buddhist, Catholic, Hindu, Jewish, Mormon, Muslim, Protestant
Nontraditional Religions	Agnostic, Atheist, New Age, Scientologist
Political Ideologies	Anarchist, Capitalist, Communist, Conservative, Liberal, Libertarian, Socialist



## Results

A one-way repeated measures ANOVA on the mean first age identified for each class of categories revealed a significant effect,  $F(4, 39) = 139.293, p < .001$  (Figure 1). Bonferroni-adjusted post-hoc tests found differences among all classes, except state residencies and traditional religions.

The distinction between before birth (before conception, in the womb) and after birth (1 year old to after death) is important to judgments of innateness because things present before birth are more likely to be considered innate. Data for each category were recoded to reflect this distinction and averaged across the classes. A repeated measures ANOVA on this variable was significant,  $F(4, 39) = 67.612, p < .001$ . As shown in Figure 2, about 9/10 of responses attributed racial identities before birth, 1/3 attributed state residencies and traditional religious affiliations before birth, and almost none attributed nontraditional religious affiliations and political ideologies before birth.



## Discussion

Based on our results, it appears participants are willing to assign religious affiliation labels to others at fairly young ages. Though the majority of participants do not see religious affiliation as innate, a substantial proportion do. Religious affiliation is unlike political ideology in this respect and more like geographic identity. This may point to folk intuitions that religious affiliation is more innate than other, superficially similar, categories and identify religion as something other than a set of beliefs and behaviors.

## References

- Haslam, N., Rothschild, L., & Ernst, D. (2000). Essentialist beliefs about social categories. *British Journal of Social Psychology, 39*(1), 113–127.
- Rule, N., Garrett, J., & Ambady, N. (2010). On the Perception of Religious Group Membership from Faces. *PLoS ONE, 5*(e14241). doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0014241
- Toosi, N., & Ambady, N. (2011). Ratings of essentialism for eight religious identities. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion, 21*, 17-29.