

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Should We Use Racial and Gender Generics?

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Recently several philosophers have argued that racial, gender, and other social generic generalizations should be avoided given their propensity to promote essentialist thinking, obscure the social nature of categories, and contribute to oppression. Here I argue that a general prohibition against social generics goes too far. Given that the truth of many generics require regularities or systematic rather than mere accidental correlations, they are our best means for describing structural forms of violence and discrimination. Moreover, their accuracy, their persistence in the face of counterexamples, and features of the contemporary socio-political context make generics useful linguistic tools in social justice projects.

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Language can describe injustice. For instance, expressions like *racism*, *structural oppression*, and *sexual harassment* can be used in descriptions or evaluations of the social world. Language might also do more; it might reinforce, cause, or constitute oppression. For instance, some theorists hold that slurs are words that dehumanize and demean (e.g., Jeshion 2013). On such views, uses of slurs do not merely reflect that some groups are oppressed, they also partially cause or constitute harm. Recently it has been claimed that racial, gender, and other social generic generalizations (as in 1–4) can also contribute to oppression.

- (1) Latinos are temperamental.
- (2) Women are nurturing.
- (3) Asians are smart.
- (4) Blacks are good at basketball.

Given examples like 1–4 several philosophers have argued that all racial and gender generics should be avoided (Haslanger 2011; Langton, Haslanger, and Anderson 2012; Leslie 2017; Wodak and Leslie 2017; Wodak, Leslie, and Rhodes 2015).

Langton, Haslanger, and Anderson, for instance, contend that if a racial generic generalization is asserted it should be rejected because such generalizations are “false, and also politically problematic” as they present “social artifacts as racial essences” and mask the social nature of oppressive systems (2012, p. 765). They suggest that when generic generalizations do say something that is statistically true, the content should be expressed

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with an “explicitly quantified statement” involving *some*, *most*, or *every* in order to avoid essentializing or conveying that racial groups share intrinsic innate explanatory features (2012, p. 765). Others (Haslanger 2011) hold that even if racial or gender generics are true, they should not be asserted due to their false implicatures, presuppositions, and other harmful effects. Generics are also extremely hard to falsify. For instance, numerous counterexamples to generic claims like 1–4 will often not suffice for speakers to judge them to be false. For these reasons, the theorists cited above argue we ought to avoid racial, gender, and other similar generics.

Here I argue that while there may be good reasons to avoid some racial and gender generics, a general prohibition goes too far. Generic generalizations can more accurately describe systematic patterns of violence and discrimination than explicitly quantified claims because true generics, unlike true quantified statements, require more than mere accidental correlations. The truth of generics requires regularities or lawlike pattern. The patterns of violence and discrimination members of oppressed groups face are systematic and not accidental. When describing structural oppression, its systematicity is a core feature that ought to be captured; generics are the best tool at our disposal for doing so.

The paper proceeds as follows: Section 1 provides evidence that generic generalizations can be more accurate descriptions of the nature of social reality than overt quantified statements. It also confronts the worry that all generics essentialize. Section 2 builds on the argument to offer an explanation for why generic generalizations can be effective tools in social justice projects. Concluding remarks are offered in Section 3.

1 Descriptively accurate generic generalizations

Consider the following minimal pairs:

- (5) a. Blacks face economic, legal, and social discrimination.
- b. Some/All/Many Blacks face economic, legal, and social discrimination.
- (6) a. Women are expected to want children. (Saul 2017)
- b. Some/All/Many women are expected to want children.

Each pair includes a generic generalization (in the *a* sentence) and a sentence with an overt quantifier (in the *b* sentence). Notice that the generalizations in 5a and 6a seem to express that something is systematically done to or expected of members of a group. This marks a stark contrast with the generic claims considered at the outset. The truth of the generalizations expressed by 1–4 appear to rely on a group having an intrinsic, persistent, and causally explanatory nature. This is what elicited the worry that they promote essentialist thinking about social categories. So, at least on initial reflection, the generics in 5a and 6a appear to avoid essentialist worries (Haslanger (2011), Nickel (2017)). We return to this potential worry in the final section. For now, let’s turn to the main claim of this section—that the generalizations in 5a and 6a are more accurate than their quantified counterparts.¹

Generic generalizations are well suited to describing systematic patterns and lawlike regularities. On many accounts the truth or falsity of generics relies not just on individual instances but on rules, laws, or other patterns in the world. These might be laws of nature,

rules in a game, or, as in the examples here, social structural patterns. For instance Dahl (1975) argues that a sentence like his 7 expresses more than accidental property sharing.

(7) Superpowers do not take account of the views of smaller countries.

He argues that 7 requires that even possible superpowers will be such that they disregard the views of smaller countries. Similarly, Carlson argues for what he calls a “rules and regulations” view of generics on which “generic sentences depend for their truth or falsity upon whether or not there is a corresponding structure in the world, structures not being the episodic instances but rather the causal forces behind those instances” (1995, p. 225). He holds that generics require regularity that surpasses mere accidental correlation. Nickel classifies genericity as requiring a “particularly close or intimate connection between a kind and a property, one that does not obviously coincide with either statistical notions (all, most, many, some), nor does it coincide with well-established modal notions (necessity or essence)” (2017, p. 440).² He justifies the claim given that generics have modal import that requires more than statistical correlations and are most acceptable when they involve well-established kinds.

Considering the nature of generics in a bit more detail further bolsters the view that generics are more accurate ways of describing instances of structural oppression than overtly quantified sentences. There is considerable controversy about the correct semantics for generics, but the most common strategy involves a covert quantificational operator (e.g., Heim 1982; Lawler 1972; Nickel 2016; Schubert and Pelletier 1989; Sterken 2016).³ On these views generic generalizations like 1–4 involve a covert dyadic *Gen* operator that functions like an adverb of quantification (Lewis 1975). For instance sentences of the form ‘Fs are Gs’ are true just in case *Gen*(x) [F(x)] [G(x)]. While there are various theories of the *Gen* operator, it is usually taken to require that sufficiently many of the individuals who are normal or typical or stereotypical Fs are G. That is, that generally an x that is F is G. One might also appeal to explanatory strategies that rely on, e.g., conventional rules or principles of evolution in the semantics of *Gen* (Nickel 2016). Appeals to normality, stereotypicality, and explanatory mechanisms support the view that true generic generalizations require more than accidental satisfaction. The truth of generics need not be grounded in laws of nature, but they require systematic patterns and more than accidental regularity.

Structural oppression constrains group members in broad systematic and lawlike ways. For instance, Iris Marion Young argues that people in oppressed groups “suffer some inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts, and feelings” (1990, p. 40). Marilyn Frye states that oppressed people’s lives are “confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional ... but are systematically related to each other” and “restrict or penalize motion in any direction” (1983, p. 4). It involves what Patricia Hill Collins calls an “overarching structure of power” that affects what a person can do and what can be done to them (2000, p. 148). Oppression also pertains to more than what *actually* occurs in a person’s life; it restricts what is possible. Phillip Pettit argues “[w]hat constitutes the power relationship” in cases of subordination “is the fact that in some respect the power bearer could interfere arbitrarily, even if they are never going to do so” (1996, p. 586).

When describing structural oppression—which is systematic, counterfactually robust, and lawlike—generics are well suited to the task.

To further support the claim that generics provide the most accurate means to describe structural oppression, let's consider the three quantified sentences in 5b and 6b above. The existential versions of the quantified statements are too weak. For instance, suppose that the only woman we know talks a lot about wanting to raise children, but as far as we know no other women are at all interested in children. That would be sufficient for the truth of the existential version of 6b. In contrast, what is expressed by 6a involves a robust expectation about the desires we would in general expect women to have given certain social standards. Existentials are made true too easily to accurately describe the systematicity and pervasiveness of social norms and patterns of discrimination.

On the other hand, the universally quantified claims in 5b and 6b are too strong. It is not the case, for instance, that all Black people face economic *and* legal *and* social discrimination. For instance, some Black people face no legal discrimination. Notice that even if the universal claims were nuanced to allow for exceptions as in 8, something would still fail to be explained.

(8) Almost all women (who are ...) are expected to want children.
The truth of 8 merely requires that almost every women (who meets some further conditions) is expected to have a particular attitude. That is, it just requires that something hold of nearly every women. Compare 8 to 9.

(9) Almost all avocados are of a single variety: the Hass.⁴
The truth of 9 does not require that there is a lawlike regularity making it true. Rather, it just requires a statistical regularity. In contrast, the claims expressed by 5a and 6a are judged to be true because of the regularity and social lawlikeness of norms and practices. Modified universals like 8 fail to capture this and so are less descriptively accurate when we are aimed at describing structural oppression.

Sentences with the proportional quantifier *many* might be true, but again, only require that it happens to be the case that sufficiently many in a category (given contextual standards) have a certain feature. For instance, in some contexts 10b might be true. In contrast 10a is overwhelmingly judged to be false.

- (10) a. Women like basketball.
b. Many women like basketball.

Sentences with proportional quantifiers also fail to capture the generality and systematicity that generics do. When describing structural oppression, its systematicity should be captured. Generics are the best tool at our disposal for doing so.

A semantic feature of generics provides additional justification for why some social generics might be effective tools for social justice. Generic generalizations are stubborn and hard to undermine. It is characteristic of generics that they allow for exceptions. For instance, even when it is pointed out that ostriches cannot fly, the generic generalization in 11 can be maintained.

(11) Birds fly.

At the outset we saw that the inability for exceptions to falsify generic claims served as a motivation in arguments *for* a prohibition against racial and gender generics like in 1–4. Yet, the same feature that served to motivate prohibiting the use of racial and gender generics can justify the use of generic generalizations to describe structural forms of oppression. Suppose that someone responds to an utterance of 5a with 12.

(12) Not *all* Black people face legal discrimination.

Even though 12 may be true, 5a can be maintained. The efficacy of racial, gender, and other social generics in describing structural oppression can be explained in terms of both their accuracy and their persistence even in the face of counterexamples.

Note that my claim here is not the well known point that generics are not truth conditionally equivalent to overtly quantified statements. That would add nothing to debates on the nature of generics or genericity. Rather, the point is that generics are able to describe the structural nature of oppression in a way that overtly quantified statements do not. This is because the truth of generics require more than accidental satisfaction and structural oppression involves more than social groups accidentally facing similar forms of discrimination.

2 Description and social justice projects

Saul (2017) also recently argued against an overarching prohibition on social generics by citing their usefulness in social justice work. She argues that there are “generic claims that campaigners for social justice might well want to make, as part of a social critique” (2017, p. 12). Saul does not, however, offer an explanation for the efficacy of generics and does not claim that they are true or accurate. If social generics can be socially and politically efficacious, what explains their effectiveness? The argument in the preceding section can explain why at least some social generics can function as effective social justice tools. Racial, gender, and other social generics can be useful *because* they accurately describe systematic patterns of injustice. An apt description of structural oppression requires capturing that it is widespread, general, and systematic. Generics capture general structural patterns in a way that overtly quantified statements do not.

Social justice projects often have both descriptive and prescriptive aims. We need an accurate description of where we are now and how we got here, the thought goes, in order to determine what strategies can best mitigate oppression. If some generic claims about race, gender, and other social categories are more precise descriptions of social reality than explicitly quantified statements, the descriptive component of a social justice project would be better served through the use of generic claims.

Moreover, given the current political climate, explicitly quantified claims might be heard as right-wing dog-whistles. Some have taken to using refrains like “all lives matter” and “not all men” as responses to campaigns to shed light on the pervasiveness of police violence and sexual harassment and assault. Attempting to describe systematic patterns of oppression with quantified statements like in 5b and 6b might bring these to mind, thereby undermining the aim of describing and working to rectify structural injustice.

Statements with overt quantifiers are neither politically expedient nor the most accurate ways to describe structural oppression.

The argument that some social generics are more accurate than corresponding quantified statements can be used to support the view that generics have a role to play in social justice projects. My aim here is not to argue that the *only* reason why social generics might be politically efficacious is due to accuracy. For instance, there might be good reasons to use some social generics even if they are false. Saul offers 13 as another generic generalization that could be among the “very important weapons in our anti-prejudice arsenal” (2017, p. 13).

(13) Girls play football.

While 13 might be true, even if it is a false generic generalization, there may be good reasons to assert it in certain political contexts.⁵ The claim argued for here is more modest: the ability for generic generalizations to accurately describe systematic patterns of injustice is one explanation for their social political expedience.

3 Concluding remarks

Some aspects of social justice projects involve efforts to change meanings, to introduce or eliminate expressions, and to alter usage patterns. For instance, projects aiming to reclaim or appropriate slurs focus on language as a locus for social change. Prescriptions about the use of racial, gender, and other social generics have been offered as one strategy to undermine oppressive power structures. However, we saw here that a general prohibition should be rejected. The use of gender and racial generics to accurately describe the lawlikeness of structural oppression can serve social justice aims.

One might worry that the generalizations in our core examples still essentialize and so, the benefits accuracy brings to a social justice project need to be weighed against the problems essentializing brings. While I agree that one ought to carry out a cost/benefit analysis in thinking through whether to use racial and gender generics, whether 5a and 6a essentialize is at least contentious. Neither attribute intrinsic features to a group. Rather, they involve claims about how a group or category is positioned within social and institutional patterns of discrimination, subordination, or restrictive norms. Anti-essentialist arguments in feminist philosophy also support that there is a significant difference. For instance, Haslanger (2000) argues that an account that relies on a shared social role (e.g., being subordinated based on perceived or imagined features/ancestry) does not over-essentialize. There can be shared social position without shared intrinsic essence.⁶ Nickel (2017) goes even further suggesting that in some contexts even social generics like 2 might be used in ways that avoid essentializing. He argues that they might be used to convey that there is a “very strong and important connection” between the group and the property attributed, “albeit one that is external to the individual agents involved” (2017, p. 451). So, he argues, generics can convey propositions that avoid biological essentialism.

The same arguments apply to the generics we focused on here. The generalizations expressed by 5a and 6a require that there is shared social positioning involving discriminatory practices or restrictive norms without problematically requiring that there is a shared biological essence. These generics sidestep the worry that racial and gender generics essentialize and obscure the social nature of these categories.

When describing forms of structural oppression generic generalizations can be the most accurate and useful linguistic tools to describe social reality.⁷ There are some racial and gender generics that we do not need to avoid and that perhaps we even ought to use.

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Notes

- 1 One might worry that the passive tense in 5 and 6 is muddying the data. There are good reasons to use passive voice in these cases given that structural oppression does not always involve people carrying out actions or having explicit attitudes about social groups. However, even in (plausibly non-equivalent) active voice variants racial and gender terms plausibly have generic interpretations. Consider the following variations:

5a'. People discriminate against Blacks through economic, legal, and social means.

6a'. People expect women to want children.

In 5a' and 6a' *Blacks*, and *women* have generic rather than existential interpretations. A test confirms this (Krifka et al. 1995; Leslie and Lerner 2016). Existential interpretations of bare plurals are upward entailing (i.e., if a property holds of Fs than it holds for supersets including Fs). Neither 5a' nor 6a' are upward entailing. For instance, 6a' does not entail:

- i. People expect women and babies to want children.

So, there is reason to think that the instance of *women* in 6a' (and also in 6a) has a generic interpretation.

- 2 Some generic claims might be made true just by statistical majority. For instance 'cars have radios' is true even though there is no lawlike or characteristic feature of cars that makes it true. (Leslie 2008). Mere statistical majority is not enough, however, for the truth of many generics, as in 'books are paperbacks' (Leslie 2008).
- 3 At least for what are sometimes called characterizing generics, like the generic generalizations in 1–4 and the others considered here. Other generics like 'Dinosaurs are extinct' and 'Rhinos are rare' are usually taken to involve direct predication of a kind. For discussion see Krifka et al. (1995) and Leslie and Lerner (2016).
- 4 Modified from Handwerk (2017) who reports that about 95% of avocados in the U.S. and 80% worldwide are Hass.

- 5 Bare plural expressions allow for existential and generic interpretations. The most natural interpretations of “Dogs are barking outside” and “Cars are parked on the top level of the parking garage” are existential. Clearly the existential interpretation of 13 is true. It is less obvious whether there is a true generic interpretation of 13.
- 6 Having a subordinate social position is also very plausibly not essential to any particular individual (Haslanger 2011). So the worry that being subordinated or privileged is essential to a particular individual is avoided.
- 7 In a somewhat similar vein, Beeghly (2015) argues that stereotyping is not always epistemically or morally objectionable by relying on a descriptive view of stereotypes and stereotyping.

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