

Psychological Essentialism in Selecting the 14th Dalai Lama: An Alternative Account

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In a letter to *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, Bloom and Gelman (2008) proposed that common-sense psychological essentialism as applied to objects could explain the selection process for the 14th Dalai Lama in Tibet. Specifically, they argued that Tibetan bureaucrats represent the Dalai Lama's personal objects as imbued with his essence. Because of this, they claimed, Tibetan bureaucrats test whether candidates are the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama based on whether the candidates can correctly identify, from a number of items, the one that belonged to the 13th Dalai Lama. In this article, we draw on knowledge of the Tibetan Buddhist selection process to argue that Bloom and Gelman have overlooked the important role that the continuity of personal memories plays in the process of selecting the Dalai Lama. Finally, we propose that assumptions about the continuity of qualities for persons, rather than objects, drive the selection procedures.

In our view, Bloom and Gelman's claim that continued memory does not play a role in the object-identification task because some of the items are identical is not warranted. First, though some of the objects may appear to be identical to ordinary folk, they are not assumed to be identical to the Dalai Lama, who is supposed to have intimate familiarity with those he owned and this is exactly the point of the task. Second, when candidates are asked to identify the Dalai Lama's personal item they are judged both on the object they select and on the quality with which they examine and handle the objects (see Baratz, 2008). This does not imply, as Bloom and Gelman suggest, an ability to detect the Dalai Lama's essence through his objects, since the successful candidate is supposed to *be* the Dalai Lama, and this would be redundant. Rather, we propose that reactions to objects are important because they indicate differential familiarity with them based on personal memory, in much the same way as a child would delight in being reunited with a cherished toy. Moreover, that memories are assumed to continue in reincarnation is evident from the role they play in the other phases of the selection process. For example, children are often identified as potential candidates because of their spontaneous recollection concerning people and places familiar to the Dalai Lama (Lama, 1998; Furer-Halmendorf, 1964; Rinpoche and Hopkins 1981; Wangdu, 1975).

We do not deny the possibility that authentic objects are treated as though they have essences. However, in the identification procedures for the Dalai Lama, we suggest that assumptions about personal identity, rather than assumptions about authentic objects, drive such practices. This raises the question of why memories are assumed to continue in reincarnation. We propose that people represent others as having essences that makes them who they are and enables them to continue as the same person over time. On this version,

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autobiographical memories are the best index to essentialized personal identity. This claim is deserving of further attention.

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