

Diversifying Syllabi 2015 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

Article/Essay Title: Carving up the Social World With Generics

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Readability: Easy*/Moderate/Difficult

Thesis: Leslie argues that generic language has an effect on social cognition. Specifically, generic language plays a role in the way small children develop concepts related to abilities, which facilitates the transmission and development of social prejudices.

Key Definitions:

Generics: sentences that express generalizations but that do not contain quantifiers. Examples include “lions have manes” or “mosquitos carry West Nile disease.” These statements are generally recognized as expressing something significant, but they are not easily analyzed in terms of their truth conditions.

Cognitively fundamental generalizations: general judgments formed by preverbal infants

Psychological essentialism: we implicitly or explicitly believe that there’s an essence to a kind (note the difference from philosophical essentialism).

Social essentialism: social kinds that are essentialized

Incremental theory: the theory that an ability can be incrementally acquired and improved through focus, dedication, and practice

Entity theory: the theory that to be good at a particular fairly demanding activity it takes natural, inherent talent—something that is fixed and unchangeable, perhaps grounded in one’s essence

Stereotype threat: where there is common knowledge of the stereotype, one’s performance at that activity will be degraded if one’s membership in this group is made salient, even in a subtle way.

Brief Summary:

1. Introduction
 - a. The focus of this paper is the effects of generics on social cognition, particularly on young children.
 - b. *Generics as default generalizations*
 - i. Children can process generics, and can do so even better than they can quantified statements.
 1. Both children and adults default to understanding quantified statements as generics.
 - ii. Leslie has previously argued that generics are a way to express cognitively fundamental generalization.

1. **Cognitively fundamental generalizations:** general judgments formed by preverbal infants
2. The Cultural Transmission of Social Essentialism
 - a. Introduction
 - i. **Psychological essentialism:** we implicitly or explicitly believe that there's an essence to a kind (note the difference from philosophical essentialism here)
 - ii. Essentialized social categories are likely to be the target of violent and virulent social attitudes.
 1. Hypothesis: this may be due to the nature of generics about these social categories – the attributes described by the generics are of a property that is striking, makes its bearers dangerous, and the sort of thing we'd like to avoid
 - b. *Generics and social essentialism*
 - i. Only *some* categories are essentialized
 1. Race, gender are essentialized categories
 2. Sports teams are not essentialized categories
 3. There is much social and historical variation in which categories are essentialized and which are not.
 4. Social kinds are not consistently essentialized, while animal kinds are.
 - ii. There must be a mechanism by which children pick up on which social kinds are essentialized.
 1. Generic language might be one of these mechanisms!
 2. Hearing generics → children essentialize that group
 3. Adults more likely to use generics about groups they essentialize
 - iii. Zarpies!
 1. Hearing generic language leads children and adults to essentialize over an entirely new social group.
 2. Parents who read essentialist information are more likely to produce generics about the group.
 3. Using generic language is one way that parents pass on essentialist beliefs to children
 - c. *Generics, essence, and explanation*
 - i. When children hear generics about a kind, they come to assume that the members of the kind share a range of deep, non-obvious, inherent similarities. This leads the children to essentialize the kind.
 1. By default, i.e. absent information to the contrary, we understand generics to express generalizations that hold because of common, inherent features of the members of the kind.
 2. In order to block the essentializing force of a generic, we need to have specific worldly knowledge of the kind. Otherwise, we tend to believe that the generic obtains.
 - d. *The insidious generic*
 - i. Many adults are not *trying* to pass along socially essentialist beliefs to children, yet do so unwittingly
 - ii. Generic language may provide a vehicle whereby beliefs are communicated without ever being explicitly formulated—perhaps even at an age when the consciously accessible conceptual resources are not even able to explicitly entertain the communicated belief.
3. Generics and Conceptions of Abilities

- a. Conceptions of ability
 - i. **Incremental theory:** an ability can be incrementally acquired and improved through focus, dedication, and practice
 - ii. **Entity theory:** to be good at a particular fairly demanding activity it takes natural, inherent talent—something that is fixed and unchangeable, perhaps grounded in one’s essence
 1. People do better when they adopt incremental theory about abilities
 - iii. Generic essentialism promotes entity theory thinking
 - b. *Stereotype threat*
 - i. **Stereotype threat:** where there is common knowledge of the stereotype, one’s performance at that activity will be degraded if one’s membership in this group is made salient, even in a subtle way.
 1. Making a person’s identity salient in a negative light negatively impacts performance
 2. Making a person’s identity salient in a positive way can have various results
 - a. Subtle reference to identity can improve performance
 - b. Explicit reference to identity, ie triggering entity theory conceptions of ability, can have negative impacts on performance
 - c. Important: ‘positive’ stereotypes are harmful!
4. Conclusion
- a. Generics are harmful!
 - b. We often remember quantified statements as generics, so avoiding generics is no solution
 - c. A more fruitful solution lies in attending to how we carve up the social world.

Possible Applications:

- Philosophy of language
- Philosophy of race, gender
- Moral psychology

Complementary Texts/Resources:

- Other texts by Leslie, especially “Generics.” In G. Russell and D. G. Fara (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Language*. New York: Routledge, pp. 355-367
- Work on implicit associations
- Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*

Possible Class Activities:

- Connect to Donald Trump’s [remarks on immigrants](#), as illustrations of generics
- Ask students to create their own low-tech, poster board Wikipedia articles, to push them to summarize the material and connect it to other topics via sticky note hyperlinks
- Use a vivid anecdote from Frantz Fanon’s book *Black Skin, White Masks* to illustrate and provide an example for discussion

What traditional texts might this text replace?