

The Essence of Americans

Research Report: PADS-008 | September 25, 2023

Research Question

Part of human reasoning involves reducing people, animals, and things to their core essence, a tendency beginning in childhood (Ahn et al., 2001; Gelman, 2003). We define dogs and cats by different essences, for example, and we do the same for people when we define them by their sex, race, age, and the like. Though helpful as a crude way of categorizing things in the world, essentialism makes us prone to error. Believing, for example, that water is defined by the essential element of “wetness” will fail to recognize ice as water; or, believing that those with recent European ancestry are defined by the essential element of “whiteness” will fail to recognize variations in cultural background or individual experience (Roth et al., 2023). While essentialism *feels* useful in its simplifying of an otherwise complex reality, it can lead to negative stereotyping. Given that essentialist reasoning typically produces rigid categorizations of people, and that rigid categorizations of people might be conducive to political misinformation, conspiracism, or extremism (e.g., Buhagiar et al., 2018; Kurzwelly et al., 2020), in this report we ask: how common is the tendency to essentialize amongst the American public?

Methodology

Data Source

- Political Accuracy and Divisions Study (“PADS,” collected August 2022 to October 2022 using Qualtrics Panel Services and quota sampling)

Data Quality Control

- All participants in this dataset passed attention, response time, fraud, duplication, and bot checks.

Participants

- 3014 adults in the United States (51.2% Female)
- Average Age = 44.39 years (SD = 17.41 years)
- 46.4% White; 32.2% Hispanic; 21.2% Black

Measures

- Essentialism Indicators:** Participants indicated to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statements...
 - Knowing someone’s *sex* tells you what that person is like.
 - Knowing someone’s *race* tells you what that person is like.
 - Knowing someone’s *income* tells you what that person is like.
 - Knowing someone’s *age* tells you what that person is like.
- Political Orientation:** Respondents were asked, “When thinking about social/cultural issues, where would you place yourself on the political continuum?”

Summary of Findings

- Relative to those with lower levels of educational attainment, those with a graduate or professional degree were more likely to essentialize people on the basis of sex, race, income and age (Fig. 1).
- Relative to those with more moderate political beliefs, respondents identifying as “Very Liberal” or “Very Conservative” were both more likely to essentialize others (Fig. 2).
 - Respondents identifying as “Liberal” were the least likely to essentialize people on the basis of race or sex.
- Millennial respondents were more likely than other generations to essentialize others on the basis of race, sex and income (Fig. 3).
 - Millennial and GenZ respondents were equally likely to essentialize others on the basis of age.
 - Baby Boomers were substantially less likely to essentialize others.

Take-Home Messages

- Overall, most people did not engage in essentialist reasoning.
- Those who did engage in essentialist reasoning were more often (1) highly educated, (2) politically extreme and (3) younger.
- Have an interpretation? Share it here: research@skeptic.com

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Figure 1

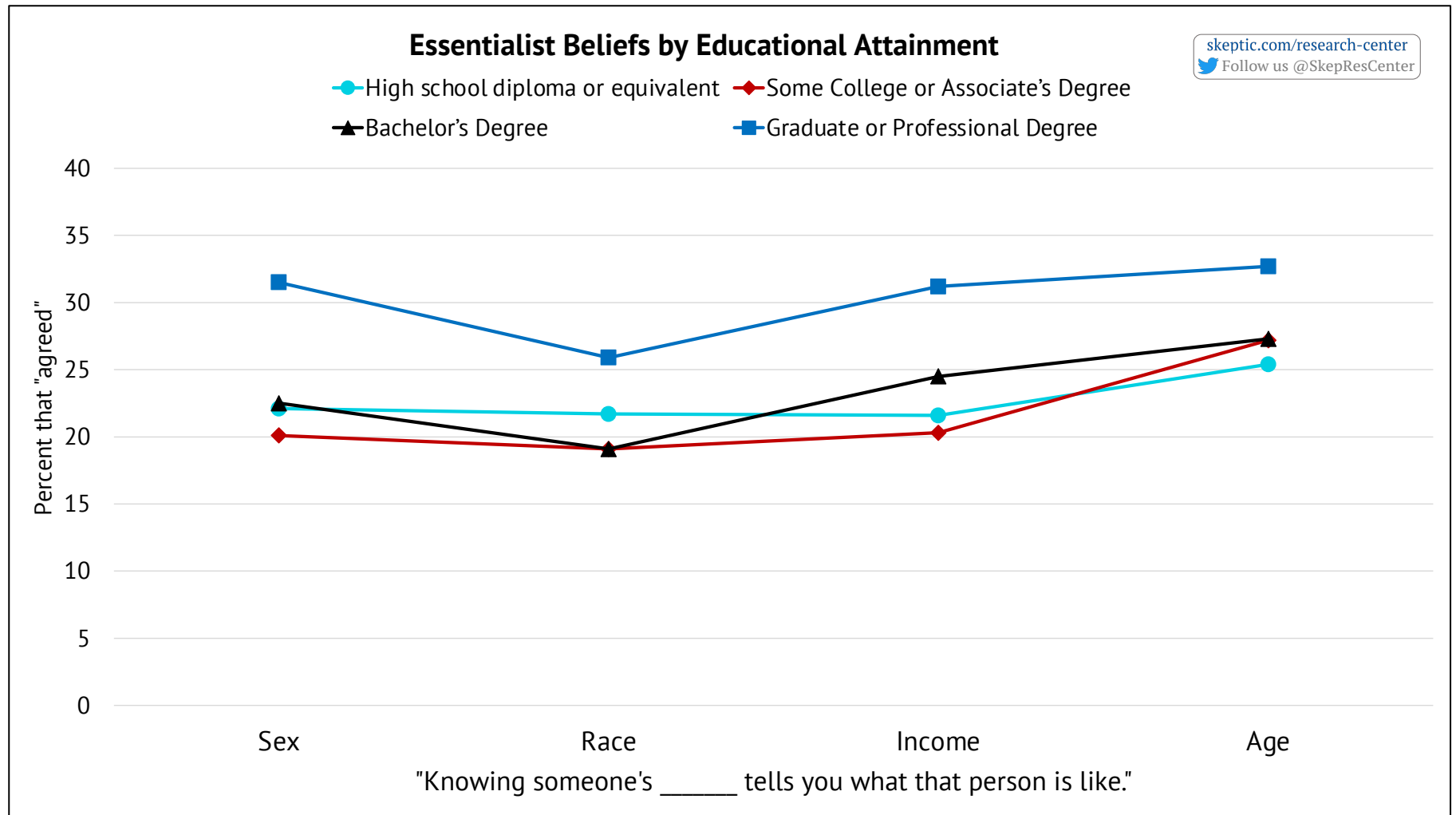


Figure 2

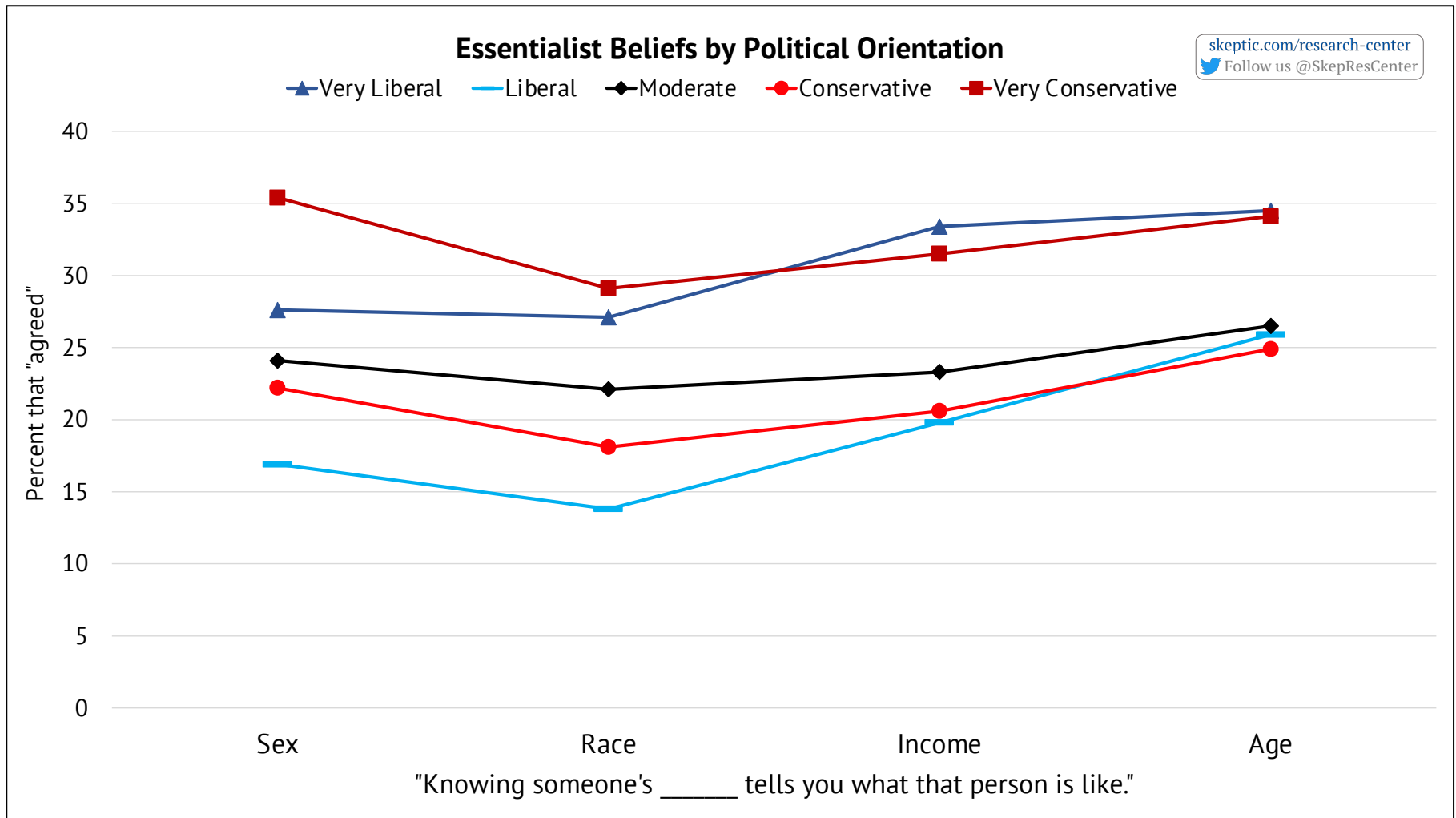
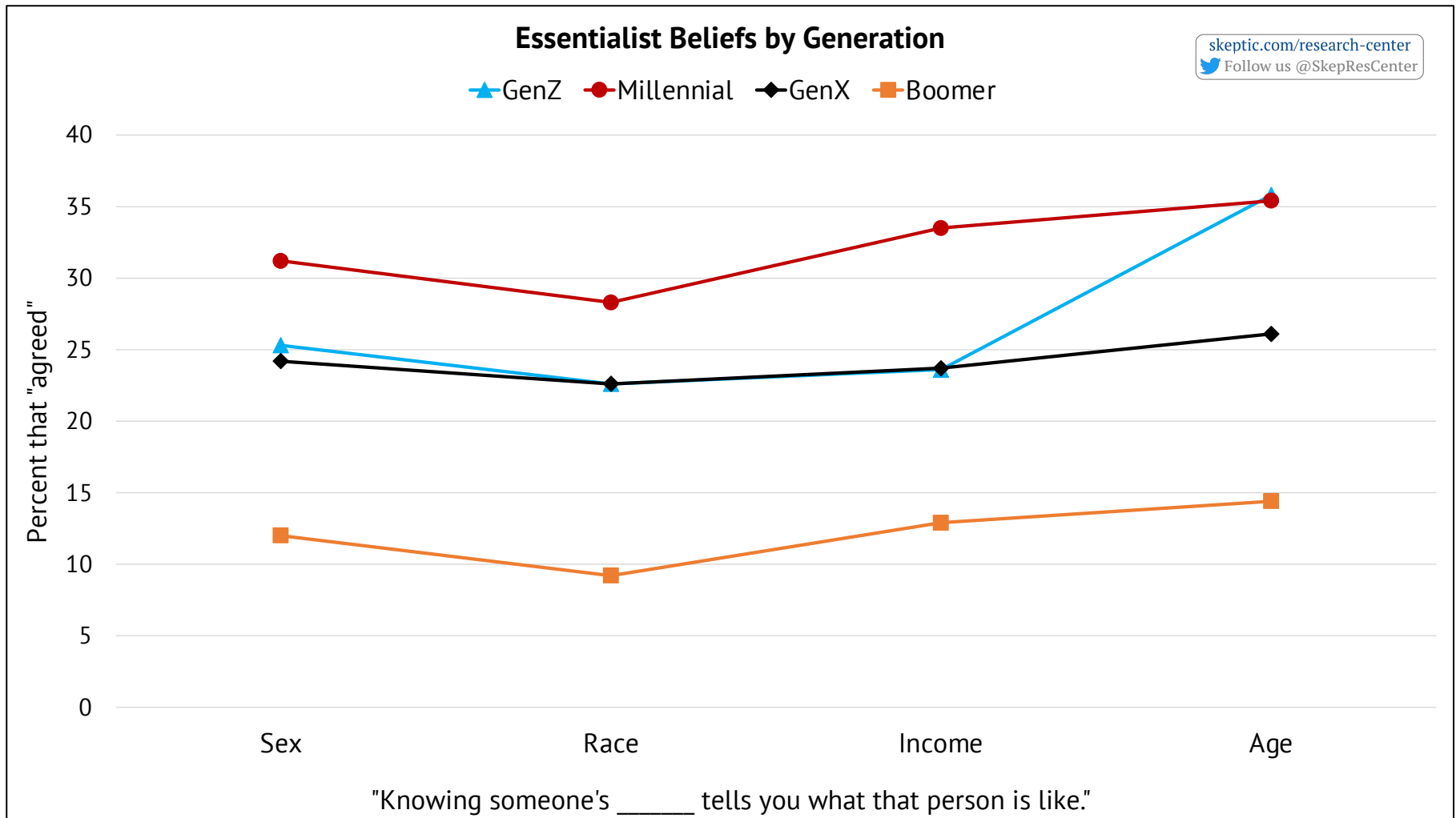


Figure 3



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