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## Social Kind Generics and the Dichotomizing Perspective

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Social Kind Generics and the Dichotomizing Perspective

by

William Fraker

Under the Direction of Daniel A. Weiskopf, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2023

## ABSTRACT

Generics about social kinds (or GSKs) frequently propagate descriptions that carry normative force (i.e., 'women are emotional'). Some philosophers of language attribute this to their tendency to transmit essentialist beliefs about social kinds. According to these accounts, utterances of GSKs implicate that there is something in the nature of social kinds that causes them to possess the properties described, and that individual members of these social kinds therefore ought to exhibit (or be expected to exhibit) these properties. Here, I draw on empirical evidence to suggest an alternative account. According to my framework, an utterance of a GSK implicates a distinction between the social kind described and its salient conceptual opposite, producing what I call a dichotomizing perspective. For example, 'women are emotional' suggests that men are not. Importantly, such distinctions frequently persist in the societal common ground as a function of social power, in part due to their alignment with hierarchical social structures between dichotomized social kinds. This enables such GSKs to perpetuate biased patterns of attention, expectation, and behavior even in the absence of essentialist belief.

**INDEX WORDS:** Generics, Social kinds, Pragmatics, Psychological Essentialism, Concepts, Mental Representation

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2023

Social Kind Generics and the Dichotomizing Perspective

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May 2023

**DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, who have always encouraged and empowered me to pursue my ideas. Thank you, I love you both.

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**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

1. GSK: Generic about social kinds

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Social power can be enacted through language. One means of doing so is via *generic* statements, generalizations such as (a) ‘women are emotional’ or (b) ‘black students do poorly in school’. By describing social kinds themselves, as opposed to any specific members, generics shape the structure of our conceptual representations of social kinds, allowing them to influence the expectations and explanations we bring to bear when navigating the social world. This makes them efficient vehicles for transmitting stereotypes and prejudice and, as a result, for entrenching social hierarchies.

Psychologists and philosophers who find this concerning often highlight the tendency of generics to essentialize social kinds. According to Sally Haslanger, for example, generics like (a) and (b) lead people to believe that there is something in the nature of women and black people that *causes* them to possess the properties described (Haslanger 2011, 2014). Pragmatically, this enables utterances of generics to acquire a normative force. That is, by expressing something about the natures of social kinds, generics also express how people *ought* to be or what we ought to expect of them. As such, on this account, essentialism is what makes generics both descriptive and prescriptive.

In this paper, I build on psychological evidence to provide an alternative approach to the pragmatics of generics about social kinds (or GSKs). Following Haslanger, I’m interested in the function of GSKs as constituents of normative social ideologies, or “representations of social life that serve in some way to undergird social practices” (Haslanger, 2014, p. 385). Unlike Haslanger, however, I argue that the normative force of GSKs is best explained by the dichotomizing perspective they express, that is, by how they dispose people to view social kinds through a lens of distinction and conceptual opposition (Kramer et. al., 2021; Moty & Rhodes,

2021; Camp, 2019). For example, statement (a) suggests that men *aren't* emotional, or are notably less so. According to my account, dichotomous characterizations like these can reify hierarchical social structures by producing the contrasting behaviors, expectations, and explanations that prop them up. Importantly, this can happen in the absence of essentialist belief (Camp and Flores, forthcoming; Táíwò, 2020; Munton, 2021). In noting this, however, I don't deny a connection between GSKs and essentialism. To the contrary, I view essentialism as one mechanism that fortifies the dichotomies they express and the social structures in which social kinds are embedded. What the dichotomizing perspective provides, then, is a minimal account of how GSKs achieve their normative effects, one that builds on empirical evidence to explain a broader range of examples.

To develop this argument, I will proceed as follows. In section II, I will summarize some of the empirical literature linking GSKs to essentialist, structural, and dichotomous interpretations, noting the factors that facilitate them. In section III, I lay out Sally Haslanger's account of the link between essentialism and normative force and develop an example in which the link becomes strained. In doing so, I introduce my alternative: GSKs implicate distinctions that evoke a dichotomizing perspective. When this perspective aligns with a dominant ideology, it organizes people's cognition and behavior so as to perpetuate hierarchical social structures among conceptually opposing social kinds. In section IV, I briefly conclude by distilling core takeaways.

## **2 EVIDENCE FROM DEVELOPMENTAL AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY**

The goal of this section is twofold. First, I will show that representations of social kinds and representations of essences constitute distinct and dissociable cognitive structures. While GSKs always pick out social kinds, the properties they attribute can be supported by various

causal interpretations (Noyes and Keil, 2019; Hoika et. al., 2021; Ritchie and Knobe, 2020; Strevens, 2000). Importantly, GSKs frequently express generalizations in which social structure is seen as the primary causal force linking kind and property (Vasilyeva et. al., 2019, 2020). Second, I will demonstrate how GSKs lead people to draw dichotomized inferences (Moty & Rhodes, 2020; Kramer et. al. 2021). I will conclude by noting the pragmatic processes that produce these inferences, appealing specifically Grice's principle of relevance (Grice, 1975; Saul, 2017).

## **2.1 De-coupling Kind and Essence**

Psychologists who study GSKs sometimes distinguish between the 'kind assumption' and the 'essence assumption' (Noyes and Keil, 2019; Ritchie and Knobe, 2020). When a GSK triggers the kind assumption, it identifies a social kind as a locus of high inductive potential (Noyes and Keil, 2019). In other words, it conveys that individual kind members are likely to possess the property described, as well as share others. When a GSK triggers the essence assumption, however, it prompts people to represent the social kind as itself possessing an internal, unobservable property that causally grounds the outward properties shared by members (Ritchie and Knobe, 2020). To see how these are different, consider the following two GSKs about a fictional social kind: "Vawns believe the sun is their god" and "Vawns have freckles on their feet" (Noyes and Keil, 2019). In a series of experiments, Alexander Noyes and Frank Keil found that adult subjects who heard either GSK were quick to form the kind assumption. They expected that Vawns would share many properties, not just the one explicitly described. However, only subjects who heard the latter GSK made the further inference that Vawns have "internal or microscopic properties" that cause their shared traits (ibid, pg. 20355). It was specifically the biological framing that prompted participants to recruit the causal logic of

essentialism. For Noyes and Keil, these findings demonstrate that “generics communicate that properties are generalizable and principled. Neither of these features necessitates any particular causal interpretation” (ibid, pg. 20355). In other words, kind and essence, though readily intertwined, can easily come apart.

The de-coupling of kind and essence suggests that GSKs might support alternative causal interpretations. What recent studies have found is that, as early as age 3, children can form structural interpretations of GSKs. Consider the following from Nadya Vasilyeva and colleagues (Vasilyeva et al., 2020). After teaching children about a novel social group using GSKs, i.e., “Zarpies speak loudly” and “Lollies talk quietly,” the researchers split the children into two groups and provided half of them with additional structural context. For example, they told these children that “Zarpies live in a land of giants,” whereas “Lollies live in a land of elves” (ibid, pg. 689). The children in both study groups were then asked to explain novel properties (i.e., why do Zarpies paint sparkling stripes in their hair?) as well as describe the properties a Zarpie would exhibit if it were raised by a Lollie. As the researchers expected, children who were provided with the structural framing were far more inclined to offer explanations of novel properties that appealed to the Zarpie’s environment. In other words, when asked to explain why Zarpies paint sparkling stripes in their hair, these children provided answers like the following – “so the giants see them and don’t step on them” (ibid, pg. 691). Similarly, these same children were far more likely to believe that Zarpies raised by Lollie parents would exhibit Lollie properties. What this reiterates is that GSKs are themselves neutral with respect to causal interpretation. While they might frequently trigger essentialism, they are just as capable of communicating stable structural realities (Ritchie, 2019).

These two studies support three core points. First, kinds and essences are represented separately and GSKs specifically describe the former. Second, the generalizations GSKs express can be supported by various causal interpretations, including structural ones. Lastly, whether or not a GSK triggers the essentialist assumption is likely due to factors such as the pre-existing beliefs about the kind that it picks out, the type of property described (i.e., is it cultural, biological, behavioral, etc.), and the way the GSK is contextualized. On this last point, it seems fair to assume that GSKs about social kinds that are antecedently essentialized by the hearer (i.e., gender) will default to essentialist interpretations unless otherwise framed. As evidence of this, Andrei Cimpian and Ellen Markman found that both children and adults were inclined to provide essentialized explanations for gender traits when these traits were presented in a de-contextualized generic format – i.e., “boys are good at math.” However, when the GSKs were modified to include contextual cues, such as “boys at a school are good at math,” the tendency toward essentialism attenuated, and both children and adults offered more explanations that appealed to practice, or other external factors (Cimpian and Markman, 2011). Default essentialism in relation to “covert” social kinds (i.e., those that are treated like natural kinds) belies the fundamental neutrality of GSKs with respect to causal interpretation (Mallon, 2017). That said, this default is still important to recognize. In the end, though, the evidence provided so far indicates that, most broadly, GSKs communicate non-accidental regularities between kinds and properties. Whether or not these associations are grounded in essentialism has to do with factors that are extrinsic to the structure of the statement itself.

## **2.2 GSKs and Dichotomous Inferences**

Whereas most studies focus on how generics influence reasoning about the social kinds they explicitly describe, there have been two recent studies that consider how GSKs affect

people's understanding of unmentioned social kinds (Moty and Rhodes, 2021; Kramer et al., 2021). For example, Hannah Kramer et al. designed an experiment in pursuit of the following question: "In the absence of complex historical and phenomenological evidence, will people assume that different social groups have opposite characteristics?" (Kramer et al., 2021, pg. 2). The answer they arrived at was an emphatic *yes*. More specifically, they found that generic language in particular led individuals to draw these dichotomous inferences.

In their experiment, children and adults learned a story in which a subset of a novel social kind, "Twiggums," branch off from their fellows and move to the mountains nearby, re-naming themselves "Zuttles." Subjects then learned about various properties of the Zuttles in either generic or non-generic language (i.e., "Zuttles like pears" or "this Zuttle, Dax, likes pears") (ibid, pg. 3). Afterwards, they answered a series of questions about Twiggums, who remained uncharacterized, questions such as "Do you think Twiggums like or hate pears?" (Ibid, pg. 4). The results indicated that subjects who had learned about Zuttles in generic language were much more likely to draw opposing inferences about the uncharacterized Twiggums. As the researchers explain, "older children and adults used what they knew about one group to infer that the opposite was true of the other group" (ibid, pg. 10). In other words, subjects adopted a dichotomizing perspective on the novel social kinds.

The tendency to dichotomize held true across various conditions, such as whether the traits were positive or negative evaluations (i.e., smart or dumb), whether or not there were more than two social groups described in the vignette (i.e., there was a third group that remained uncharacterized), and whether or not the traits were binary or scalar. Furthermore, they found that shifting other situational factors, such as adding a narrative

of inter-group conflict or harmony, did not change the adoption of the dichotomizing perspective.

As part of their conclusion, the authors make an interesting observation about the pragmatics of GSKs: “When a speaker provides information about one group, the listener may infer that the decision to exclude information about the second group was purposeful” (ibid, pg. 14). In doing so, it leads them to assume that the unmentioned social kind lacks the property described. In a study whose findings closely parallel those of Kramer and colleagues, Kelsey Moty and Marjorie Rhodes draw a similar conclusion, noting that “pragmatic reasoning” drives the inference that the speaker *could have* mentioned both social kinds, or lumped them into a superordinate category, and therefore must have intentionally decided not to (Moty and Rhodes, 2021, pg. 4). Think about it – if a property applies more broadly, why would a speaker bother to specify one social kind within a field of possible alternatives? Consider the example from Cimpian and Markman’s study, “boys are good at math.” From the vantage of the hearer, it would make little sense to assert this generic if the intended meaning is something closer to ‘children are good at math’. In fact, doing so would violate the pragmatic maxim of relevance, the shared expectation that conversational contributions are appropriately pertinent to the unfolding exchange (Grice, 1975, pg. 47).

In other words, it would be conversationally uncooperative to assert a generalization about gender if gender distinctions had nothing to do with the description at hand (Saul, 2017). In light of this, and given that a GSK about gender carves conceptual space into a salient conceptual dichotomy, it is pragmatically prudent to infer that “boys are good at math” also means that girls aren’t (or are less so). At the very least, it implicates that math skills constitute one way of distinguishing between boys and girls. Pragmatically, then, when a speaker utters a

GSK, they draw a distinction between social kinds on the basis of a specific property. With this on the table, we can now move more fully into the realm of pragmatics.

### 3 THE PRAGMATICS OF GENERICS ABOUT SOCIAL KINDS

#### 3.1 Dichotomous Implicatures in the Common Ground

In “The Normal, the Natural, and the Good,” Sally Haslanger argues that GSKs achieve their normative force by affecting the common ground of a conversation (Haslanger, 2014, pg. 376). Broadly speaking, common ground consists of the evolving set of propositions mutually taken for granted by conversational participants (Stalnaker, 2002). For example, if I’m chatting with a new acquaintance and say ‘unfortunately, I have a band practice to get to’, this implicates that the conversation needs to end while also presupposing that I’m a musician. They might respond, ‘Sure, no problem. Oh, but by the way, what do you play?’ In addition to these contextually shifting propositions, the common ground also consists of a wider set of background propositions that are “treated as true for the purposes of organizing behavior” (Táiwò, 2020, pg. 310). These propositions can be mundane, like the day’s weather, or more nuanced and contestable, like the social status of the participating individuals. Importantly, when it comes to these propositions, “actual belief is neither necessary nor sufficient, what matters is mutual *acceptance* for current purposes” (Camp, 2016, pg. 1618). For example, someone might actively disavow a particular proposition but nonetheless act or communicate on its basis, like a service employee who has to behave as though ‘the customer is always right’.

For what follows, it’s necessary to grasp how common ground is frequently updated in ways that go beyond what a speaker literally says. Consider my comment about band practice: I didn’t actually *say* that the conversation needs to end. Instead, I *implicated* it. In order for my utterance to have been a sensible contribution in that context, it needed to carry this additional

meaning (Grice, 1975). Similarly, I didn't explicitly say that I'm a musician, but that proposition is *presupposed* by my having a band practice to attend. When it comes to GSKs, it's precisely these pragmatic mechanisms that are central to Haslanger's account, as well as my own. GSKs implicate propositions into the common ground, and out of these implicatures emerges a normative *force*, where force is understood as what a speaker intends to accomplish in uttering the statement (Hesni, 2021; Searle, 1975). On the face of it, GSKs appear to have the force of a truth-conditional assertion – in asserting them, a speaker is simply describing the world as being a certain way that is either accurate or inaccurate. To say that GSKs have a normative force, however, is to suggest that these descriptions are also intent on producing conformity with their contents; the descriptions are also prescriptions. Oftentimes, these prescriptions align with, and therefore sustain, pre-existing social arrangements. This complicates the picture significantly. To grasp how this works, I'll begin by laying out Haslanger's framework.

According to Haslanger, GSKs affect the common ground by implicating two propositions (or assumptions) about the social kinds they describe: an *essentialist* one and a *normative* one. On the one hand, they implicate that “robust regularities are not accidental. They are due to the natures of things” (Haslanger, 2014, pg. 379). And on the other, they implicate that “things should express their natures and under normal circumstances they will” (ibid). For Haslanger, these two propositions are tightly linked and mutually reinforcing. Indeed, she goes as far as to hypothesize that they are a *default* part of the common ground. Unless explicitly rejected, we supposedly all accept these assumptions in our communicative interactions (ibid, pg. 382).

Given what we now know about the contingent relationship between GSKs and essentialism, it should seem unlikely that the essentialist assumption is as universal as Haslanger suggests. However, it's worth working through one of her examples in which essentialism is

plausibly in play: a coach who asserts “boys don’t cry!” when a young player is brought to tears (Haslanger, 2014, pg. 383). Since gender is frequently essentialized, it seems fair to argue that this GSK does rest on a default essentialist assumption about boys. According to Haslanger, then, the coach’s utterance implicates (it adds to the common ground) the following: there is something in the nature of what it is to be a boy that makes boys *not* cry, and therefore it *ought* to be the case that boys don’t cry. In other words, the coach is prescribing a specific behavior by anchoring it in a proposition about boys’ underlying nature, as well as a proposition about how boys ought to act in relation to that nature. The resulting force of the statement is therefore directive. What the coach communicates is the command to ‘stop crying!’ (Searle, 1975). While this is a fitting example, and while I agree that the coach’s assertion carries a directive force, there is something wrong with the account of the implicatures that produce that force. To see why, we can run a different example through Haslanger’s machinery.

Imagine the following – at a family reunion, a young woman is talking with her uncle, arguing in favor of a policy that would expand EBT benefits. In response, the uncle says, ‘come on now – poor people are lazy!’ When we apply Haslanger’s framework to this case, it produces the following implicatures: there is something in the nature of poor people that make them lazy, therefore it is “right and good for [poor people] to be [lazy]” (Haslanger, 2014, pg. 380). This seems strange. After all, I doubt that the uncle is implicating that poor people *should* be lazy because it’s in their nature to be. In fact, he would probably argue the contrary – that they should work harder! As such, the force of the uncle’s description is not to direct the behavior of poor people, but rather to steer the perspective of his niece. He is suggesting that poor people deserve to be poor *because* they are lazy and encouraging his niece to view them from this vantage as

well. In other words, and as Samia Hesni rightly points out, the force of the uncle's assertion is a direction to *treat* poor people as though they are lazy (Hesni, 2021, pg. 3).

What's important to note is that while it's perfectly possible that the uncle holds some form of essentialist belief about poor people, by no means is an essentialist implicature necessary for making sense of the meaning or force of his assertion. In other words, we don't need to know the *cause* of poor people's laziness to grasp the uncle's point. Instead, we just need to know that laziness is a property that poor people purportedly share, one that *distinguishes* them from the rich. This undermines Haslanger's framework because conversational implicatures simply are the additional contents or interpretations that are *necessary* for making sense of a speaker's utterance in context (Saul, 2017, pg. 5). If essentialism is not needed for making sense of the uncle's utterance, then it is unlikely that something about the nature of poor people is conversationally implicated. This makes the cornerstone of the framework look somewhat superfluous.

The alternative analysis I propose is that the function of GSKs is to draw specific distinctions in context. As I'll demonstrate, these distinctions (and the perspectives they express) do a better job explaining the normative force of both cases. Let's begin with the macho coach. While I'm once again willing to grant a default *gender* essentialism pre-existing in the common ground, the implicature of the coach's assertion – what it actually *adds* to the common ground – is as follows: in asserting 'boys don't cry!' he implicates that 'girls do cry'. Immediately, grasping this allows us to account for the fact that the coach is suggesting that by crying, the boy is acting like a girl. What's 'unnatural' about the boy's crying, then, is not its violation of some causal force that normally prevents boys from crying, but rather its violation of bifurcated gendered expectations more broadly. What's unnatural is for him to act like a girl. With this in

mind, we can see that the normative force of the coach's assertion arises from the boy's grasping this distinction about gendered behavior and inferring that, since he is a boy and wants to be seen as one, he ought to act like one and stop crying. As such, essentialism is not part of the dichotomous implicatures themselves, but rather strengthens their force. In other words, essentialism is not functioning to implicate anything about the causal origins of the specific *property*. Instead, it's serving to fortify the distinction between the *social kinds* themselves.

Let's now return to Mr. Meritocracy at the family reunion. In light of the dichotomizing perspective, what the uncle is implicating is that people who are *not* poor are *not* lazy – rich people (like himself, of course) work hard and have therefore earned their success. In other words, to make sense of the uncle's assertion, it's necessary to grasp laziness as one property that *distinguishes* poor from rich (or, more minimally, 'not poor'). In grasping this distinguishing property, we're supposed to view poor people as undeserving of social benefits. If they simply worked harder, then they wouldn't be poor, right? To contrast with the previous example, whereas the coach's assertion prescribes contrasting *behaviors* by evoking a distinction about gender, the uncle's assertion prescribes contrasting *characterizations* by evoking a distinction about class. In both cases, what's added to the common ground is a simple distinction. In turn, these distinctions come packaged with a normative force, one that directs people to *treat* them as accurate and explanatory. Note how this is different than merely making an assertion. The speaker is less concerned with whether or not people actually *believe* the specific propositions and more concerned with whether or not they grasp the distinctions and inhabit the perspectives they encapsulate. The target is not merely belief, but rather the maintenance of a certain pattern of social interaction (Táíwò, 2020). If people do buy into the propositions, that's all the better, but it isn't strictly necessary. To abstract away a bit, macho coach and Mr. Meritocracy are both

basically saying: ‘look, this is the way the world is – act accordingly’. What’s interesting (and concerning) is that if people and institutions do indeed act in accordance with the content of these distinctions, they can easily start to appear true.

At this point, a proponent of Haslanger’s account might object to the supposed pragmatic functioning of the dichotomizing perspective. For example, they might argue that my account over-generates in that it reads too much content into the common ground. Does saying ‘poor people are lazy’ *really* implicate that ‘not poor’ people are not lazy? What even is the actual ‘opposite’ of poor? What about social kinds that don’t exist in straightforward pairs? It seems the dichotomizing perspective might be *too* convenient and simplistic to actually capture how GSKs function.

This is a legitimate point that’s worth addressing in some detail. To begin to address it, it’s worth noting that implicating a distinction does not necessarily add a ‘mirror’ proposition about the unmentioned social kind into the common ground. In other words, ‘poor people are lazy’ does not necessarily implicate that ‘rich people *aren’t* lazy’. Instead, it simply suggests that laziness constitutes one way of distinguishing between the poor and rich. In turn, this implicated distinction produces a dichotomized *perspective* on the social kinds, one which disposes people to view poor and rich people in contrasting, value-laden ways (Camp and Flores, forthcoming; Ritchie, personal communication).

It is still necessary, however, to more fully defend the argument that GSKs always establish implicit dichotomies. With gender-based social kinds, I take it the existence of a salient conceptual dichotomy is fairly uncontested. This is not to deny the existence of trans/non-binary people. Instead, it helps capture some of the political and psychological resistance to these social kinds (Dembroff, 2020). And furthermore, asserting a GSK about trans people simply invokes a

different dichotomy between cis and trans people. Race is similarly dichotomized along a black/white binary, especially in the U.S., such that other races are frequently interpreted from within its bounds (Alcoff, 2006). In other words, the salience of this binary results in other races being interpreted in relation to their proximity to whiteness or blackness. However, the existence of more than two racial kinds does raise some questions about the universality of the dichotomizing perspective. Some of them can be immediately settled by Kramer et. al.'s empirical findings, which demonstrated that subjects continued to think dichotomously even when the fictional narrative they were interpreting contained three social groups (Kramer et. al., 2021). As such, the fact that certain superordinate categories break down into more than two social kinds does not challenge people's tendency to dichotomize.

But how might this work? For example, what is the opposite of a GSK where 'Mexican' is the subject? The answer is fairly simple: the precise content of the contrast is usually disambiguated by context. So, when Donald Trump asserted 'They're rapists' in reference to Mexicans, he implicated a dichotomy between Americans and Mexicans. We can find evidence for this in the flurry of efforts to block Trump's bigotry by pointing to rape statistics in America, such as an article in *Politico* with the sub-header: "White Americans are far more rape-y than Mexicans can ever hope to become." To be clear, this is not to say that this is the binary that would hold across the board. For example, if a group of people were debating about which country is better to travel to, Mexico or Thailand, and someone asserts 'Mexicans are amazing cooks,' the implication is that Mexican people's cooking skills are superior to Thai people's.

What this suggests, then, is that a GSK carves conceptual space into a binary structure. One side of this dichotomy is explicitly referenced while the other – the 'shadow' – is 'filled in' by context to contrast with the social kind explicitly referenced. Grasping this actually raises the

interesting prospect that blocking the normative implications of a GSK is perhaps best achieved by illuminating this shadow so as to dissipate the binary structure. We see one way of attempting this in the article above, but we can generate more successful examples that arise in the immediate context of a conversation. Let's return to Mr. Meritocracy at the family reunion. Let's say the uncle's partner has overheard the conversation and interjects, "Oh yeah, honey, and *you* aren't lazy?" This response suggests that the uncle *had* in fact implicated the distinction between poor people and rich people, such as himself, something the partner found objectionable. By insinuating that the uncle is lazy, the partner cancels the idea that laziness is a meaningful way to distinguish between those who are poor and those who aren't.

### **3.2 Perspectives, Social Power, and Social Structure**

Grasping the foregoing account raises further questions about how people might block these dichotomous implicatures from entering the common ground and, relatedly, how they might be able to flout the directive force of a speaker's assertion of a GSK. Indeed, much of Haslanger's work on GSKs is concerned with addressing these questions (Haslanger, 2011, 2014; Saul, 2017). In order to arrive at satisfying answers, there are three interconnected considerations that need to be taken into account.

The first has to do with the notion of a perspective. Following Elisabeth Camp and Carolina Flores, I'm understanding a perspective as an "open-ended disposition to notice, respond [to], and evaluate" the social world in a way that centers people's social identities (i.e., the social kinds to which they belong) (Camp and Flores, forthcoming, pg. 2). These non-propositional effects are part of what makes GSKs so sticky. Just being *aware* of the contents of distinctions they express can produce vivid characterizations of social kinds that regulate

attention, expectation, emotion, and behavior in a way that is largely automatic. None of these effects requires actively endorsing the propositional content of a given GSK.

Consider a GSK such as ‘gay men are effeminate’. An individual can be aware of this broad stereotype, reject its propositional content (as well as its associated implicature that ‘straight men are masculine’) but nonetheless wonder about the sexuality of a man whose tone of voice, apparel, or physical behavior fails to meet stereotypical characterizations of masculinity. And conversely, they might fail to consider a man’s sexuality when his presentation meets these normative standards. As Jessie Munton notes, part of what’s at issue here is *salience*, what ‘pops out’ about people in our everyday interactions. As she states, “that kind of salience relies not just on facts about low level processing common to different individuals, but also on culturally specific knowledge about normal behavior” (Munton, 2020, pg. 4). In other words, this pattern of salience is largely due to their inhabiting a specific dichotomous perspective about sexuality, one that influences their habits of thought and behavior involuntarily.

This helps illuminate why it isn’t necessary for an individual to reflectively grasp, endorse, or even entertain a GSK in thought for it to shape their perceptions or explanations of individuals. A GSK accomplishes this by *organizing* what it is one notices about people, and which features of their identity are seen as predictive of these properties (Munton, 2020; Camp and Flores, forthcoming). This can be especially true when the GSK is a widely known stereotype one would rather resist. For example, we can imagine the individual above noticing their perceptions and inferences being organized by the stereotype and responding by actively rejecting any assumptions they were beginning to form. In this sense, then, their beliefs can come apart from the perspective, even when it is still in some sense ‘active’. Resisting the dichotomizing perspectives produced by ideological GSKs tends to take sustained mental work.

This leads to the second consideration, which is that what's allowed to persist in the common ground is largely a function of social power and authority. Think back to the idea that common ground consists not just in the overlapping *private* beliefs of individuals, but also the public propositions that are *treated* as true for the purposes of social coordination (Táíwò, 2020; Camp, 2016). As Olúfemi Táíwò explains, it is necessary to “take stock of exactly how far people’s public actions can deviate from their private beliefs when social power is involved” (Táíwò, 2020, pg. 306). And, even further, it is necessary to understand how one’s social positioning limits their capacity to challenge or update the common ground (Ayala, 2016).

A straightforward example is the crisis of police brutality towards black people in the United States. There is ample evidence that police frequently operate on the assumption that ‘black people are dangerous’ or ‘black people are criminals’ (Smiley and Fakunle, 2017). How is a black individual supposed to counter these propositions in interactions with police without also risking their physical safety? For the purposes of self-protection, a black person who might want to voice their innocence, may instead acquiesce silently. And if they do in fact voice their innocence and dissent to the presuppositions the police are acting on, there’s a chance that this could later be represented as aggression or argumentation (Smiley and Fakunle, 2017, pg. 11). In other words, these behaviors are later framed by the GSK. Think back to how a perspective influences how things are *interpreted* (Camp, 2015). As Samia Hesni notes, when a dominant perspective produces these sorts of mischaracterizations, it’s an example of *silencing*, whereby the speech acts of disenfranchised individuals fail to have their desired effects (Hesni, 2021, pg. 8). In summary, then, when powerful forces are acting on the basis of certain GSKs in the common ground, it is frequently a form of self-protection for people to track these perspectives and behave accordingly. And furthermore, efforts to verbally counter can frequently fail to have

their desired effects, partially because the very perspective they hope to undermine prevents these efforts from carrying force (Langton & Hornsby, 1998).

The third and final consideration I will touch on only briefly. And this is that proponents of certain GSKs can sometimes point to existing social structures as evidence for their assertions. The unfortunate fact of the matter is that unjust social structures produce certain realities, and observing these realities can generate GSKs that might come to serve as justifications for these very structures. As Jessie Munton notes, when we fall prey to this process, we are “liable to perpetuate or rationalize the very flaws in the *status quo* which give rise to the statistical regularities that ground them” (Munton, 2019, pg. 132). Consider the GSKs ‘women leave work to raise children’ or ‘black students do poorly in school’. Applying the dichotomizing perspective, we now know that these GSKs implicate distinctions between women and men and black students and white students. Generally speaking, and in the U.S. specifically, these implicated distinctions are accurate in a way that the isolated propositions aren’t.

Therefore, as opposed to simply denying the accuracy of these distinctions, blocking any normative force that takes them as their basis might be achieved by shedding light on the contingency of the structures that produce them. What’s at issue here is what Jessie Munton calls the ‘modal profile’ of the generalized distinction: how projectable it is and on what grounds (Munton, 2019). An essentialist reading would be one way to represent the modal profile of these distinctions as stable, but essentialism isn’t necessarily the only way. Simply failing to consider the modal profile or attributing it to “the *wrong* non-essential cause” could produce the same sense of stability (Munton, 2019, pg. 235). However, we can also imagine the GSK about black students being recontextualized so as to reveal its instability. For example, someone might assert that ‘due to the history of structural racism in the U.S., black students do poorly in school’. What

this gestures towards is the idea that GSKs, though frequently used to entrench unjust social structures, might also be effectively used to shed light on them (Ritchie, 2019).

To summarize, dichotomous perspectives and their persistent non-propositional effects, in conjunction with powerful social forces that keep them in the common ground, help produce the social-structural evidence that justifies their existence. This makes blocking GSKs a tricky and somewhat fraught affair. It is worth noting that this is where my account converges significantly with Haslanger's, as she also situates the effects of ideological GSKs not only in the propositional attitudes of individuals, but also in the social practices that take them as their basis (Haslanger, 2011; Táíwò, 2020). However, this also helps to more precisely pinpoint where our accounts diverge: whereas Haslanger treats essentialism in the common ground as the primary propellant of these ideologies, I argue that the dichotomizing perspective plays this role, and essentialism comes to its aid in specific contexts.

#### **4 STRUCTURE-AFFIRMING & STRUCTURE-EXPOSING GENERICS**

A further objection to the foregoing account has to do with essentialist beliefs. One might argue that my account hasn't sufficiently disqualified essentialist belief as the underlying source of GSKs' normative force. After all, essentialism was in play in my account of the macho coach example, albeit in an importantly different way from Haslanger's. And furthermore, essentialist belief is not necessarily about *biology*, nor is it necessarily about reflective endorsement. As Sarah-Jane Leslie has been careful to emphasize, to believe a category has an essence is to possess the "(tacit) belief that there is some hidden, non-obvious, and persistent property ... shared by members of that kind, which *causally grounds* their common properties and dispositions" (Leslie, 2017, pg. 408, emphasis added). In other words, a biological essence is just one example of the broader phenomenon of essentialism. For example, on Leslie's account,

people who believe the GSK ‘Muslims are terrorists’ possess an essentialist belief about Muslims that is not about biology, but nonetheless possesses essentialism’s causal logic. On this logic, there is some ‘inner essence’ that disposes Muslim’s to terrorism, albeit not a biological one.

Let me be clear: I do not deny that this type of essentialism exists, nor that it might explain some instances of prejudicial belief. For someone to actually believe the GSK about Muslims probably does require a highly developed form of essentialism. These people certainly do exist; indeed, there are probably more of them than I would like to admit. The question, then, is whether or not essentialist belief so understood is the most widely applicable explanatory apparatus for understanding the normative effects of GSKs. This is what I deny, and the reason is twofold. First of all, many ideological GSKs can bias people’s expectations and behavior to conform to pernicious stereotypes even when those GSKs, when reflected upon, are actively rejected. And second, there are harmful stereotypes that don’t possess essentialism’s causal logic. To corroborate this, it’s helpful to look at more empirical evidence.

In a seminal study into the relationship between psychological essentialism and social cognition, Nick Haslam and a team of researchers measured correlations between peoples’ beliefs about social kinds and their valuation of those social kinds (Haslam et. al., 2000). In order to do so, they looked at these beliefs along two dimensions – what they call ‘entitativity’ and ‘naturalness’ (ibid). The former refers to the ‘informativeness’ of membership in social kind, as well as the social kind’s “having a homogeneity that makes category membership a rich source of inferences” (Haslam et. al., 2000, pg. 120). ‘Naturalness,’ on the other hand, maps on to the present understanding of essentialism as a social kind’s possessing an internal nature or set of “necessary properties” that *cause* an individual to be a member of the kind (Haslam et. al., 2000,

pg. 120). It is worth briefly noting that this distinction was a direct inspiration for Noyes and Keil's conceptions of the 'Kind' and 'Essence' assumptions discussed at the outset of this paper (Noyes and Keil, 2019). What Haslam and colleagues found was that 'entitativity' (i.e., the 'kind assumption') was more significantly correlated with category devaluation. For example, 'lower class,' 'homosexual,' and 'black' all scored significantly higher on entitativity than their dichotomized counterpart (Haslam et. al., 2000, pg. 122). Interestingly, some of the most highly valued social kinds – 'male' and 'white' – were among those perceived to be the most natural but least 'entitative.' And finally, social kinds that were viewed as 'entitative' *as well as* natural turned out to be "especially stigmatized" (ibid, pg. 123).

This is compelling data in favor of the idea that the kind assumption, and not the essence assumption, is directly involved with how dichotomous hierarchies are implemented in thought. And when we apply of the notion of a perspective, the more 'entitative' a social kind is viewed to be, the more likely it is that that kind will be viewed along the lines of various stereotypes and characterizations. This has important implications for how to counter these patterns of thought. As Haslam and colleagues argue, "challenging these beliefs involves reducing the *reification* of the category in question by showing its internal diversity, its similarity to and overlap with other categories" (Haslam et. al., 2000, pg. 125). One way of achieving this goal might be the strategy of blocking implicatures that suggest certain properties constitute meaningful distinctions between dichotomous social kinds.

Haslam et. al.'s experiment also helps bring into focus another central claim of this paper: essentialism (in the sense of naturalness) plays a significant auxiliary role in entrenching the dichotomizing perspective, the patterns of thought and behavior they produce, and the social hierarchies these patterns feed into. As Haslam's study revealed, it was the social kinds that were

perceived as entitative *as well as* natural that were especially devalued. Therefore, GSKs that attribute properties which additionally trigger the essence assumption might be especially sticky and particularly good at masking their prescriptivism. Compare ‘women stay home to raise families’ with ‘women are nurturing’. Whereas both could be asserted in a debate about parental leave policies, the latter limits the possibility of a structural interpretation or retort.

Statements that function like this are what I call *structure-affirming* GSKs. They often import essentialism into dichotomous perspectives in order to produce patterns of cognition and behavior that perpetuate hierarchical social structures. Although essentialism is not being *implicated* into the common ground, it arises as a fairly rapid inference, especially when there is a default essentialism about the social kind being described. While gender and racial kinds are the most obvious candidates for these types of GSKs, I argue that “poor people are lazy” is also structure-affirming in an important sense. Even though there is no essentialist assumption involved (in Haslam’s study, ‘lower class’ scored high on ‘entitativity’ and low on ‘naturalness’), the property ‘laziness’ also doesn’t readily afford a structural interpretation. This allows the GSK to justify ways of treating poor people (i.e., less benefits, worse labor policies) while simultaneously making the structures that produce their poverty less visible. This is the key feature of structure-affirming GSKs – their propensity to occlude the social structures that play a role in producing the properties they describe. In the example at hand, this is what prompts something like unemployment to be characterized as a personal failure.

The existence of structure-affirming GSKs suggests an alternative: *structure-exposing* GSKs. These GSKs seek to illuminate mutable social structures. To understand these kinds of GSKs, it’s helpful to return to the objection about descriptive accuracy mentioned in the previous section. When GSKs are relatively accurate, it’s not immediately clear why their normative force

is problematic. GSKs are useful linguistic tools for describing the social world, so it can't be the case that they *all* implicate distinctions that propagate social hierarchies. What makes structure-affirming GSKs problematic is that they make certain properties seem fixed, when in reality they aren't. The example of the GSK 'women leave work to raise children' helps capture this.

Regardless of whether or not people essentialize gender itself, this GSK implicates a distinction that can be used to justify the very structures that make it true, such as the labor policies that favor maternity leave over paternity leave.

However, consider how this GSK about women leaving work might be uttered in a different context, one where people are arguing over the cause of disparities in income and professional achievement between the genders. Someone hoping to point to structural factors that produce this reality might say: 'look, women leave work to raise children – these discrepancies are largely because of the unpaid labor they're providing!' In such a context, the implicature is the same (that leaving work to raise children is an important way of distinguishing between the genders), but the normative force is to treat the generalization as contingent, shaky, and counterfactually unstable. Whereas structure-affirming GSKs direct people to treat these distinctions as stable premises for the purpose of social coordination, the force of this utterance is to treat this distinction not just changeable but warranting change. These types of statements can be incredibly useful for social justice projects precisely *because* they prescribe perspectives on social kinds; the prescription is just to treat the realities they describe as mutable instead of fixed (Richie, 2019).

## 5 CONCLUSION

Social kinds frequently exist in conceptual dichotomies. When you trace the fault lines of these dichotomies, it can become clear that they tend to approximate social structures in which

one group holds power over the other. This paper considered the pragmatic role GSKs might play in facilitating this alignment. My argument has been that in order to understand this broad phenomenon, we need to view GSKs as tools for drawing distinctions that produce a dichotomizing perspective. This perspective can become crystalized by an essentialist causal logic, but essentialism is not where the story starts.

The challenge under consideration has been to understand the origin of GSKs' normative effects. As an alternative to essentialist accounts, the dichotomizing perspective has several benefits. First of all, it can better account for the conversational implicatures of GSKs. For a GSK to be considered a cooperative utterance, essentialism need not be in play. Instead, the property a GSK attributes must constitute a way of distinguishing between social kinds. For example, if a speaker believes that men and women are both nurturing, then it would make little sense to attribute that property to women alone. Second, the dichotomizing perspective can explain the harmful effects of GSKs where essentialism is not inferred. As the psychological evidence indicates, this inference is not always present. Consider the oft-cited GSK 'black people are criminals' (Haslanger, 2011). Such an utterance is especially harmful because it creates expectations about black people *instead of* white people. Importantly, an individual might readily acknowledge that there is no inner essence that pre-disposes black people to criminality, but nonetheless possess biased expectations that align with this distinction. What's at issue is that this property is more salient in or associated with black people than white people, and GSKs are one way of perpetuating this pattern of salience or association.

Finally, the dichotomizing perspective better explains how our patterns of attention are molded by hierarchical social structures, and how GSKs can either entrench these structures or bring them to light. Most work on GSKs is concerned with the former kind of GSKs, which are

what I call *structure-affirming*. These GSKs make property-based distinctions between social kinds seem fixed and unchanging. For essentialist accounts, this feature of GSKs is an inevitability. However, it is important to recognize that GSKs can also be forceful tools for ameliorative social movements; that is, they can be *structure-exposing*. Consider a GSK such as ‘black lives matter’. In this case, the GSK is uttered from within a social arrangement that the speaker hopes to call into question. In uttering the statement, a speaker is imploring listeners to adopt a perspective that illuminates unjust social structures and reveals their contingency. In the end, then, although GSKs are common vehicles of linguistic bias, it is helpful to see how they might also be used to combat it. The dichotomizing perspective allows us grasp how this might be possible, while also providing a comprehensive account of generics as a source of linguistic bias.

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