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THE MARK OF THE PLURAL

Generic Generalizations and Race

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Albert Memmi once wrote that "the mark of the plural" signals the depersonalization of the colonized:

> The colonized is never characterized in an individual manner; he is entitled only to drown in an anonymous collectivity ("They are this." "They are all the same."). If a colonized servant does not come in one morning, the colonizer will not say that she is ill, or that she is cheating, or that she is tempted not to abide by an oppressive contract . . . . He will say, "You can't count on them." It is not just a grammatical expression. He refuses to consider personal, private occurrences in his maid's life; that life in a specific sense does not interest him, and his maid does not exist as an individual.
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> (Memmi 1957/1991: 129)

Memmi's observations about the mark of the plural may strike some as obscure or hyperbolic. But we believe they are prescient. Drawing on recent work in linguistics, psychology, and philosophy, we will argue that the mark of the plural plays an even more important, and more damaging, role in race relations than Memmi suggests.

Let's clearly imagine the circumstance that Memmi describes. A white family's black maid does not come to work one morning. The children ask why. The father answers:

(1) Blacks are unreliable. You can't count on them.

Using (1) as our central case, we will ask five questions about the nature and effects of this speech act, and the wider phenomenon that it represents.

First, what is the grammatical expression employed, and what makes it distinctive? In section one, we explain that it is a *generic generalization* about a racial group, and it shares the distinctive features of generic generalizations about animal groups, such as "Tigers have stripes," "Ducks lay eggs," and "Mosquitos carry the West Nile virus."

Second, what does the use of generic generalizations communicate to "us" about "them"? What does the father's use of (1) communicate to his children? In section two, we argue that it communicates that one racial group (blacks) is essentially different

from another (whites), and that this explains why members of that group possess a negative property ("being unreliable"), which in turn explains why those individuals behave as they do (why the maid has not come to work that morning). Despite its surface simplicity, (1) communicates complex, false, and pernicious information that most likely could not be imparted to children in any other way. We offer an explanation of how this works.

Third, how does the use of generics about "us" affect "us"? In section three we argue that generics about racial groups expose members of those groups to two types of pernicious psychological pressures ("stereotype threat" and "ideal realization"). These pressures can bring it about that individuals who are members of the relevant group conform to harmful stereotypes about that group.

Fourth, how does the use of generic generalizations contribute to the very construction of the racial categories that divide "us" from "them"? In section four, we argue that generic generalizations are central to the construction of social categories like racial groups, and to masking the fact that those categories describe a constructed rather than natural world.

Finally, how should we change or challenge the use of generics about race? So much of the information that is communicated by (1) is not explicitly stated or consciously thought by the speaker or the audience. We argue that it is both difficult and insufficient for someone who is appropriately socially situated to negate the harmful falsehoods that are communicated by (1). We will end by noting that the Socratic method may be an efficacious, albeit limited, way to engage with those who make claims like (1).

Before proceeding further, it is worth noting that while we will use (1) as our central example of a generic generalization about a racial group, this is a very broad phenomenon (consider, for instance, *Asians are good at math*, *Latinos are passionate*, and the title of the popular 1992 film *White Men Can't Jump*). Since these generics presuppose and reinforce a division between an in-group ("us") and an out-group ("them"), we will we continue to mention these categories throughout, though their referents are fluid: the in-group and out-group shift between generics. Obviously we do not endorse these categorization schemes; it would simply be remiss to ignore their salience in social cognition about race.

What Are Generic Generalizations?

Generic generalizations like (1) differ from quantified generalizations such as:

(2) All blacks are unreliable.
(3) Most blacks are unreliable.
(4) Some blacks are unreliable.

In many ways, (2)–(4) are similar to (1): they are all generalizations, after all. What distinctive features set (1) apart from (2)–(4), and why do they warrant our focus on generic rather than quantified expressions?

The most obvious and immediate feature that sets generic generalizations apart is the absence of a quantifier—"all", "most," or "some"—in (1). But this is only the way into a complex set of issues. The distinctive features of generics are best understood by considering examples of generics about animal groups like "Tigers have stripes," "Ducks lay eggs," and "Mosquitos carry the West Nile virus."

It is comparatively easy to understand what is communicated by quantified generalizations like "All tigers have stripes," "Most ducks lay eggs," and "Some mosquitos carry the West Nile virus." But it is more difficult to capture what is communicated by the generic versions of these generalizations. Why is "Tigers have stripes" true even though there are albino tigers? Why is it true that *Ducks lay eggs*, but false that *Ducks are female*, even though there are more female ducks than egg-laying ducks? And why is it true to say "Mosquitos carry the West Nile virus" even though fewer than 1% do so, yet false to say "Mosquitos don't carry the West Nile virus" even though some (in fact, over 99%) don't do so?

To answer these questions, we must reflect on how we think about both the groups and the properties involved in these generic generalizations. We frequently make generic generalizations about kinds—like tigers, ducks, and mosquitos—that are highly *essentialized* in the psychologists' sense: we implicitly take members of these kinds to share some distinctive, non-obvious, and persistent property or underlying intrinsic nature that causally grounds their common properties and dispositions (see Gelman (2003), and for discussion of the relationship between the philosophical and psychological notion of essence, see Leslie (2013)).

Leslie (2007, 2008, 2012) argues that it is useful to distinguish three types of (descriptive) bare plural generics, which correspond to different ways in which the property that is attributed is related to the relevant kind. First, there are *majority generics*, where the property just happens to be possessed by *most* members of the relevant kind (e.g., "Barns are red," "Cars have radios"). Second, there are *characteristic generics*, where the property is widely possessed by members of the kind in virtue of their common intrinsic natures (e.g., "Tigers are striped"). Third, there are *striking property generics*. Here the property that is attributed is taken to be dangerous or harmful (such as the property of carrying the West Nile virus); this licenses the generic even when the property has a very low prevalence among members of the group, provided that the group is believed to have a shared intrinsic nature. Of these three types of bare plural generics, only majority generics are free of any implicit reference to the notion of a shared nature or essence. However, evidence suggests that majority generics are by default understood as characteristic generics (see Cimpian and Markman 2009, 2011; Haslanger 2011; and Leslie 2014).

We propose that we should understand what is communicated by racial group generics along these same lines. That is, we should understand (1) as by default communicating that members of the kind *blacks* share some distinctive, non-obvious and persistent property or underlying nature that causally grounds their common properties and dispositions, and that the property *being unreliable* is characteristic of that kind (i.e., widely possessed by individuals who are black in virtue of their shared intrinsic nature). Other racial generics may involve striking properties (e.g., "blacks are violent"), and so get to be asserted independently of any controlling considerations of actual prevalence.

Our account of what is communicated by (1) is based on Leslie's account of generics (see Leslie 2007, 2008, 2012). But it is not dependent on that view. For instance, we have said nothing about what information is communicated by (1) as part of its semantic meaning rather than pragmatic implicature (as Haslanger 2014 proposes). Of course, for each semantic proposal there are objections and alternatives (such as a set-theoretic approach, Barwise and Cooper 1981; see also Liebesman 2011, but cf. Leslie 2015). For the sake of brevity, we will not consider them here. Our working account is fairly ecumenical, but not entirely uncontroversial.

Why focus on generic rather than quantified generalizations? First, several researchers have proposed that generic sentences may be language's way of letting us give voice to our cognitive systems' most basic forms of generalization (e.g., Gelman, Sanchez and Leslie, forthcoming; Leslie 2008, 2012; Meyer, Gelman and Stillwell 2011; Sutherland, Cimpian, Leslie and Gelman 2015). Second, it is now well established that generic generalizations play a particularly important role in our cognition of social categories like "blacks" (see Wodak et al. 2015, and references therein). Third, experimental evidence suggests that qualified statements like (2) are recalled as generic generalizations like (1) (Gelman, Sanchez and Leslie, forthcoming; Leslie and Gelman 2012). So any attempt to understand the role played by quantified statements like (2) would be incomplete without an understanding of the role played by generics like (1). Finally, specific forms of prejudice are passed on to children by adults—children do not inherit their prejudicial schemes of classification through their genes—and by far and away the most dominant form of child-directed generalizations are generic in form (Gelman 2003).

This is why we take the concerns raised by Memmi's observations about the mark of the plural to be best understood in relation to the category of generic generalizations. Superficially there is some initial awkwardness about this, since not all generics involve bare plurals. There are generally taken to be three distinct syntactic types of generic reference: first, indefinite (aka "bare") plural generics, like "Tigers hunt at night" and "Italians are fond of pasta"; second, indefinite singular generics like "A tiger hunts at night" and "An Italian is fond of pasta"; and finally, definite singular generics like "The tiger hunts at night" and "The Italian is fond of pasta" (Krifka et al. 1995). In the case of social categories, the definite plural construction can take on a generic meaning, e.g., "The Italians are fond of pasta," though outside the social realm this construction tends not to have a clear generic interpretation (Krifka et al. 1995). There are important conceptual and linguistic differences between these types of generics (see, e.g., Greenberg 2003; Leslie et al. 2009; Prasada, Khemlani, Leslie and Glucksberg 2013). But all that we wish to note here is that, setting these complications aside, the father could have had have a similar effect by answering his children with any of the following:

(5) The black is unreliable. You can't count on them.
(6) A black is unreliable. You can't count on them.
(7) The blacks are unreliable. You can't count on them.

Understanding that there are singular and plural generics is important to any estimation of the frequency of generics about race. Zaidi (2010) lists examples of stereotypes about Hispanics from textbooks published between 1961 and 1993; many involve definite singular generics, like "The Latin American considers his home his sanctuary" and "The Central American citizen is no more fit for a republican form of government than he is for an arctic expedition." As Zaidi writes, these generalizations "portray Hispanics as one-dimensional characters that are defined by their essences" (2010: 157).

We have already seen enough to suggest that it is unfortunate that generics about racial, ethnic and national groups continue to be printed in academic works. Occasionally, but only occasionally, this attracts criticism. Consider the following passage from Richard J. Evans's review of Alon Confino's *A World Without Jews* in the *London Review of Books*:

> One of the book's most obvious flaws is its constant reference to "Germans" as if all Germans were Nazis and Anti-Semites. Confino is careful not to include the definite article, but time and again a statement about "some Germans" expands within a few pages to become simply "Germans." Thus it was "Germans" who, "via the raw emotions of hatred, anger, mockery, fear, transgression and guilt" expressed in the burning of the Torah scrolls, "conveyed a sentiment, perhaps even an understanding, that a Germany without Jews was becoming a reality."
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> (2015: 19)

These are uses of generics by an eminent professor of history in a book published by Yale University Press. Even the well-educated still use and accept generics about groups that give voice to cognitively primitive generalizations, and communicate essentialist beliefs.

Generics About *Them*

In light of this, we can now clarify how generics like (1) about racial groups work to communicate complex, false, and pernicious information to non-members of the groups, including children. The relevant information comes in three stages.

The first stage concerns the nature of *them*. In saying (1), the father implicitly communicates that "they" (blacks) are essentially different from "us" (whites). It communicates that blacks as a group share a distinctive essence, making them fundamentally different from "us". This accords with the general tendency to view racial groups in essentialist terms: claims about "[t]he 'soul of the Oriental,' 'Negro Blood,' . . . 'the passionate Latin,'" Allport wrote, "all represent a belief in essence. A mysterious mana (for good or evil) [that] resides in a group, all of its members partaking thereof" (1954: 173–174).

This claim that generics transmit essentialist beliefs to children is supported by experimental evidence from Rhodes, Leslie and Tworek (2012). In their experiments, four-year-old children and adults were shown an imaginary social group—"Zarpies"—who could not be mapped on to any familiar essentialized group. The use of generics in describing Zarpies resulted in a marked increase in the tendency of children and adults to essentialize Zarpies. And the inculcation of essentialist beliefs about Zarpies in a separate group of adults resulted in a marked increase in their use of generics in describing Zarpies to children. This suggests an intimate connection between generics and essentialism: hearing generics results in the essentialization of social groups; and the essentialization of social groups increases the use of generics in describing those groups.

Hence, uses of generics like (1), particularly if repeated over time, are likely to impart to children the notion that blacks share a distinctive, fundamental inherent nature—a dangerous falsehood. Members of highly essentialized social groups are more likely to have diminished social status and be subjected to prejudice (Haslam et al. 2000, 2002). When "the civilized" essentialize others, Patterson writes, they "impoverish their own understanding of these other groups and obscure their own affinity with them. Ultimately, this fuels their fear of these groups" (Patterson 1997: 87–88).

The second stage concerns the properties attributed via the generic. If *being unreliable* is attributed as a characteristic property of blacks, this communicates not only that the children can expect individual members of that racial group to share this negative trait, but that

little can be done to change this—it is grounded in their inherent nature, not explained by extrinsic circumstances. When striking properties—like *being violent*—are attributed to racial groups, the audience will not even need much evidence of their prevalence to accept the generic. This would not be quite such bad news if the acceptance of generics did not result in poor probabilistic inferences about the likelihood of arbitrary members of the kind to have the striking property in question (Khemlani, Leslie and Glucksburg 2012). Once accepted, striking property generics "appear to be commonly taken in a rather strong sense, as though the quantifier *always* had implicitly crept into their interpretation" (Abelson and Kanouse 1966: 172). In other words, the cognitive mechanism which generics give voice to lets us rapidly move from "Some Germans were Anti-Semites" to "Germans were Anti-Semites," which is then taken to have an inferential power akin to "All Germans were Anti-Semites"—this is the basis of Evans's complaint against Corfino.

The third stage of the information communicated by generics is that they *explain* salient phenomena. Generics like (1) are used to explain one individual's conduct in terms of the properties of a group. Recall Memmi's observation that the father explains the absence of the family's maid by claiming that *they* are unreliable. He does not consider alternative explanations, such as that *she* is ill, or "tempted not to abide by an oppressive contract": "He refuses to consider personal, private occurrences in his maid's life; that life in a specific sense does not interest him, and his maid does not exist as an individual."

Even when a group-level explanation is apt, generics still communicate something mistaken: that the *intrinsic* nature of the group, rather than their extrinsic circumstances, is the relevant explanatory factor. As Haslanger writes, the common features of conduct of members of a group often "obtain by virtue of [a] broad system of social relations within which the subjects are situated, and are not grounded in intrinsic or dispositional features of the subjects themselves"; yet this is "obscured" by the "systematically misleading" use of generics as explanations (2011: 179–180).

Zaidi's examples of generics about Hispanics illustrate this point well. In *Spanish for Secondary Schools* (1961), the authors wrote: "The Spaniard is primarily a man of feeling, rather than of action, foresight or method. His overvaluation of the individual diminishes his sense of solidarity with the larger community." Zaidi notes that here the authors "fail to consider that if the people of Spain seemed somewhat lacking in expressions of solidarity in 1961, then perhaps the repressive Franco dictatorship, which by then had already ruled Spain for three decades, might have been at least partly to blame" (2010: 159). Similar observations are made about the fifth edition of *Civilización y Cultura*, from 1991: "to read *Civilización y Cultura*, one would think that underdevelopment, poverty, and crime result from congenital defects in Puerto Ricans rather than from colonization and globalization" (2010: 166). These are instances of what Andrei Cimpian (2015) calls the "inherence heuristic": an intuitive tendency to explain patterns (Puerto Rican poverty and crime) in terms of the inherent (i.e., "essential") properties of their constituents (Puerto Ricans' "congenital defects"), while overlooking extrinsic, environmental factors.

As we move further into the political sphere, it becomes more apparent that the use of such generics as explanations is intimately connected to tacit *justifications*. Consider the opinion of Lord Cromer, the English representative in Egypt from 1882 to 1902:

> Want of accuracy, which easily degenerates into untruthfulness, is in fact the main characteristic of the Oriental mind. The European is a close reasoner; his

statements of fact are devoid of any ambiguity; he is a natural logician, albeit he may not have studied logic; he is by nature skeptical and requires proof before he can accept the truth of any proposition; his trained intelligence works like a piece of mechanism. The mind of the Oriental, on the other hand, like his picturesque streets, is eminently wanting in symmetry. His reasoning is of the most slipshod description.

<div align="right">(as cited by Said 1994: 38)</div>

This stream of generics about "the European" and "the Oriental" is a tacit justification for the power of the former over the latter. That "they" are fundamentally different from "us" not only explains why they are powerless and we are powerful; it justifies the right of "the European" to "not only to manage the nonwhite world but also to own it" (Said 1994: 108).

So, by saying (1) the father communicates to his children that *they* (blacks) are essentially different from *us* (whites), and that these differences explains why *they* possess a negative property (unreliability), which in turn explains why those individuals behave as they do (why the maid has not come to work that morning); and moreover, it tacitly justifies why *we* have *them* as servants, rather than vice versa. It is hard to imagine a better way of communicating such complicated, misleading, and harmful information to any audience, let alone to young children, in so few words.

Generics About *Us*

Generics about racial groups not only shape how we see others, but how we see ourselves. Generics about *us* communicate that we are essentially different from *them*. One non-obvious reason why this is harmful is that essentialist beliefs undergird a *fixed* conception of abilities, with the resultant conception of certain demanding tasks as requiring inherent, natural talents, rather than hard work and incrementally acquired traits. When individuals adopt a fixed conception of abilities they are more likely to underperform in, or just avoid, challenging activities; failures are taken to be evidence of immutable shortcomings (Dweck 1999, 2006). (One possible explanation for the dearth of African Americans, as well as women, in academic fields like philosophy is that members of that marginalized group are falsely led to believe that they lack the inherent talents required for success in the field *and* to believe that others regard them lacking those inherent talents (Leslie et al. 2015).)

Relatedly, if an individual's membership in a social kind is made salient, this can impair that individual's performance in certain activities. This robustly documented phenomenon is known as "stereotype threat," the effects of which are amplified if either the group is viewed in essentialist terms or the performance is thought to be grounded in a fixed ability (for an excellent overview, see Steele 2010). A highly pertinent illustration of stereotype threat comes from an experiment where black and white students were engaged in the same activity: playing golf (Stone et al. 1999). When students were told that the activity was testing their "sports intelligence," black students underperformed. When students were told that the activity was testing their "natural athletic ability," white students underperformed. Black and white students know that the generics "blacks are unintelligent" and "whites are not naturally athletic" are commonly believed. Repeated experiences of stereotype threat not only impair

performance, but result in diminished confidence in one's abilities and interest in the relevant activity (Gilovich 2006: 467–468); en masse, this can seem to confirm the stereotype.

There is a clear connection—which is supported by further research (Cimpian et al. 2012)—between stereotype threat and generics. The problem that the students in the preceding experiment face is that once a negative stereotype about their group is made salient, they no longer appear to themselves just as individuals: they show awareness that their individual performance as golfers will be judged as representative of their group, in accordance with stereotypes about that group. Even highlighting an individual's membership in a positively stereotyped group can impair her performance, provided that the stereotype is activated in a blatant manner (Cheryan and Bodenhausen 2000). When the stereotype is activated subtly, individuals' performance may improve: this is the phenomenon of "stereotype lift" (Walton and Cohen 2003).

While stereotype threat affects both dominant and marginalized groups (as in the golfing experiment), the effects on the latter are more pernicious. In the United States there are far more negative stereotypes about blacks than whites. And there are far more activities that white individuals can engage in without being conscious of their race, which is often regarded as naturally diverse, and so not as susceptible to specific stereotypes. Other racial groups do not have this privilege.

Stereotype threat is a well-documented pernicious psychological pressure affecting individuals' behavior (see meta-analyses by Nguyen and Ryan (2008) and Walton and Cohen (2003)). But it is not the only psychological pressure connected to the use of generics about racial groups. Another is what we will call "ideal realization."

This pressure is connected to normative, as opposed to descriptive, generics. To illustrate the distinction, consider "Boys cry" and "Boys don't cry." Both could be accepted, without incoherence, when the former *describes* how crying is characteristic of boys while the latter *proscribes* crying by boys. "Boys don't cry" communicates that there are distinct *ideals* for boys and girls, and that not crying is part of the ideal of boy-ness, such that individual boys who cry are admonished for failing to instantiate or realize this ideal. (For different ways of understanding this ideal and its connection to the semantics or pragmatics of generics, see Leslie 2015, and Haslanger 2014). Normative generics exert a significant psychological pressure: they create a sense of obligation among members of a group to possess features which otherwise few would feel either an obligation or a desire to possess (Leslie 2015).

Descriptive and normative generics can be hard to disentangle, given that they have the same surface form. One way to distinguish the two is to consider the use of graded comparisons. In a society where normative generics like "Women are submissive" and "Men are assertive" are widely accepted, an assertive woman might be declared "more of a man" than a submissive man. Consider Linda Grant's comment in 2012 that Margaret Thatcher "is twice the man and twice the woman of any other MP [Member of Parliament]". Similarly, we encounter seemingly paradoxical threshold claims such as "Hillary Clinton is the only man in the Obama administration." These claims are best understood as assessments of the degrees to which individuals realize distinct gender ideals: Hillary Clinton was taken to instantiate ideals of masculinity to a greater degree than her male colleagues (for more discussion, see Leslie 2015).

Similar graded and threshold claims are made with regard to racial groups. Biracial children in the United States are frequently taken to be, in the words of Earl Sweatshirt, "too white for the black kids, and too black for the whites." Barack Obama has frequently been accused of "acting white," most notably by Jesse Jackson in 2007. In October 2014, (black) Seattle Seahawks players reportedly declared that their (black) quarterback Russell Wilson was "not black enough." Ex-NBA star Charles Barkley responded:

> With young black kids [who] do well in school, the loser kids tell them, oh, you are acting white . . . [F]or some reason, we are brainwashed to think if you are not a thug or an idiot, you are not black enough. If you go to school, make good grades, speak intelligent, and don't break the law, you are not a good black person.

Both the initial report about the Seahawks, and Barkley's response, remain controversial, as is the empirical literature on the phenomenon of "acting white" (see Fryer and Torelli 2010). But the general point stands: in-group generics can work to (1) essentialize features of the group and (2) insinuate tendentious group-wide ideals.

In summary, the use of generics about *us* communicates that *we* are an essentialized kind (exposing individuals to stereotype threats) and that *we* ought to instantiate the ideals of *our* kind (exposing individuals to a further pressure to conform to harmful stereotypes).

The Construction of *Us* and *Them*

Barkley's response helps to illustrate the complex relationship between descriptive and normative generics. One way to understand this connection is in terms of Haslanger's claim that two assumptions form part of the common ground in conversations that employ generics (2014: 379): a descriptive assumption that robust regularities are due to the essential natures of things, and a normative assumption that things should express their essential natures. Now consider the generic "blacks are thugs." This claim might be accepted by those who take thuggishness to be a *striking* property of blacks: it is a dangerous, though not prevalent, attribute of some members of this racial group. Once accepted, striking property generics are often employed as though the property they involve was in fact prevalent—as though, as Abelson and Kanouse frame it, the quantifier "always" had implicitly crept into their interpretation. So some might come to accept that thuggishness among blacks is a robust regularity, and hence assume that it is a *characteristic* property of blacks. Here Haslanger's suggestion would be that it is assumed that blacks *should* express their (falsely) essentialized natures; thus "blacks are thugs" comes to be accepted as a *normative* generic. This leaves individual blacks in the fraught position wherein behaving in ways that can be deemed "thuggish" is taken to confirm an offensive descriptive generic, yet abstaining from such behaviors can lead to their being admonished for "acting white" or "not being black enough."

This relationship between descriptive and normative generics produces looping effects. Once a group is highly essentialized, unusual, aberrant actions on behalf of the few may be taken to characterize the group as a whole (for discussion, see

Leslie, forthcoming), and uncommon traits may be taken to be statistically normal. As Haslanger writes, "what's statistically normal is taken to be evidence of how things are by nature," and hence an inevitability to be accommodated; and how things are by nature is taken to be how things "ought to be," and thereby legitimated and socially enforced (Haslanger 2014: 389). The use of descriptive and normative generics in determining what is normal, natural, and good helps explain how stereotypes of particular racial groups are socially constructed: that is, it helps explain how traits like thuggishness have become associated with groups like blacks.

Generics may play a further role in the social construction of race. As Appiah (1996: 54) famously argued, there are no actual racial groups whose members share an essence (or, in his words, share "certain fundamental, heritable, physical, moral, intellectual, and cultural characteristics with one another that they [do] not share with members of any other race"). But on many plausible views (see Ritchie 2015), false essentialist beliefs are causally or constitutively involved in the social construction of racial groups. We know that hearing racial generics results in the essentialization of social groups, and conversely the essentialization of social groups increases the use of generics in describing those groups. Moreover, such generics *mask* the fact that these racial categories are socially constructed: once groups are essentialized, categories that are artificial come to seem natural, and a social order that is historically contingent and changeable seems inevitable and immutable—or at the very least, simply responsive to the "natural" social order.

Changing and Challenging Generics

If racial generics play a role in the persistent social construction of race, then successfully changing or challenging the use of generics about racial groups may be a particularly efficacious means of changing the social construction of race. But *how* can we successfully change or challenge the use of generics about race?

Langton, Haslanger and Anderson (2012) argue that we should "insist on explicitly quantified statements." If you were to restrict yourself to quantified generalizations about racial groups, this would be a commendable change in your own conduct. But it would not be enough. The information communicated by your quantified generalizations may be recalled by others in generic form (Leslie and Gelman 2012; Sanchez, Gelman and Leslie, forthcoming). And your abstaining from generics about race does not redress the harms caused by others' uses of generics like (1), if they are simply left unchallenged.

Effectively challenging generics like (1), however, turns out to be quite difficult. In part, this is because generics are difficult to negate by appealing to counterexamples. "Tigers are striped" is true even if there are some stripeless albino tigers, and "Mosquitos carry the West Nile virus" is true even if 99% of mosquitos don't carry the West Nile virus. Likewise, many will accept "blacks are unreliable" even when they are aware that some, many or most blacks are highly reliable. Even if one were aware that *no* blacks are thugs, one may continue to assert that "blacks are thugs" as a normative generic: one would simply take all actual blacks to fall short of this ideal, just as one can take all actual women to fall short of the ideals (e.g., "submissiveness") associated with that gender category. "There are no real women any more" is a not-unheard-of old-school social conservative lament.

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This difficulty in challenging generics like (1) is compounded by *slippage* between different interpretations of the same generic. Langton, Haslanger and Anderson (2012) discuss this with regard to a speaker's use of the generic "Latinos are lazy." You could respond by presenting an onslaught of counterexamples, but then the speaker can accept that "although many Latinos aren't lazy, they tend to be—thus embracing the characteristic generic"; or, alternatively, you could respond by arguing that Latinos show no greater tendency towards laziness than any other group, but the "speaker can then suggest that, although it is not part of the nature or essence of Latinos to be lazy, most are." The fact that majority, characteristic, striking, and normative generics all take the same surface form allows for a "slide back and forth between different interpretations of the utterance," which in turn "allows speakers to avoid taking responsibility for the implications of their claims" (Langton, Haslanger and Anderson 2012).

A final difficulty with challenging generics like (1) is that much of the harmful information it communicates is not explicitly stated or consciously thought by the speaker or the audience. Responding with "blacks aren't unreliable" or "blacks aren't thugs" does not negate the *presupposition* that there are distinct essences and/or ideals for whites and blacks. This presupposition is especially hard to negate when it is transmitted to young children who can understand generics, but cannot explicitly understand notions like "essence" and "ideal."

Where does this leave us? We agree with Langton, Haslanger and Anderson (2012) that generics about racial groups should be rejected because they *either* contain, presuppose, and implicate harmful falsehoods *or* can easily be interpreted to do so. But we suggest that a more successful means of challenging such generics may be to engage in Socratic inquiry. If a speaker makes claims like (1), ask what he or she means. Ask probing questions that make slippery claims precise and implicit assumptions explicit. "Do you think all blacks are unreliable? If not, what percentage of blacks do you think are unreliable? What percentage of whites do you think are reliable? What explains the difference? Is it in the nature of blacks to be unreliable, or is this just a historical accident?" Instead of assuming the difficult burden of showing that the utterance was false, force the speaker to take responsibility for and either defend or disavow whatever falsehood they had in mind.

Of course, the Socratic method only addresses *linguistic* obstacles (slippage, presupposition) to challenging generics. So it has serious limitations: it does nothing to resolve other obstacles, like the entrenched power dynamics that make it all but impossible for, say, a black servant to challenge a white father's use of generics like (1).

Conclusion

Memmi's remarks about the mark of the plural may strike many as obscure or hyperbolic, but we believe that they can be made precise by homing in on a particular class of grammatical expressions—generics—that make individual members of marginalized racial groups "drown in anonymous collectivity." Indeed, we have argued that generics are involved in the construction and transmission of the racial categories that divide *us* from *them*, and in doing so communicate false beliefs about distinct essences, ideals, and properties. These beliefs shape how we see others, how we see ourselves, and how we see our social world, in ways that are deeply morally objectionable yet difficult to challenge.

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