



Adolescents' beliefs about caste-essentialism and their social location in Nepal

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ABSTRACT

Social essentialism plays a significant role in legitimizing power imbalances within hierarchical societies, such as the caste system. We investigated whether adolescents endorsed caste essentialist beliefs and whether these beliefs about the stability of caste correlate with their perceived social mobility and social location (caste, SES). We interviewed 590 students between the ages of 10 and 18 years ($M_{age} = 14$ years; $SD_{age} = 1$ year 7 months) of grades 6–10 from 25 school classes in Nepal to assess their caste essentialist beliefs with a switched-at-birth task and measured their perceived social mobility in terms of perceived feasibility regarding marriage to a higher caste. In line with our assumptions, adolescents of the highest caste group showed stronger essentialist beliefs regarding both higher and lower caste when compared to adolescents from the other caste groups and believed that an individual's caste would not change even when switched at birth. Adolescents of the highest caste and from higher-SES backgrounds expressed stronger essentialist beliefs than their peers. Caste essentialist beliefs and perceived feasibility regarding marriage to a higher caste were significantly correlated. However, adolescents' social location did not play a significant role in their perceived feasibility of marriage to a higher caste. Overall, they expected low social mobility concerning marriage. We discuss the complex associations between caste essentialism, social mobility beliefs and social location during adolescence.

1. Introduction

Essentialism is the propensity to believe that individuals belong to distinct ethnic, biological, or cultural groups and possess inherent and unchanging characteristics that define their membership in these categories (Medin & Ortony, 1989; Gelman, 2003). Essentialist beliefs about social categories fall under the framework of social essentialism, whereby core dimensions have been identified that shape how social categories are perceived (Rhodes, 2012; Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000). Among those dimensions, stability is considered a significant element of essentialism because it reflects the belief that social categories are historically stable and persistent over time. This perception contributes to the view that these categories are unchanging and enduring, reinforcing the idea that they have a fixed essence (Gelman, 2003). Such beliefs can influence how individuals perceive and interact with members of these categories, potentially leading to stereotyping and resistance to social change (Bastian & Haslam, 2006). Indeed, social essentialism has been associated with stereotyping and prejudice (Haslam & Levy, 2006; Keller, 2005; Prentice & Miller, 2007), which in turn

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increases the risk of negative social consequences (Rhodes & Mandalaywala, 2017; Chen & Ratliff, 2018). Currently, little is known regarding social essentialist beliefs in contexts with a history of strong social boundaries between people, whereby the idea of stable and unchanging social categories may be particularly relevant. Therefore, the current study focused on the role of social essentialism, with a particular focus on stability, in Nepal.

1.1. Social Essentialism in the Context of Nepal

Nepal is a country with a rich cultural heritage and diversity, with a strong focus on social inclusion (Gurung, 2022). This strong focus emerged as policies aimed to rectify prevalent social inequalities that resulted from the caste system, rendering people of lower caste at the lower end of the social spectrum (Bhatta, Sharma, Pherali, & Rowell, 2008; Subedi, 2016). The caste system was a practice within Hindu societies that consisted of largely endogamous communities that were organized in a hierarchical social order. It was formally abolished by law in 1963 (Nepali, 2018); however, former power structures continue to shape beliefs about social mobility and perpetuate discriminatory attitudes (Pandey, 2010; Tiwari et al., 2016).

Essentialist beliefs about caste (caste essentialism) reinforce the notion that individuals from different castes have inherent and unchangeable attributes. This leads to the establishment of a rank system, further consolidating the position of dominant castes and marginalizing lower castes (Mahalingam, 2003; 2007). Despite caste-based attributes having a weaker biological basis than race or ethnicity (Van den Berghe, 1978), the social order appears to persist due to caste-essentialist beliefs within society. Furthermore, caste is a distinct basis for social stratification of Hindu Nepalese societies differing fundamentally from class-based stratification. Caste is considered hereditary, whereby an individual is identified with a caste group right at birth, whereas class is not determined by birth but by wealth accumulated by an individual or their family; therefore, social class can change over generations (D'Souza, 1967). However, a noteworthy parallel between caste and class can be observed in Western societies, particularly in the context of aristocratic and royal families. In these systems, individuals are often regarded as "blue-blooded" from birth (Perić & Buntić, 2021). Additionally, marriage is typically restricted to members of other royal lineages and can propagate inequality across generations (Goni, 2015). Similar to the caste system, such hierarchical structures continue to exist, as evidenced by the continued existence of royal monarchies in Europe (Hazell & Morris, 2020). Thus, these systems demonstrate how essentialism can play a significant role in maintaining and legitimizing power imbalances and inequalities within society, even when they are prohibited by law, as is the case with the caste system. It has also been reported that even individuals who consider caste irrelevant often have essentialist beliefs regarding members of a caste category and consider their traits to be inherent and stable (Deschenaux, 2019).

Previous evidence suggests connections between caste essentialist beliefs and perceived social mobility. For example, attitudes towards caste were found to be related to intuitive theories regarding the achievement capabilities of different caste group members in late childhood and adults in India (Srinivasan, Dunham, Hicks, & Barner, 2016). However, developmental considerations of caste essentialist beliefs and associated perceptions about changing one's social status remain scarce. Moreover, there is a need for more insights from a wide range of cultural contexts regarding the development of essentialist beliefs (Deschenaux, 2019). Within such diverse cultural contexts, adolescents' own social position in the social system may have different implications for their essentialist beliefs. The current study aimed to address these research gaps by studying whether adolescents in Nepal hold essentialist beliefs about caste (with a focus on the stability of group membership), whether such beliefs relate to their perceived social mobility, and whether these beliefs differ depending on individuals' age and their own social position, focusing on the concept of social location.

1.2. Social Location and Social Essentialism

To understand the basis of essentialist beliefs and their relation to the social position of individuals holding such beliefs, it is critical to understand identity within social groups. According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), an individual's identification with a social group and their assessment of their group's social status significantly influence the evaluation of other groups. Individuals in higher social positions often employ essentialist reasoning to legitimize and perpetuate existing systems of inequality (Morton, Hornsey, & Postmes, 2009). Within social structures, caste and socioeconomic status (SES) are important social categories which mark the social location of an individual (Mahalingam, 2003; Kraus & Keltner, 2013) and either put an individual at an advantage or disadvantage within society. An individual's own group status plays a role in legitimizing group hierarchies as reflected in studies where adults from higher-ranked groups tended to show greater hierarchy-reinforcing beliefs (Anderson, Hildreth, & Sharps, 2020). Individuals occupying higher socioeconomic status positions are also more likely to endorse meritocratic and essentialist ideologies (Kraus & Keltner, 2013). Del Rio and Strasser (2011) showed that essentialist beliefs about the poor were more prevalent in children belonging to higher, as compared to lower, SES backgrounds. Additionally, recent findings indicate that group status corresponds with attitudes that reinforce hierarchies, since children in advantaged groups that were experimentally induced were more likely to judge the group hierarchy to be fair, generalizable, and wrong to challenge (Rizzo, Roberts, & Rhodes, 2023). Lastly, recent work emphasized that SES may interact with other aspects of social group membership, whereby the tendency to essentialize social categories like SES was particularly pronounced among individuals of higher SES and majority ethnic groups; hence individuals of higher status across multiple groups may show the strongest essentialist beliefs (Zhu & Scott, 2025). Building on these insights, we seek to investigate how social location intersects with essentialist thinking, particularly in developmental contexts where the promise or absence of social mobility may shape how individuals understand and rationalize social hierarchies.

1.3. Developmental Considerations of Caste Essentialism and Perceived Social Mobility

There is evidence that social essentialism for categories such as race, gender or ethnicity develops as early as age four, where children consider these categories as stable and intrinsic and determined by inherent factors present at birth (Rhodes & Mandalaywala, 2017). These beliefs are not necessarily diminished by adulthood (Eidson & Coley, 2014). With regards to caste, there is little previous work with a developmental focus. Caste categories are non-biologically marked categories, and their development is distinct from those of other social categories (Dunham, Srinivasan, Dotsch, & Barner, 2014). One of the few studies on caste essentialism (Srinivasan et al., 2016) showed that among older children and adolescents (age range: 10–18 years) and adults (age range: 20–61 years), caste attitudes (the importance of caste in one's life and society) were linked to intuitive theories about personal freedom (beliefs about control over one's life decisions), intelligence and personality traits. In other words, individuals who placed more importance on the caste system were more likely to adopt deterministic intuitive theories about personal freedom and considered traits like intelligence and personality to be fixed rather than malleable. Taken together, this first study on developmental considerations focused on beliefs regarding certain characteristics of caste being unchangeable (i.e., the dimension of immutability) and documented that when caste was more salient, older children and adolescents reported an awareness of how personal restrictions result from the caste system (Srinivasan et al., 2016).

Based on this first study, we assume that adolescents' identification with their caste becomes a relevant feature for their essentialist beliefs and perceptions of social mobility. Adolescence marks an important period characterized by increasing salience of social groups and heightened meaning of social identification for their own self-esteem (Quintana, 1998). Adolescents begin to develop a coherent identity, including their group identity, which is shaped by their peers, media and community (Zhang & Qin, 2023) and heavily influenced by transitional periods and life events that challenge one's existing sense of self (Branje, 2022). Previous studies have documented adolescents' increasing understanding of the sources and consequences of social inequalities regarding the social system that they are a part of (Grütter, Dhakal, & Killen, 2021; Flanagan et al., 2014; Seider et al., 2020). Thereby, social group membership, such as SES and caste, may increasingly become an important factor for adolescents' reasoning about social mobility, particularly within societies that limit opportunities based on social origin (Grütter et al., 2021). Evidence from another Asian context (South Korea) shows that among children and adolescents (age range: 10–18 years), increasing age was associated with greater awareness of their social and economic position and lower perceived social mobility for their own future occupations (Kim & Gewirtz, 2019). In addition to age, other social structural factors such as SES and gender determine adolescents' social location and shape their perception of agency, which may ultimately affect their perceived social mobility (Madjdian et al., 2021; Kim & Gewirtz, 2020).

1.4. Differential Caste Essentialism and Social Location

When studying essentialism about caste, it is important to consider potential correlations with other social categories, particularly SES, as strong correlations have been reported between caste and SES in terms of access to resources, education, and occupational opportunities in societies historically structured by the caste system (Gurung, 2022). Such differences between social categories may also result in differences in essentialist beliefs among and about members of these categories (i.e., differential social essentialism). Individuals of the same SES belonging to different castes may have similar availability of resources but significantly different access to social opportunities, thereby resulting in differences in beliefs regarding social mobility. In Nepal, long-standing tradition has resulted in the internalization of essentialist beliefs about caste-based identities (Subedi, 2016). Moving upwards in the caste hierarchy is a form of social mobility and is achieved either by the process of Sanskritization (a legal code for purification, Srinivas, 1957) or by marriage to someone belonging to an upper caste (Jones, 1976; Sharma, 1976). Hence, perceptions of mobility regarding inter-caste marriage are entangled with caste essentialist beliefs and need to be explored systematically as essentialist thinking contributes to the stigmatization of such marriages (Mahalingam, 2003).

Essentialism can serve to legitimize unbalanced power structures, which are captured in the essentialist theory of power. This theory argues that essentialist thinking helps individuals higher in each hierarchy to maintain their position (Mahalingam, 2003; Kraus & Keltner, 2013). The variable nature of essentialism (i.e., differential essentialism) also indicates that essentialist beliefs are not stable within individuals but are often endorsed strategically (Morton et al., 2009). For example, individuals may endorse essentialist beliefs when they can be used to exclude others but not when they are used to exclude themselves (Morton et al., 2009). Different caste groups may or may not endorse essentialist beliefs strategically. For example, high-caste elites often oppose the reservation policy and the practice of positive discrimination in favor of lower castes in education and employment in India (Upadhyaya, 2007) and Nepal (Dhakal, 2013). Similarly, adolescents of higher caste and higher SES may express stronger caste essentialist beliefs, given the heightened role of social status for future occupational opportunities during adolescence.

1.5. The Current Study and Hypotheses

The goal of this study was to investigate adolescents' beliefs about the essential nature of caste, particularly whether they perceive caste as stable and persistent. In addition, we investigated the associations between such essentialist beliefs about caste with perceived social mobility in terms of adolescents' perceived feasibility of marriage to a higher caste. The paradigm utilized for this purpose is a modified form of the switched-at-birth (SAB) methodology (Gelman & Wellman, 1991), whereby participants responded to questions formulated to assess their caste essentialist beliefs (i.e., whether the caste of individuals gets switched when the individuals are switched at birth into a family of a different caste) and their social mobility beliefs regarding inter-caste marriage (i.e., whether the switched-to another-caste at birth individuals are likely to marry into a higher caste later on). The SAB paradigm has been employed to

evaluate young children's essentialist beliefs (Hirschfeld, 1995; Mandalaywala, Ranger-Murdock, Amodio, & Rhodes, 2019). In the context of caste, a study conducted in India examined caste essentialism in adults using a brain-transplant paradigm to explore whether caste is perceived as an inherent trait (Mahalingam, 2007). The data showed a greater degree of beliefs in caste change related to an individual of a lower caste but not related to an individual from a higher caste. Moreover, the findings indicated that individuals belonging to higher castes believed more in the stability of caste membership and therefore held more pronounced caste essentialist beliefs (Mahalingam, 2007).

Building on these findings and the concept of differential essentialism (Williams, 2015), we hypothesized that adolescents would be more likely to believe that an individual born into a higher-caste family would retain their caste identity, even if raised in a lower-caste family. In contrast, we expected greater variability in adolescents' beliefs regarding the caste of an individual born into a lower-caste family but raised in a higher-caste family (H1). Regarding adolescents' own caste, we hypothesized that adolescents of higher caste backgrounds would have stronger essentialist beliefs compared to adolescents of lower caste backgrounds (H2). This hypothesis is grounded in social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and the essentialist theory of power (Mahalingam, 2007). In addition, given the negative relationship between essentialist and mobility beliefs (Xu, Wen, Zuo, & Rhodes, 2023), we expected significant correlations between essentialist beliefs and the perceived feasibility of marriage to higher caste (H3). We also expected that adolescents from higher caste backgrounds would show a higher perceived feasibility of marriage of a switched-to-lower-caste character to another higher caste character, as they would be more essentialist (and assume that the caste would not change, H4). To account for adolescents' social location, defined by their caste as well as SES, we hypothesized that adolescents of higher caste background with a higher SES would express stronger essentialist beliefs (H5). This is because these individuals may want to reinforce the caste hierarchy to maintain their position at the top of the social ladder (Mahalingam, 2007). Furthermore, drawing on studies suggesting a complex understanding of social status and inequalities among older adolescents (Flanagan & Kornbluh, 2019) and among participants of a wider age range of older children and adolescents (Srinivasan et al., 2016), we expected that older participants would perceive lower social mobility (H6).

2. Methods

2.1. Sample

Participants included 590 students between the ages of 10 and 18 years ($M_{age} = 14$ years; $SD_{age} = 1$ year 7 months) of grades 6–10 from 25 school classes in Nepal. Participants were enrolled in five schools situated in a remote area within the Kathmandu Valley, characterized by significant societal inequalities according to the Central Bureau of Statistics Nepal (2011). Student information about gender (54 % girls), family SES, and caste was gained through direct (gender) and indirect (SES and caste) information.

The SES of students was gauged using housing and property-related items from a comprehensive statistical report on social and economic development in Nepal (Central Bureau of Statistics Nepal, 2011). Based on the data of this representative report, the predictive value of each of these indicators for the real per capita consumption was estimated for the region in which the data was collected and was used as a proxy for the SES of each student in the current sample, whereby the estimates were corrected for inflation ($M = 40,124$ Nepalese rupees (NPR), $SD = 17,580$ NPR, range = 7061 – 83,663 NPR).

We gained information about students' caste from their last names (Gellner, 2007). Since caste is a sensitive topic (Chrispal, Bapuji, & Zietsma, 2021), we did not ask students to self-identify. Instead, we asked two local social workers from the same region where we conducted the data collection to independently rate the caste of all the existing participant names. To check their ratings, particularly in the case that the two raters did not agree (regarding 36 out of 220 last names, 16 %), we consulted two experts (professors at a local university with a special research focus on social history and social inequalities related to Nepal's traditions). The experts agreed on their ratings, except for 8 not common last names, in which we went with the rating of the majority. Consequently, 24 % of the sample was classified as the highest caste, called Brahmins ($n = 139$). 26 % of the sample belonged to the second caste group called Chhetri ($n = 154$). The Chhetri are a distinct group of castes in terms of cultural practices, and their economic index is very closely related to the Brahmins (Jodhka & Naudet, 2023). Next, 30 % of the sample belonged to the caste of Newars ($n = 176$), which is a non-Hindu caste that is prominent in the Kathmandu valley (and even has its own caste system), holding relatively strong economic positions within the area. 16 % of the participants belonged to ethnic castes outside the traditional caste system, the so-called Janajati ($n = 95$), which represent social minority groups due to speaking different first languages and different customs and traditions. 4 % of the sample was from the lowest caste within the Hindu caste system, called the Dalits ($n = 26$, including Dalits of the Newar group). Dalits are marginalized communities that have been systemically excluded from opportunities and historically subjected to discriminatory

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of Participants by Caste Groups.

Caste	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i> SES	<i>SD</i> SES	<i>M</i> Age	<i>SD</i> Age
Brahmin	139	40,864.43	17,759.27	12 y 9 m	1 y 6 m
Chhetri	154	39,561.84	17,572.81	12 y 10 m	1 y 5 m
Newar	176	41,073.45	16,055.39	12 y 11 m	1 y 7 m
Janajati	95	38,066.34	19,411.56	13 y 6 m	1 y 8 m
Dalit	26	40,912.60	20,341.35	13 y 4 m	1 y 7 m

Note: SES refers to the estimated real per capita consumption and is reported in Nepalese Rupees. Age is reported in years (y) and months (m).

behavior by other castes (Kafle, Sapkota, & KC, 2025). Lastly, 1 person was from a Muslim background and did not belong to any caste group and therefore was excluded from the data analysis. For details regarding age and SES distributions for each caste, see Table 1. Please note that the Dalit group had a relatively high SES, but a larger standard deviation in SES than the other castes.

2.2. Procedure

This study was part of a larger research project that received approval from the human subjects' board [blinded for review] and complied with the ethical recommendations of the Helsinki Declaration, the American Psychological Association, and the World Health Organization (WHO). Initial clearance was sought from the local village council to engage with schools in the community. Following this step, principals and teachers were briefed about the research during visits by research assistants, and after obtaining their approval, students were informed during class time. Active parental consent was obtained based on written information, whereby research assistants acted as witnesses for illiterate parents (15 % of fathers, 37 % of mothers, and 26 % of other primary caregivers), and only 1 % of all caregivers ($n = 6$) did not consent. Local research assistants administered individual face-to-face interviews in Nepalese and first explained the study's purposes and voluntary participation to all adolescents. They were asked for their assent (one adolescent did not assent), and they had the option to terminate the interview at any point without providing any reason. The interview questions were initially developed in English, translated into Nepalese, and subjected to back-translation for validation purposes. Before the start of the study, extensive pilot testing of the SAB task was conducted.

2.3. Measures

The following situation (modified SAB task, Gelman & Wellman, 1991) was presented to students in a gender-matched scenario (we report the version and measures for boys, for girls, the same wording was used, except for the names):

"Kamal is from a very low caste family, and Dikendra is from a very high caste family. Now, imagine that Kamal and Dikendra were born at the same hospital on the same day. However, when the nurses did the check-up, something happened: The babies were switched by mistake. So Dikendra grew up in the family of Kamal, and Kamal grew up in the family of Dikendra." The two characters (one switched-to-lower-caste and another switched-to-higher-caste) were shown as neutral figures in school uniforms and put in front of the child when they were introduced. When the babies got switched in the story, the interviewer also switched the position of the two figures to display visually what happened.

To measure adolescents' **essentialist beliefs regarding higher caste**, they were asked whether the caste of the story character of the higher caste changes (*"Does the caste of Dikendra change if they grow up in the lower caste family?"* 0 = no, they remain high caste; 1 = yes, they have a lower caste now). The same question was asked for the lower caste individual to measure **essentialist beliefs regarding lower caste** (*"Does the caste of Kamal change if they grow up in the higher caste family?"* 0 = no, they remain low caste; 1 = yes, they have a higher caste now). **Perceived social mobility** was subsequently assessed for both story protagonists by assessing their **perceived feasibility of marriage to a higher caste** (for higher caste: *"What if Dikendra wanted to marry a person from a higher caste, would that be possible?"*; for lower caste: *"What if Kamal wanted to marry a person from a higher caste, would that be possible?"*), 6-point (Likert scale: 1 = extremely unlikely, 2 = very unlikely, 3 = unlikely, 4 = likely, 5 = very likely, 6 = extremely likely). For both questions, we focused on upward mobility, as restrictions regarding inter-caste marriage predominantly hinder upward mobility (Zharkevich, 2019; Poudel, 2023). A higher perceived social mobility would be implied by the perceived likelihood of marrying a character from a higher caste.

2.4. Data Analytic Strategy

To test whether essentialist beliefs were stronger concerning higher as compared to lower caste (H1), we performed a Fisher's exact test (VanPool & Leonard, 2011). To test the hypothesis about the role of adolescent's social location for their essentialist beliefs and perceived social mobility regarding marriage to a higher caste (H2 to H5), we conducted stepwise models, whereby caste (used as a factor variable owing to the non-hierarchical nature of the five caste groups in the study), age (scale-centered), and SES (scale-centered) were included as predictor variables in a first step, followed by the interaction of caste and SES in the second step. For all our statistical analyses, we controlled for gender (0 = boys, 1 = girls) due to existing gender-based differences in social inclusion in Nepal (Das et al., 2014).

As students' shared classroom environment could lead to clustering effects, we first examined whether there were significant differences between classrooms in our dependent variables (Bliese, 2000). Comparisons were made between a null model with a fixed intercept and a model with a random intercept, where the outcome variable could vary across the different classrooms. For both binary outcome variables, likelihood ratio tests showed no significant differences between the two models (essentialist beliefs regarding higher caste: $\Delta\chi^2_{(2)} = 0.00, p = 0.99$; essentialist beliefs regarding lower caste: $\Delta\chi^2_{(2)} = 0.00, p = 0.99$). Therefore, multilevel analyses were not performed here. For the linear outcome variables related to perceived social mobility regarding marriage to higher caste, likelihood ratio tests showed significant effects regarding a character switched to higher caste ($\Delta\chi^2_{(2)} = 7.09, p = 0.007$; ICC1 = 0.06) but not regarding a character switched to lower caste ($\Delta\chi^2_{(2)} = -4.51, p = 1$; ICC1 = 0.02). Hence, a multilevel model with a random intercept was used for the analysis of the first variable to control for significant differences between classrooms. All analyses were performed in the R statistical environment (R Core Team, 2024) using the lme4 package for the GLMMs and LMMs (Bates et al., 2015).

3. Results

3.1. Differential Caste Essentialist Beliefs

Regarding lower caste, 33 % of participants and regarding higher caste, 35 % of participants did not believe that the castes of the switched babies would change; hence, approximately one-third of adolescents voiced essentialist beliefs. We did not find support for our hypothesis (H1) that students would have stronger caste essentialist beliefs regarding higher caste compared to lower caste as revealed through a Fisher's exact test ($p = 0.49$; OR = 1.09; CI₉₅ = [0.85, 1.4]).

Regarding the perceived feasibility of marriage to higher caste, adolescents were significantly less optimistic regarding the switched-to-lower caste character ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.79$), as compared to the switched-to-higher-caste character ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 0.73$, $t(1161.9) = -15.554$, $p < 0.001$, CI₉₅ = [-0.77, -0.60]; $d = 0.66$).

3.2. Adolescents' Social Location in Terms of Caste, SES, and Their Essentialist Beliefs

Relative to the students from the highest caste group (Brahmins), adolescents of the caste groups Chhetri, Newar, and Janajati were more likely to respond that the caste of the individuals (both, lower and higher caste) changed when switched at birth (see Table 2 and Table 3, step 1; see Fig. 1). One exception pertained to adolescents of the caste considered the lowest (Dalits), as they expressed relatively higher essentialist beliefs; however, the number of participants from this group was too small to make reliable conclusions regarding their essentialist beliefs.

Taken together, these findings suggest that adolescents belonging to the higher caste group had stronger caste essentialist beliefs regarding both higher and lower caste, supporting H2. Furthermore, the model revealed that girls, compared to boys expressed greater essentialist beliefs regarding higher, but not lower, caste.

In a second step, we examined the interaction between caste and SES of the participants to test the hypothesis that adolescents of a higher caste and with a relatively higher SES would show higher essentialist beliefs (H5). The results indicated a significant interaction between caste and SES for essentialist beliefs regarding both higher and lower caste (see Table 2 and Table 3, step 2). To gain further insight into whether changes in essentialist beliefs are consistent across different SES groups, conditional comparisons (Preacher et al., 2007) were made whereby separate models were fitted to understand if the relation between SES and essentialist beliefs varied when looking at different levels above and below the scaled SES (+1 and -1 SD in this case). Moreover, to better understand the significant interaction effects, interaction plots were created (see Fig. 2).

For essentialist beliefs regarding higher caste, the conditional comparisons showed that when the SES of adolescents was relatively high, most caste groups showed lower essentialist beliefs than adolescents of the highest, Brahmin caste (Chhetri: $\beta = -1.12$, CI₉₅ = [-1.87, -0.41], $p < 0.001$; Newar: $\beta = -0.69$, CI₉₅ = [-1.35, -0.04], $p = 0.04$; Janajati: $\beta = -1.11$, CI₉₅ = [-2.01, -0.30], $p = 0.01$), however for the Dalit caste group, this difference was not significant (Dalit: $\beta = -0.97$, CI₉₅ = [-2.24, -0.23], $p = 0.17$). In contrast, when the SES of adolescents was relatively low, there were no significant differences between adolescents of the highest caste as compared to any other castes (Chhetri: $\beta = -0.05$, CI₉₅ = [-0.74, 0.64], $p = 0.88$; Newars: $\beta = -0.56$, CI₉₅ = [-1.27, 0.16], $p = 0.13$;

Table 2
Results of Generalized Linear Model Predicting Essentialist Beliefs Regarding Higher Caste.

	Step 1		Step 2		
	Log Odds	[95 % CI]	Log Odds	[95 % CI]	
Intercept	-0.45	[-0.83, -0.06]*	-0.44	[-0.84, -0.06]*	
Social location					
Gender	Female	0.46	[0.10, 0.81]**	0.44	[0.08, 0.80]*
Age		-0.01	[-0.18, 0.17]	-0.00	[-0.18, 0.18]
Caste	Chhetri	-0.58	[-1.07, -0.10]*	-0.58	[-1.08, -0.10]*
	Newar	-0.62	[-1.10, -0.16]**	-0.62	[-1.10, -0.14]*
	Janajati	-0.62	[-1.19, -0.06]*	-0.64	[-1.23, -0.08]*
	Dalit	0.13	[-0.74, 0.99]	0.13	[-0.82, 1.07]
SES		-0.01	[-0.17, 0.18]	0.29	[-0.05, 0.65]
Cross-level interactions					
Caste [Chhetri] x SES			-0.53	[-1.06, -0.03]*	
Caste [Newar] x SES			-0.07	[-0.57, 0.42]	
Caste [Janajati] x SES			-0.47	[-1.05, 0.07]	
Caste [Dalit] x SES			-1.1	[-2.24, -0.23]*	
R ² _{GLMM(m)}	0.04		0.05		
AIC	753.68		750.90		
BIC	788.60		803.28		

Note. $n = 585$ students. Control variable is gender. Predictor variables are age, caste, and SES. Log Odds with their 95 % confidence intervals indicate effect sizes. Higher values indicate greater belief in the caste switch of individual from higher caste.

R²_{GLMM(m)} is indicated as estimators for explained variance. Abbreviations: AIC = Akaike Information Criterion. BIC = Bayesian Information Criterion. CI = Confidence Interval.

† $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, two-tailed.

Table 3

Results of Generalized Linear Model Predicting Essentialist Beliefs Regarding Lower Caste.

		Step 1		Step 2	
		Log Odds	[95 % CI]	Log Odds	[95 % CI]
Intercept		-0.25	[-0.64, 0.12]	-0.25	[-0.64, 0.13]
Social location					
Gender	Female	0.10	[-0.25, 0.46]	0.06	[-0.30, 0.42]
Age		0.003	[-0.17, 0.18]	0.01	[-0.16, 0.19]
Caste	Chhetri	-0.69	[-1.18, -0.21]**	-0.75	[-1.26, -0.25]**
	Newar	-0.76	[-1.24, -0.29]**	-0.75	[-1.24, -0.27]**
	Janajati	-0.70	[-1.38, -0.14]*	-0.70	[-1.28, -0.13]*
	Dalit	0.12	[-0.75, 0.98]	0.13	[-0.78, 1.03]
SES		-0.02	[-0.21, 0.15]	0.32	[-0.01, 0.68]
Cross-level interactions					
Caste [Chhetri] x SES				-0.84	[-1.42, -0.31]**
Caste [Newar] x SES				-0.15	[-0.66, 0.35]
Caste [Janajati] x SES				-0.40	[-0.96, 0.13]
Caste [Dalit] x SES				-0.92	[-1.9, -0.1]*
R ² _{GLMM(m)}		0.02		0.05	
AIC		738.69		733.35	
BIC		773.60		785.70	

Note. *n* = 584 students. Control variable is gender. Predictor variables are age, caste and SES. Log Odds with their 95 % confidence intervals indicate effect sizes. Higher values indicate greater belief in the caste switch of individual from lower caste.

R² _{GLMM(m)} is indicated as estimators for explained variance. Abbreviations: *AIC* = Akaike Information Criterion. *BIC* = Bayesian Information Criterion. *CI* = Confidence Interval.

† *p* < .10, * *p* < .05, ** *p* < .01, *** *p* < .001, two-tailed.

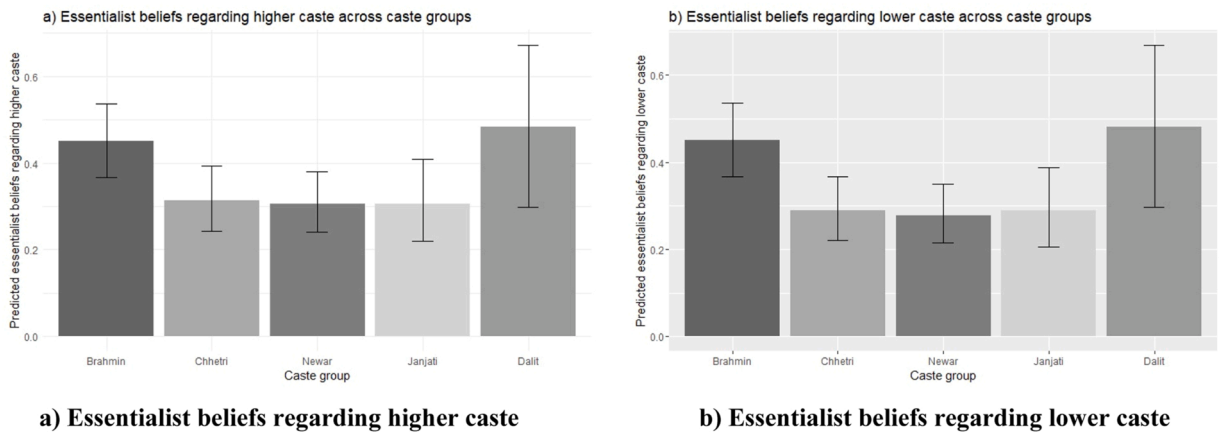


Fig. 1. Essentialist beliefs regarding higher caste and lower castes across caste groups. Note. Predicted essentialist beliefs depending on Caste group. 95 % CIs are depicted. Higher values indicate higher essentialist beliefs.

Janajati: $\beta = -1.7$, $CI_{95} = [-0.93, 0.17]$, $p = 0.65$; Dalit: $\beta = 1.23$, $CI_{95} = [-0.01, 2.62]$, $p = 0.06$). Moreover, Fig. 2 shows that adolescents with a lower SES and Dalit background expressed significantly higher essentialist beliefs than adolescents of lower SES of other caste groups, except Brahmin, when Dalit caste group was taken as reference (Brahmin: $\beta = -1.23$, $CI_{95} = [-2.61, 0.01]$, $p = 0.06$; Chhetri: $\beta = -1.29$, $CI_{95} = [-2.67, -0.07]$, $p = 0.05$; Newars: $\beta = -1.79$, $CI_{95} = [-3.17, -0.55]$, $p = 0.01$; Janajati: $\beta = -1.41$, $CI_{95} = [-2.81, -0.14]$, $p = 0.04$).

Similar trends were observed for essentialist beliefs regarding lower caste. Conditional comparisons showed that when the SES of adolescents was relatively high, most caste groups showed lower essentialist beliefs than adolescents of the highest caste (Chhetri: $\beta = -1.59$, $CI_{95} = [-2.44, -0.82]$, $p < 0.001$; Newar: $\beta = -0.90$, $CI_{95} = [-1.58, -0.25]$, $p = 0.01$; Janajati: $\beta = -1.10$, $CI_{95} = [-1.95, -0.31]$, $p = 0.01$), whereby a similar difference emerged for adolescents of Dalit background, although not statistically significant ($\beta = -0.79$, $CI_{95} = [-2.23, 0.41]$; $p = 0.23$). In contrast, none of the caste groups were different from adolescents of Brahmin caste when SES was relatively low (Chhetri: $\beta = 0.09$, $CI_{95} = [-0.60, 0.80]$, $p = 0.79$; Newar: $\beta = -0.60$, $CI_{95} = [-1.33, 0.12]$, $p = 0.10$; Janajati: $\beta = -0.30$, $CI_{95} = [-1.07, 0.45]$, $p = 0.43$; Dalit: $\beta = 1.06$, $CI_{95} = [-0.14, 2.35]$, $p = 0.09$). Again, Fig. 2 showed that adolescents with a lower SES and a Dalit background expressed significantly higher essentialist beliefs than adolescents of lower SES of Newar and Janajati caste groups when Dalit caste group was taken as a reference (Brahmin: $\beta = -1.06$, $CI_{95} = [-2.35, 0.15]$, $p = 0.09$; Chhetri: $\beta = -0.97$, $CI_{95} = [-2.26, 0.22]$, $p = 0.11$; Newar: $\beta = -1.66$, $CI_{95} = [-2.96, -0.45]$, $p = 0.01$; Janajati: $\beta = -1.36$, $CI_{95} = [-2.68, -0.13]$,

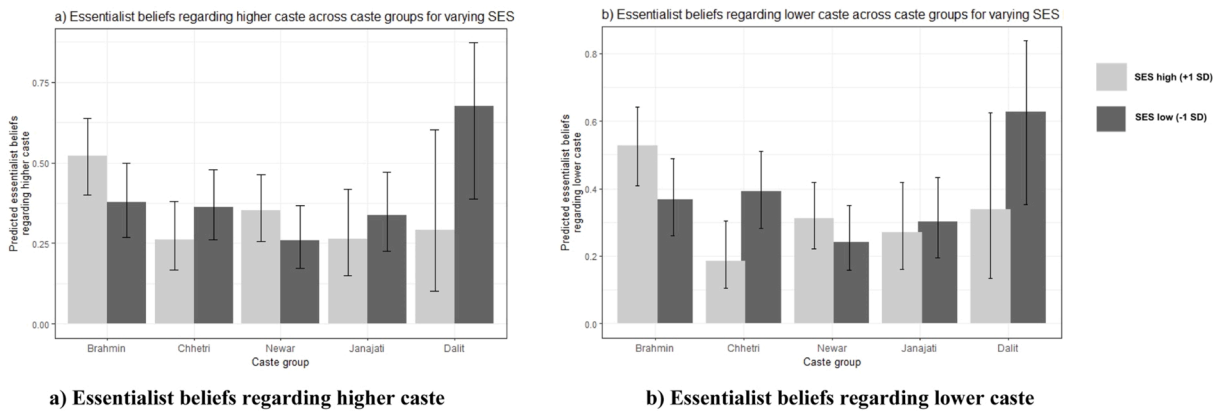


Fig. 2. Essentialist beliefs regarding higher caste and lower castes across caste groups varying SES levels. Note. Predicted essentialist beliefs depending on Caste group and SES levels. 95 % CIs are depicted. Higher values indicate higher essentialist beliefs.

$p = 0.03$). Taken together, these findings suggest that among higher-caste groups, higher SES may be associated with higher essentialist beliefs.

3.3. Adolescents' Perceived Feasibility of Marriage to a Higher Caste

Significant correlations were observed between essentialist beliefs and perceived feasibility of marriage to higher caste (Table 4) in support of our hypothesis (H3). Participants with stronger essentialist beliefs regarding higher caste (who did not believe in the caste change of switched-to-low-caste character) perceived marriage to high caste as more likely. Similarly, participants with stronger essentialist beliefs regarding lower caste (who did not believe in the caste change of switched-to-high-caste character) perceived marriage to higher caste as less likely. In addition, the significant effects observed in our MLM models with essentialist beliefs entered as control variables supported these results (see Table 5).

With regards to the role of social location, no main effects of caste were found in the perceived feasibility of marriage (see Table 5). These results suggest that there were no significant differences between castes when studying their perceived feasibility of marriage. Therefore, we did not find support for our hypothesis (H4) that social mobility beliefs would be lower among adolescents of higher castes as compared to adolescents of lower castes.

Furthermore, we did not find support for our hypothesis (H6) that age would be associated with lower perceived social mobility. In contrast, age was associated with perceived higher feasibility of marriage for a switched-to-lower caste character (model 1, Table 5) and lower feasibility for a switched-to-higher-caste character (model 2, Table 5), although these effects were not statistically significant (marriage for a switched-to-lower caste character: $\beta = 0.07, p = 0.09, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.01, 0.17]$; marriage for a switched-to-higher caste character: $\beta = -0.06, p = 0.07, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.12, 0.01]$). Lastly, girls showed significantly lower perceived feasibility of marriage between a switched-to-higher-caste character and another higher-caste character than boys.

4. Discussion

Essentialist beliefs about caste reinforce the social hierarchy resulting from the caste system, preserving it in several Hindu societies even after its abolishment in countries such as Nepal (in 1963) and India (in 1950). The caste system was based on endogamy, inherited rank, and taboos related to notions of purity and pollution (Srinivasan et al., 2016). It not only led to several forms of prejudice and stereotyping regarding those people from lower castes but also to serious social inequalities that remain hard to address despite many inclusive policies (Gurung, 2022; Mahalingam, 2003). There is abundant literature that offers insights into how the overrepresentation of certain groups in Nepal affects social cohesion, access to resources, and decision-making processes, and might also explore historical, cultural, or policy-related factors contributing to this imbalance (Gurung, 2018; Staddon et al., 2023). Essentialist beliefs may condone these prevalent social issues, since people with essentialist beliefs still see the caste system as fixed and unchanging, despite a strong

Table 4
Correlations Between Essentialist Beliefs and Social Mobility.

	(1)	(2)	(3)
(1) Essentialist beliefs regarding higher caste			
(2) Essentialist beliefs regarding lower caste	0.81**		
(3) Perceived feasibility of marriage between switched-to-lower caste and higher caste	0.08*	(0.14**)	
(4) Perceived feasibility of marriage between switched-to-higher-caste and higher caste	(-0.09)	-0.11***	0.10*

Note: Phi Correlations for binary-binary pairs, Point-Biserial correlations for binary-Likert pairs, and Spearman Correlations for Likert-Likert pairs. The values relevant in the context of the hypothesis are those without brackets. ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 5

Results of Linear Mixed-Effects Model Predicting Perceived Feasibility of Marriage Between Switched-to-Lower Caste Character to Higher Caste (Model 1) and Linear Model Predicting Perceived Feasibility of Marriage Between Switched-to-Higher-Caste to Higher Caste (Model 2).

	Model 1		Model 2	
	β	[95 % CI]	β	[95 % CI]
Intercept	3.64	[3.47, 3.82]***	4.60	[4.46, 4.75]***
Essentialist beliefs regarding higher caste	0.15	[0.01, 0.28]*		
Essentialist beliefs regarding lower caste			-0.18	[-0.31, -0.06]**
Social location				
Gender (female)	-0.02	[-0.15, 0.10]	-0.16	[-0.28, -0.04]**
Age	0.07	[-0.01, 0.15]†	-0.05	[-0.11, 0.01]†
Caste (Chhetri)	0.04	[-0.14, 0.23]	-0.01	[-0.18, 0.16]
Caste (Newar)	0.07	[-0.11, 0.25]	-0.03	[-0.19, 0.13]
Caste (Janajati)	0.10	[-0.11, 0.30]	-0.10	[-0.29, 0.09]
Caste (Dalit)	0.09	[-0.25, 0.42]	-0.02	[-0.33, 0.29]
SES	-0.01	[-0.08, 0.05]	0.04	[-0.02, 0.10]
R ²	0.06			
R ²			0.06	
AIC	1402.54		1279.67	
BIC	1450.53		1323.42	

Note. $n = 586, 587$. Control variable is gender. Predictor variables are age, caste and SES. Higher values indicate a higher perceived likelihood of marriage. R² values reflects proportion of variance explained by fixed and random effects.

Abbreviations: AIC = Akaike Information Criterion. BIC = Bayesian Information Criterion. CI = Confidence Interval.

† $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, two-tailed.

advocacy for inclusion and social change. Therefore, it is important to better understand whether adolescents representing future generations growing up in these contexts of the former caste system hold essentialist beliefs and perceive caste as a stable feature and whether they perceive possibilities for social mobility related to caste.

4.1. Caste Essentialism Among Adolescents in Nepal

In the current study, approximately 30 % of the participants showed essentialist beliefs regarding characters from both higher and lower castes, whereas the remaining did not. Although notable, this percentage is relatively low compared to the ones reported in previous studies evaluating essentialist beliefs. For example, 97 % of the participants in a study based in India (Brahmins and Dalits) answered that the brain transplant would not change the caste of the recipient (Mahalingam and Rodriguez, 2006). Compared to that study, the current study also included adolescents of different castes, including Janajatis, representing many different ethnic groups that place a high value on equal treatment (World Bank, 2006). The result that approximately every third adolescent in this study did not believe that a person's caste can change when growing up in a family of a different caste may mirror that essentialist beliefs remain a salient social issue, even among younger generations. Inclusion policies aim to increase the social and political representation of individuals from traditionally oppressed groups (Gurung, 2022); however, the assumption that socialization may not be enough for changing a person's caste could present a significant obstacle to such policies.

Although this is one of the first studies addressing caste essentialist beliefs with a developmental focus, it remains restricted to the period of adolescence, when the role of social status becomes more salient for identity and aspirations about the future (Kim & Gewirtz, 2019; Zhang & Qin, 2023). More research is needed that can focus on an even broader age range and with a longitudinal design in order to understand when essentialist beliefs about caste emerge and how they translate into behavior. In addition, acknowledging that essentialism is a multidimensional construct (Rhodes & Mandalaywala, 2017), future work could investigate additional dimensions of essentialism and shed light on how they relate to the dimension of stability. Currently, there is only limited evidence on other dimensions of caste essentialism. A recent study focused on the immutability dimension of caste essentialism and explored children and adults' attitudes towards caste, beliefs about certain characteristics related to caste and perceived implications for personal restrictions (Srinivasan et al., 2016).

Adolescents who believed in stability and the unchanging nature of caste group membership did not differ in their essentialist views based on caste. The finding that essentialist beliefs existed among adolescents regarding both higher and lower caste was not in line with our hypothesis about the existence of differential essentialism among adolescents. An absence of differential essentialism in our study is also contrary to the findings from Mahalingam's study (Mahalingam, 2007) which showed the essentialist position of adults in India to be different for individuals from higher and lower castes, whereby the caste of an individual from a lower caste can change but the caste of an individual from a higher caste cannot. However, the Mahalingam study used a brain-switch paradigm, where participants were asked about the possibility of a caste switch if the brains of higher and lower-caste characters were switched. In contrast, our study used a modified switched-at-birth task involving the switch of a baby belonging to a particular caste into another caste. While an abstract concept or situation is considered of great utility for research on beliefs (Borghi, Shaki, & Fischer, 2022), a hypothetical brain-switch scenario could be less likely perceived as rational in contrast to a switch-at-birth paradigm, which, while being an abstract situation, is also a realistic possibility. Furthermore, the reasoning behind changing one's caste due to a brain-switch could have been based on beliefs regarding the intelligence of different caste groups.

4.2. Social Location and Essentialist Beliefs

We included caste and SES as indicators of an individual's social location, which could potentially relate to variations in essentialist beliefs among adolescents. Our results showed that, on average, individuals from the highest caste backgrounds (Brahmins) expressed stronger essentialist beliefs about caste compared to individuals from the other caste groups (except for the lowest caste group). Importantly, however, we found that essentialist beliefs depended not only on adolescents' caste but also on their SES. Essentialist beliefs were stronger for participants of higher SES backgrounds if they were of the highest caste background as compared to the other castes. The observed results align with the Essentialist theory of Power, which supports the idea that essentialist thinking functions to justify and maintain prevailing social and economic hierarchies, especially for those in positions of power (Mahalingam, 2007) and that the most privileged members tend to reinforce the social hierarchy. When individuals hold essentialist beliefs about social groups, power structures within the society may be reinforced. For example, class-based essentialist beliefs limit access to opportunities and social mobility for marginalized groups (Kraus & Keltner, 2013). Moreover, individuals showing high essentialist beliefs perceive low social mobility and a lower scope of mobility in society has been linked to more essentialist beliefs (Xu et al., 2023). Together, these studies underscore the role of essentialist thinking in maintaining the status quo, particularly by those who benefit most from existing social structures. In this sense, essentialism acts as a tool of ideological reinforcement, naturalizing group-based disparities and reducing motivation to question or challenge entrenched systems of power.

Our study further substantiates the essentialist theory of power, as our study results showed essentialist beliefs regarding both higher and lower caste to be relatively higher among participants with lower SES from the lowest caste group. This finding integrates with a recent study based in Lithuania showing that self-essentializing and in-group favoritism varied with local group status, with minority and locally outnumbered majority groups expressing more essentialism than clear majorities, who favored politically correct, non-essentialist discourse (Zeromskyte & Wagner, 2017). Therefore, essentialist beliefs are not fixed concerning social position but might be responsive to structural dynamics and one's relative position within local and broader social hierarchies. In this regard, the higher essentialist beliefs among adolescents of lower SES and lower caste could potentially indicate that the most disadvantaged members of a society have internalized negative beliefs regarding their social group and may even accept their situation (Dunham et al., 2014). However, concerning these participants of the lowest caste and lowest SES, we cannot make a conclusive interpretation due to the small sample size for the lowest caste group ($n = 26$), whereby the findings would need to be replicated in future work.

4.3. Adolescents' Perceived Feasibility of Marriage to a Higher Caste

The current study focused on the perceived social mobility of adolescents in the form of the perceived feasibility of marriage to a higher caste. A significant correlation observed between essentialist beliefs and the perceived feasibility of marriage to higher caste in our study overall indicated low perceived social mobility in terms of moving upwards through marriage. Those participants who did not believe in the caste change of the switched-to-low-caste character were more likely to think that they could marry someone from the higher caste group, and participants who did not believe in the caste change of switched-to-high-caste character were less likely to think that they could marry someone from the high caste group. In contrast to our expectations, there were no statistical differences for either caste or SES in the views of the participants regarding inter-caste marriage. Thus, the study revealed a greater role of essentialist beliefs in the perceived feasibility of marriage among adolescents when compared to their own social location, as neither caste, SES, nor the interaction between caste and SES significantly predicted their perceived feasibility of marriage to a higher caste.

Caste not being a significant predictor of the perceived feasibility of marriage contrasts with previous studies that have reported that individuals of lower caste hold negative stereotypes of their group (Dunham et al., 2014). Additionally, the caste system was shown to result in negative perceptions about their own abilities among children from marginalized caste groups (Srinivasan et al., 2016). However, it is possible that it is not one's own caste but one's beliefs about the essence of belonging to a caste group that matters for perceptions regarding social mobility.

Alternatively, the examined dimensions of social location might not be the primary considerations in shaping adolescents' expectations for their future social status. Past research by Flanagan and Kornbluh (2019) has indicated that adolescents' beliefs about their social mobility are often shaped by daily experiences and social interactions with members of another group. In the context of present-day Nepal, where schools foster frequent interactions among individuals from diverse caste groups and socioeconomic backgrounds (Grütter et al., 2021; Rao, 2019), it is plausible that student perceptions are heavily influenced by their school-based social interactions, and therefore less dependent on one's caste and SES. Future work can shed more light on the role of different factors at the individual level and within adolescents' social environment that shape their perceptions about social mobility with regard to inter-caste marriage.

4.4. Developmental Considerations and Gender Effects

Within the age range used in our study, we did not observe significant age differences in essentialist beliefs. Moreover, the findings did not support our hypothesis that age would be positively correlated with pessimism about social mobility. In contrast, the results showed a tendency in another direction, namely that with increasing age, the marriage of a switched-to-lower-caste individual into a higher caste was increasingly perceived as feasible. Given that around two-thirds of the participating adolescents believed in the possibility of caste change for the switched-lower-caste individual, it can be inferred that with increasing age, adolescents acquire a more optimistic view of social mobility through marriage. Since adolescents become more aware of societal barriers and restrictions to social mobility (Grütter et al., 2021; Seider et al., 2020), this finding may represent hope for social change. However, given that this

result was not significant, it needs to be replicated in future research.

However, at the same time, the findings showed a tendency that adolescents considered marriage to higher caste for a switched to higher caste as less feasible, even though around two-thirds of adolescents again believed in the change of caste. This seemingly contradictory finding could indicate that, despite low essentialism, the association of lower caste with certain traits which cannot be overcome even after a caste switch may persist across age among adolescents (Deschenaux, 2019). Therefore, future work needs to determine whether such beliefs may hinder adolescents' perceived upward mobility through marriage. Such fixed attitudes towards caste have been reported to be more prevalent in older (ages 10–18) as compared to younger children (ages 7–13; Srinivasan et al., 2016).

Lastly, the current study also revealed gender effects on essentialist and marriage beliefs of adolescents. Girls, when compared to boys, were found to be more essentialist for the higher caste but not for the lower caste. Females were also less likely to believe in the marriage of a switched-lower caste character into a higher caste. Given that a gender-matched switched-at-birth scenario was presented to the study participants, the female participants' responses show their lower beliefs regarding the marriage of switched-to-higher-caste females to males of a higher caste. As females believe more in the purity of higher caste groups (Miller, 1993), it is likely that they did not think a female who was originally of a lower caste background would be well respected if she married into a higher caste family. This could be attributed to the fact that women tend to receive harsher penalties for violating caste endogamy rules (Bidner & Eswaran, 2015). Such marriages have been reported to result in societal tensions in Nepal (Basnet & Jha, 2019), which might be the reason why Nepalese women may more likely refrain from such marriages upon recognizing their perceived role in upholding the family's social standing.

4.5. Limitations and Future Directions

It is important to acknowledge that our study design explored only one dimension of social essentialism, namely the stability of group membership. Hence, these findings cannot be generalized to the other dimensions of caste essentialism, such as discrete boundaries between caste categories, homogeneity within a category, or the belief in caste being a natural trait, which are equally relevant when deriving conclusions regarding essentialism in general. A more elaborate design, which can address multiple dimensions, is recommended for a complete understanding of caste essentialism. Moreover, it is crucial to acknowledge that the questions on perceived social mobility in our study solely pertained to marriage and were measured within the same task as caste essentialist beliefs. While this was useful to understand whether adolescents not only believed in a change of caste but also anticipated consequences for marriage, it restricted the possibility to assess beliefs about social mobility independent of caste essentialism. Hence, future studies could expand and include measures focusing exclusively on social status and also encompass occupational or economic mobility. Lastly, the small sample size of the lowest caste group in our study resulted in limiting the understanding of essentialist beliefs among the most discriminated groups. Moreover, this group was not of lower SES when compared to the other groups; hence, it may not have included the poorest and most disadvantaged. To address this limitation, a longitudinal study with a larger sample size focusing specifically on marginalized groups such as Dalits could offer more informative insights into the complex relationships between caste, essentialist beliefs, and social mobility.

5. Conclusion

The current study provides insights into adolescents' societal viewpoints and suggests that the influence of long-existing practices of discrimination based on caste persists in Nepal and that it would be important to address essentialist beliefs about the stability of caste in order to target social inclusion and social change. Giving space to adolescents to express and reason their beliefs and perceptions about caste could help them question the existing structures in hierarchical societies.

Author notes

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Pramod Bhatta: Writing – review & editing, Resources. **Manishi Srivastava:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Formal analysis. **Jeanine Grütter:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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