

*A Good Girl is Tough and Boys Don't Cry:
Normative Generics and Social Kind Terms¹*
Samia Hesni

I. Background

'Girls are tough,' I say to my niece after she's fallen and scraped her knee. In doing so, I've communicated to her that girls tend (and even ought) to be tough; she can handle the scrapes. I've expressed a *normative generic statement*. For some reason, 'a girl is tough' does not have the same effect. Why not? One observation is that 'girls are tough' is expressed using the bare plural (girls), and 'a girl is tough' uses the indefinite singular (a girl). This is one of many examples where a normative generic is felicitously expressed using the bare plural, but not with the indefinite singular. This paper gives a theory of normative generics and examines the effect of normative generic statements on our characterization of social terms.

A generic statement makes a generalization about certain kinds or individuals: for example, *tigers are striped*, *ducks lay eggs*, and *mosquitos carry West Nile virus*. Among the various interesting (and puzzling) things about generics is the difficulty in pinning down the truth conditions and meanings of generic statements. It is difficult to say in virtue of what the examples just given are true. Generic sentences aren't universal quantifications: tigers are striped, but albino tigers aren't. They're not true in virtue of being true of most members of the kind: only about 50% of ducks lay eggs (meanwhile *ducks don't lay eggs* is not true, even though about 50% of ducks don't lay eggs). And they aren't even true in virtue of being true about at least half of the members of the kind: fewer than 1% of mosquitos carry West Nile virus.²

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² These are just a few of the many challenges to a straightforward truth-conditional analysis for generic statements. For more challenges, see Krifka et al. 1995, Leslie 2012, among others.

Another puzzlingly interesting feature about generic statements is that they can be expressed using the *bare plural*– ‘tigers are striped’ – or the *indefinite singular*– ‘a tiger is striped.’³ Although there may not be a sharp theoretical distinction between bare plural and indefinite singular generics, it is worth noting that many generic statements can be expressed using the bare plural locution, but not the indefinite singular. For example, ‘madrigals are popular’ expresses that for the most part, madrigal songs are popular. ‘A madrigal is popular,’ on the other hand, has a non-generic existential reading: that some specific madrigal song is knocking the socks off its listeners. It has been well-established that bare plural generics and indefinite singular generics pattern differently.⁴ I explore this phenomenon as it applies to *normative* generic statements.

We can call a generic expression normative if an utterance of it (a) expresses some sort of norm involving the subject of the generic statement and (b) endorses that norm. It is generally held that there is a distinction between normative and descriptive generics, although the line between the two is admittedly blurry. For the purposes of this paper, I will grant that there is such a distinction and maintain that a theory of generics should be able to predict why and when indefinite singular normative readings are available.⁵ Examples of normative generic statements include: *a good Christian goes to church on Sundays, a lady never curses, children are seen but not heard, friends don’t let friends drive drunk*. Utterances of ‘a lady never curses’ seem to express a norm that a lady should not curse, and express the speaker’s approval of this norm. But here’s a curious thing about some normative generic statements: they are expressible in the bare plural locution, but not in the indefinite singular. Consider the sentence pair:

(1) Boys don’t cry.

³ Less commonly, generic statements can also be expressed using the *definite singular*: “the tiger is striped” (to get yourself in the mood, imagine the narrative of a documentary). I won’t talk about definite singular generics in this paper, but they will be an interesting sub-class to revisit given that it seems extremely difficult to think of any normative generics expressed using the definite singular.

⁴ See Burton-Roberts 1976, Lawler 1973, Carlson 1982, Cohen, 2001, Greenberg 2003, Leslie 2008, Krifka 2012, among others.

⁵ I will say more about this in section ii.

(2) A boy doesn't cry.

Sentence (1) expresses a general normative statement about boys crying – while (2) doesn't seem to. Why isn't the normative generic reading available for (2)? And what's more, how do we explain the re-introduction of the normative generic reading when we consider a sentence like 'a real boy doesn't cry' ?

Sarah-Jane Leslie (2015b) points to the treatment of normative generics as a long-standing puzzle in the generics literature. There are in fact two long-standing puzzles in the generics literature: the puzzle of normative versus descriptive generics, and the puzzle of bare plural versus indefinite singular generics. Normative generic statements differ from non-normative (or descriptive) generic statements in terms of their truth-conditions. Indefinite singular generics sometimes differ from bare plural generics in terms of their felicity.⁶ In this paper I propose a joint solution to the two puzzles: we should look to a *metalinguistic* theory of indefinite singular generics to understand the patterning of normative indefinite singular generics.

This sort of approach will help us weigh into two important debates in semantics and social philosophy of language: what is happening generally with the difference in patterning between indefinite singular and bare plural generic statements; and what we are doing normatively and socially when we use normative generics. First, a good number of generics are normative generics, so we should include them in the data.⁷ There's already debate about why the indefinite singular patterns differently from the bare plural or even the definite singular. Normative generics should figure into that debate. Second, normative generics pick out specific features of normative and social language: stereotypes, and biases, among others. It will be important to figure out how we

⁶ A sentence of the form 'An F is G' is felicitous if it can be read or heard as a generic sentence (it is infelicitous if we get an existential reading, instead).

⁷ Some have acknowledged the need to give normative generics special treatment (Burton-Roberts (1977), Cohen (2001), Leslie (2015b, forthcoming-b)), but most treat normative generics as a sub-class of descriptive generics, or as exceptions (Cohen 1999). I think a unified treatment for descriptive and normative generics is desirable, and that considering the patterning of normative generics informs this treatment.

talk and – among other things – disagree about normative generics and their underlying assumptions.

I argue that linguistic data about the patterning of certain normative generics – such as ‘boys don’t cry’ – weigh in favor of a *metalinguistic* theory of indefinite singular generic statements. I follow Plunket and Sundell (2013) – who in turn follow Barker (2002) – in using the term *metalinguistic* to mean that the usage of an expression communicates information about the usage of the expression. So, when I use the term “boy” metalinguistically, I am communicating information about how to use the term “boy.” I then consider some implications of this for normative language. My conclusion is that semantically, the patterning of indefinite singular and bare plural normative generics support a metalinguistic theory. Down the line, such a theory can help us gain a greater understanding of the social implications of invoking and disagreeing about normative generics.

Normative generics are generics. But they can differ from descriptive generic statements in important ways. In the next section, I discuss some recent characterizations of normative generics. Then I consider a series of pairs of normative generics expressed in the indefinite singular and the bare plural. I end by arguing that not only does the linguistic data about normative generic patterning support a metalinguistic theory, but that we can say good and useful things as a result of applying such a theory to normative generics.

II. Normative Generics

i. Normative generics and social language

There is some sort of important difference between the generic expressions *boys are children* and *boys don’t cry*. One way to identify the difference is to call the former expression descriptive and the latter normative. Someone may utter ‘boys don’t cry’ knowing that statement does not map on to (or represent) the world in the same way that ‘boys are children’ does. The sentence conveys more than descriptive information about the world. A number of kinds of

sentences are candidates for being called ‘normative generics,’ so I should be clear about the scope of the sentences I am interested in. I will concern myself with generics of the form *Fs are Gs* or *an F is G* that are implicitly, rather than explicitly, normative. That is, there does not seem to be much in the sentences themselves that is an indicator of normative or hortatory force.⁸ I am most interested in these types of generics for the purpose of this paper because they most closely resemble descriptive generics, yet seem to convey something more. For the rest of the paper, I try to flesh out what this “something more” amounts to.

According to Sarah-Jane Leslie, a generic statement like *boys don’t cry* is normative by way of having a ‘hortatory force’ (Leslie, 2015b, forthcoming-a). That is, assertions of normative generic statements can serve as encouragements or admonitions of certain (relevant) behavior. When I say ‘winners never quit’ to a student, I am encouraging her not to quit, or admonishing her for quitting, or praising her for continuing not to quit in the face of adversity. Similarly, Sally McConnel-Ginet (2012) says of normative generics: “speakers uttering sentences like those... are usually urging their addressees to act so as to make the actual world more like an “ideal” world of which these sentences could truly be uttered descriptively – for example, to do their part to make it descriptively accurate to say that boys don’t cry.” In these regards, normative generic sentences differ importantly from descriptive generic sentences.

⁸ To contrast: generics like *women are kind*, *firefighters are brave* and *jerks are rude* are normative, but arguably are so because of the normativity in the thick terms. Of course, there is overlap here and to the extent that I can, I will address those normative generics (like *girls are tough*) that seem to have an implicit ‘ought’ claim or extra hortatory force. Another class of generics that are beyond the scope of this paper are *habituals*: generics like *John smokes* or *Mary handles the mail from Antarctica*. These sentences are said to be generic because they describe how an individual usually or generally behaves (Carlson 1982, Krifka et al. 1995). We can generate normative-sounding versions of these, as well: *everybody loves a winner*, perhaps. “You don’t love her? But everybody loves a winner!”

Sally Haslanger (2014) discusses another feature of normative generic sentences: the way they influence and reflect (how we think about) the social world.⁹ For example, a normative generic sentence like *women stay home with their children* can be used ‘to back social norms: women *ought* to stay home with their babies...’ Haslanger also explains how utterances of normative generics endorse norms. When one says that Fs are Gs in the relevant generic normative sense, this implicates ‘that it is right and good for Fs to be G, and Fs that are not G are defective.’¹⁰

A third way in which normative generics differ from their descriptive counterparts is that normative generic sentences are not assigned truth-conditions in the same way that descriptive generic sentences are. For example, *boys don’t cry* is not judged true or false in the same way that *boys are children* is. Instead, its truth conditions are closer to those of the sentence *boys ought not cry*.¹¹ As Leslie (2015b) tells us, these kinds of generics ‘do not seem to express any kind of inductive generalization about the empirical world,’ and ‘seem to be unresponsive to the actual distribution of the property among the members of the kind.’ That is, a (normative) utterance of *boys don’t cry* does not seem to depend on whether, descriptively, boys actually do not cry. Rather, it expresses some sort of normative ideal or standard according to which boys do not cry.

We can take away two things from this observation: first, utterances of normative generic statements invoke something *other than* descriptive portrayals of the world (which might also include descriptive portrayals). Second, when we are determining the truth conditions of a normative generic sentence, we do something different than when we determine the truth conditions of a descriptive generic sentence. So, it’s important to distinguish between the truth-

⁹ “... in contexts where it is assumed that what’s natural or good (at least for good things) is how things should be... then the utterance of a generic enables a short inference to the normative conclusion, giving the generic a kind of normative force” (367).

¹⁰ Haslanger 2014, 380.

¹¹ This assumption is not uncontroversial. My argument hinges on a more general and commonly held assumption: that there is some important difference between normative and non-normative generic sentences.

conditions and the felicity of a normative generic sentence. *Boys don't cry*, for example, is felicitous but false. In this paper, rather than dealing with the truth conditions of normative generics, I will be focusing on the *felicity* or assertability of normative generics: whether or not an utterance of *Fs* are *Gs* or *an F is G* conveys a normative generic statement.¹²

Leslie (2015b) proposes that normative generic statements be understood in a way that draws upon the 'dual character concepts' of the subject terms in them (drawing on Knobe and Prasada, 2013). A word like 'boy,' for example, has two readings: a normative and a descriptive one. When we utter a generic statement like 'boys don't cry,' we invoke the normative reading of 'boy.' Importantly, this distinction is a semantic one. 'Boy' (and other terms that can be read normatively) is two-way polysemous: there is the normative 'boy' (what a boy ought to be or do), and the descriptive 'boy' (what a boy is like). Leslie also gives a theory of descriptive generics on which indefinite singular generics are felicitous if they involve 'characteristic properties' (Leslie 2007, 2008) of the term being explained. Her view has been recently challenged (Asher, 2012, Sterken 2014, Liebesman 2011, among others). At the end of the next section, I will suggest ways in which the patterning of normative indefinite singular generics could make trouble for Leslie's theory.

ii. Normative patterning

Some utterances of indefinite singular generics permit normative readings while some do not. Utterances of bare plural generics seem to more readily permit normative readings. Here are some data points.

1. Boys don't cry.
2. #A boy doesn't cry.
3. Girls are tough.
4. #A girl is tough.

¹² See Leslie 2008 for further discussion of the truth-conditions of generic sentences versus "the effects of generic language on social cognition."

5. Children are seen but not heard.
6. #A child is seen but not heard.

7. Friends don't let friends drive drunk.
8. A friend doesn't let friends drive drunk.

9. Waiters don't smoke on the job.
10. A waiter doesn't smoke on the job.

11. Gentlemen hold doors open.
12. A gentleman holds doors open.

13. Winners never quit.
14. A winner never quits.

Sentences (2), (4), and (6) do not seem to express normative generic statements – or at least, if they do, they sound strange, and the normative generic reading is a bit contrived. But things change when we enhance sentences (2), (6), and (8) with normatively-flavored adjectives:

15. Strong boys don't cry.
16. A strong boy doesn't cry.

17. Real girls are tough.
18. A real girl is tough.

19. Good children are seen but not heard.
20. A good child is seen but not heard.

With the added adjectives, sentences (16), (18), and (20) felicitously express generic sentences (which is, again, to say nothing of the sentences' truth-conditions – just that, when asserted, they express generic claims).¹³

Sentences 15-20 are problematic for theories that hold that indefinite singular generics are

¹³ Cohen (2001) points this out with the felicity of “a good king is kind” as contrasted with the infelicitous “a king is kind.” Also eschewing a view of indefinite singular generics as reflecting essence, he proposes a “rules and regulations” reading of indefinite singular generics, where an IS generic signals that a rule is in effect. The rule can be any number of flavors: “physical, biological, moral, legal, or linguistic.” My proposal differs from his in that I posit that the ‘rule’ is always linguistic: normativity comes in at the pragmatic level.

about *essence*.¹⁴ It has been held that the reason *a tiger is striped* is a felicitous indefinite singular generic while *a tiger is from Africa* is not is that being striped is essential to being a tiger. On this kind of view, the reason that (2) – *a boy doesn't cry* – is infelicitous is because it's not the case that not crying is essential to boyhood. By contrast, *a lady doesn't curse* is felicitous because the speaker does hold that not cursing is essential to ladyhood. Bracketing the obvious social problems with holding that one or another of these properties is essential, there's another problem with the essences view. It should predict that sentences 16, 18, and 20 are just as infelicitous as sentences 2, 4, and 6. If toughness is not essential to being a girl, then, intuitively, it is not essential to being a real girl (and aren't all girls real girls?). Similarly with the other sentences. An essentialist view cannot make sense of the observation that merely adding an adjective to the subject term of an infelicitous indefinite singular generic generates a felicitous indefinite singular generic. The essentialist might respond here that there *is* in fact a significant difference between positing the essence of *girl* and the essence of *real girl*. In section IV, I give another argument against the essentialist view that is neutral about this.

Insofar as Leslie's view lines up with essentialist theories of indefinite singular generics, this data is problematic for her, too. Leslie distinguishes between *characteristic* property generics and other kinds of generics (like majority property generics or striking property generics) (Leslie 2007, 2008, 2015b). A characteristic property generic, according to Leslie, is 'ducks lay eggs.' A characteristic property generic of the form 'Ks are F' is true if it is the case that: "if F lies along a characteristic dimension for the Ks, then some Ks are F" (Leslie 2007, 386). According to Leslie, 'boys don't cry' is a normative characteristic property generic, where "*not crying* is a characteristic property of [the] ideal notion of a boy" (Leslie 2015b). The full picture of Leslie's account of normative generics can be found in Leslie 2015b. She proposes (following Knobe and Prasada 2011) that certain terms (like *woman* and *scientist*, and unlike *bartender* and *banana*) have two

¹⁴ Such theories are held by Lawlor 1973, Burton-Roberts 1977, among others.

readings: a descriptive reading and a normative, ideal reading. Expressions like normative generics and statements like ‘Hillary Clinton is the only man in the Obama administration’ contain the normative reading and reveal the underlying polysemy of these kinds of terms. So, a normative generic like ‘boys don’t cry’ says something characteristic of the ideal notion of *boy*.

Other types of generic sentences are about *majority* properties: accordingly to Leslie, ‘boys cry’ is an example of this kind of generic. It is true because most boys cry (other examples are ‘barns are red’ and ‘cars have radios’) (Leslie 2007, 2015b). Leslie writes that while generics involving characteristic properties can occur with the bare plural or the indefinite singular, “generics that involve non-characteristic majority properties can only be formulated with bare plural subjects” (Leslie 2015b). This is why ““a car has a radio” or “a boy cries” are decidedly strange (or else take on a different meaning altogether)” (Leslie 2015b). But here is one potential worry: this view doesn’t accommodate the infelicity of ‘a boy doesn’t cry’ or the felicity of ‘a real boy cries.’ If ‘boys don’t cry’ is a normative characteristic property generic and characteristic property generics can be expressed using the indefinite singular, then why isn’t the normative generic reading of ‘a boy doesn’t cry’ available? And if a normative generic reading of ‘a boy cries’ is unavailable, then why is the normative generic reading of ‘a real boy cries’ available? If I’m not mistaken, Leslie’s theory predicts that if we have a characteristic property generic reading expressed using the bare plural, then it should be available in the indefinite singular (and it is the *majority* property generic readings that are available using the bare plural but backfire with the indefinite singular).

Perhaps Leslie’s response would be to deny that the normative readings of characteristic property generics like ‘a boy doesn’t cry’ are unavailable, and to say that modifications like ‘real’ or ‘good’ in fact trigger the ideal normative notion of *boy*. A friend of the dual character concept understanding of normative generics may even point out that normative readings of indefinite singular generics are available when focus is added to the subject term; if we emphasize the word

'boy,' as in 'a *boy* doesn't cry,' the normative reading sounds more felicitous than a monotone reading of the generic.^{15, 16} This line of response runs into two more problems, as we'll see more clearly in the next section. First, we can generate felicitous normative indefinite singular generics using modifiers *other* than 'real' and 'good,' and it is more difficult to make the case that these modifiers are triggering the normative reading of the subject term in question. If we deem 'a girl is tough' and 'a girl shares her toys' infelicitous, but find that 'a brave girl is tough' and 'a friendly girl shares her toys' have normative force, then we need a more intricate story about how those adjectives give rise to the normative reading of 'girl.' Second, it seems like this line of response will over-predict which terms have dual characters. Leslie hypothesizes that pairs of normative and non-normative generic readings "can arise only if the concept in question has a dual character," so that we get a normative reading of 'boys don't cry' in case *boy* has a dual character (Leslie 2015b). But it seems like we can get normative readings of generics like 'a real bicycle has multiple gears' or 'a good bartender doesn't get drunk on the job,' and that we might want to resist positing dual characters for terms like *bicycle* and *bartender*.¹⁷

III. Bare Plurals and Indefinite Singulars

I would like to offer for consideration a metalinguistic theory of indefinite singular normative generics. First, I explicate one example of such a theory as it applies to generics in general (both normative and non-normative). Then, I propose a theory in a similar spirit.

Below, I consider Manfred Krifka's *definitional theory* and show that it nicely accommodates the patterning data of normative indefinite singular and bare plural generics. Krifka's is just one

¹⁵ See Cohen 2003, Krifka 1995, for discussions of generics and focus.

¹⁶ Another response in defense of Leslie's view might be to say that 'a boy doesn't cry' or 'a girl is tough' misfires as a normative generic because we hear it as a majority property generic, which is not expressible using the indefinite singular.

¹⁷ Knobe and Prasada 2011 find that only a certain subset of words display a "dual character concept." But as we will see in the next section, the set of terms that become available for a normative reading extend far beyond the ones they indicate.

among several theories that endorse a definitional or analytic reading of indefinite singular generics. I choose to explicate his as a useful example of a metalinguistic theory, but my claim that the data from normative generics support a metalinguistic theory of indefinite singular generics is not restricted to his particular theory.

i. Krifka and definitions

Krifka's definitional theory of indefinite singular generics is roughly the following: indefinite singular generic expressions are definitional statements about the subject of the generic statement. Bare plural generic sentences, on the other hand, are (for the most part) descriptive. The salient difference between definitional and descriptive generics is that descriptive generics are about the world (or the way the world is), whereas definitional generics say something about language: 'descriptive generics make generalizations about patterns that appear in the world; definitional generics restrict the language used to describe the world.'¹⁸ So, when we use a descriptive generic, we hold the interpretation (the language) of the generic term fixed. When we use a definitional generic, on the other hand, we are proposing a shift in the language (and holding the world fixed).

So, *a tiger is striped* says that what it is to be a tiger is to be striped, whereas *tigers are striped* says that in general, or for the most part, tigers are striped. The indefinite singular locutions says something different than the bare plural locution. This explains why *Fs are Gs* can have a felicitous generic reading, while *an F is G* might not. Compare: *Tigers live in Africa* with *a tiger lives in Africa*. The bare plural reading is felicitous, because it makes sense to say that for the most part, tigers live in Africa. The indefinite singular reading fails, because it is not appropriate to propose that living in Africa is part of the definition of 'tiger.'

¹⁸ Krifka, 2012, 3. "Descriptions presuppose that the language is fixed... definitions communicate about the language that is being used."

Krifka offers us a formalized notion of *common ground* to help model the difference between definitional and descriptive generics. Common ground is what is mutually known (and known to be known) by participants in a given conversation (Stalnaker 1998, 2002). So, if I utter a sentence and you don't reject it, I have added it to the common ground. According to Krifka, we evaluate a generic sentence at an indexed pair: a set of admissible interpretations, and a set of possible worlds. So, for any expression α , we can give its extension at $\llbracket \alpha \rrbracket^{i,w}$ where i is how the expression is interpreted, and w is the world at which we evaluate it. To take an example, consider the expression 'a duck is feathered.' The interpretation parameter consists of a set of admissible interpretations for 'duck', and a set of possible worlds in which we evaluate that sentence.¹⁹ Roughly, the interpretation parameter tells us how we interpret 'duck,' and the world parameter tells us whether ducks are feathered in a given world. Krifka uses this model to explain the difference between definitional and descriptive generics:

DEFINITIONAL

if for any i, i', w and expression α , $\llbracket \alpha \rrbracket^{i,w} \neq \llbracket \alpha \rrbracket^{i',w}$, then $\langle i, w \rangle$ and $\langle i', w \rangle$ differ in how expressions are interpreted, but not primarily in the how the worlds are like.

DESCRIPTIVE

if for any i, w, w' and expression α , $\llbracket \alpha \rrbracket^{i,w} \neq \llbracket \alpha \rrbracket^{i,w'}$, then there must be some factual differences between the indices $\langle i, w \rangle$ and $\langle i, w' \rangle$.

So, on any given extension of a generic expression, if the interpretation parameters differ, then there is *definitional* disagreement about the expression: the expressions are interpreted differently. The disagreement is about what it is to be a duck: specifically, about whether or not to be a duck is to be feathered – whether or not 'being feathered' is part of the definition of duck, so to speak. If, on the other hand, the worlds differ, then there is some disagreement about the facts or

¹⁹ Technically, the interpretation parameter consists of a set of admissible interpretations for the whole sentence.

truth of 'ducks are feathered'. The disagreement is about whether or not ducks – where the interpretation of ducks is constant – are feathered.

What happens in a conversation when a generic expression is uttered depends on whether it is being used definitionally or descriptively: 'If a proposition $[[\Phi]]$ is accepted definitionally at a common ground $\langle I, W \rangle$... then the set of possible worlds stays the same, but only such interpretations i remain admissible for which the proposition $[[\Phi]]$ is true in all possible worlds of the common ground.'²⁰

According to Krifka's proposal, an indefinite singular generic usually corresponds to a definitional generic, while a bare plural locution usually corresponds to a descriptive generic (but can also be definitional). So, what we're doing when we use an indefinite singular is proposing a definition or interpretation of the subject of the expression. When we use the bare plural, we are proposing a way that the world is. This explains why indefinite singular and bare plural generics pattern differently. Consider some mis-matched (non-normative) pairs.

(21.a) Barns are red.

(21.b) #A barn is red.

(22.a) Ducks are monogamous.

(22.b) #A duck is monogamous.

(23.a) Parties are fun.

(23.b) #A party is fun.

(24.a) Berries are delicious.

(24.b) #A berry is delicious.

The intuition is that the 'a' sentences are all felicitous, and the 'b' sentences are strange. Krifka's theory gives us a nice way of interpreting this data. All the 'a' sentences, expressed using the bare plural, are descriptive generic sentences. For the most part, barns tend to be red, ducks

²⁰ Krifka 2012, 5

monogamous, parties fun, and berries delicious. The reason that the 'b' sentences do not read felicitously are that they purport to say something *definitional* about the subject terms in them: and intuitively, we reject these characterizations as definitions. For example, it is not part of our definitional interpretation of a barn that it be red, or that a duck be monogamous, etc. In contrast, we might explain the felicity of 'a duck is feathered' because we *would* affirm that part of what it is to be a duck is to be feathered. Compare: 'that's not a duck – it's not even feathered!' with 'that's not a duck – it's not even monogamous!' The former statement seems rightly assertible, while the latter seems confused.

So far, we have dealt with how Krifka's account applies to non-normative generics. There is room in a definitional account to explain the patterning of indefinite singular and bare plural normative generics. On a definitional account, we mean something *different* when we say 'boys don't cry' than when we say 'a boy doesn't cry.' Here is Krifka's gloss on the descriptive normative generic usage of 'boys don't cry': "In the descriptive use, the speaker assumes a shared interpretation of *boys*, and wants to communicate to the addressee that under this shared interpretation, the generalization that the entities fall under *boys* do not cry when in situations that could lead to crying."²¹ That is the descriptive use that corresponds to the bare plural reading.

The indefinite singular locution corresponds to the definitional reading of the generic expression: 'In the definitional use, the speaker *proposes to the addressee* to restrict the interpretations such that it holds that the entities that fall under *boys* do not cry...'²² This captures the normative force of the generic, but not by asking the addressee to accept a claim about how the world should be: that, in it, boys should not cry. Rather, it's to ask them to accept something like a *definition* for boys: that to be a boy, one ought not to cry.

²¹ Krifka 2012, 4

²² Krifka 2012, 4, my emphasis

We began this paper with a question. Why does a sentence like *boys don't cry* straightforwardly communicate something, whereas *a boy doesn't cry* gives us pause? We want to maintain that both sentences have some sort of normative force, but that they also differ. Krifka's account explains the different patterning of indefinite singular and bare plural generic statements. In that spirit, I propose the following metalinguistic theory about the patterning of normative indefinite singular and bare plural generics.

IV. Normative Indefinite Singular Generics

Following Sarah-Jane Leslie and Sally Haslanger, I maintain that a normative generic statement is an expression of a norm.²³ When I say that 'girls are tough,' I am saying that girls *should* be tough, or that it is 'right and good' for girls to be tough (Haslanger 2014).²⁴ Granting that normative generics contain an implicit *ought*, I propose the following to explain the difference between indefinite singular and bare plural normative generics:

Normative Indefinite Singular (IS): S is a normative generic assertion of '*An F is G*' iff S is an assertion of '*It ought to be the case that if x is F, then x is G.*'

Normative Bare Plural (BP): S is a normative generic assertion of '*Fs are Gs*' iff S is an assertion of '*Fs ought to be Gs.*'

More formally, **Normative IS** proposes that the normative generic '*an F is G*' has the underlying structure of *ought (F -> G)*, and **Normative BP** proposes that the normative generic '*Fs are Gs*' has the underlying structure: *(F -> ought G)*. On this view, IS normative generics express how we ought to use language, where BP normative generics express how the world ought to be. I suggest that terms that work felicitously in IS normative generics tend to be more normatively loaded social terms: like *gentleman, lady, friend* (in contrast with terms like *boy, girl, and child*).

²³ See footnote 7 for the scope of 'normative generic' for the purposes of this paper.

²⁴ For Haslanger, the context determines whether a generic statement is normative. When a generic is deemed normative, however, it expresses an underlying norm.

The proposal is that normative indefinite singular generics communicate some sort of proposal about the characterization of the term in question. We might, then, expect the indefinite singular generic to accord with the above theory in other ways. For example: if what it is to say that *an F is G* is to say that *G* is characteristic of *F*, then we should be able to deny that *x* is an *F* if *x* lacks *G*. We can come up with a simple way to test this: we should be able to say ‘*x* isn’t an *F*; *x* isn’t *G*’ of felicitous indefinite singular normative generics. We try it out on the following sentences:

(21) He’s not a boy – he cries!

(22) She’s not a girl – she isn’t tough!

(23) She’s not a friend – she lets her friends drive drunk!

(24) He’s not a gentleman – he doesn’t hold doors open!

Sentences (23) and (24) sounds more felicitous than (21) and (22). Our next question is why. Here is a hypothesis: It is more natural to say ‘a friend doesn’t let a friend drive drunk’ than ‘a boy doesn’t cry’ because it is more appropriate to propose a normative interpretation of ‘friend’ than of ‘boy.’ Perhaps that is because our idea of how ‘boy’ should be characterized is fixed, while ‘friend’ leaves more room for interpretation. One suggestion for why this is, to be explored at a later date, is that it might be more natural to use the indefinite singular construction when the subject of the generic is more of a social term and less of a natural term. This seems intuitive: it’s easier to provide definitions for terms that are socially constructed.

Some more data support this suggestion. Here is what I would like to observe: We can put almost anything after ‘an *N F is G*,’ where *N* is some normatively flavored adjective, and the resulting sentence is felicitous. Consider some of the following:

(29) A good duck is monogamous.

(30) A real man rides a moped.

(31) A brave girl doesn’t eat peanuts.

(32) A committed doctor washes her hands.

Contrast them with:

(33) A duck is monogamous.

(34) A man rides a moped.

(35) A girl doesn't eat peanuts.

(36) A doctor washes her hands.

Sentences 29-32 read felicitously, unlike their adjective-less counterparts. What we're doing when we utter these sentences is proposing that monogamy, sobriety, peanut-abstinence, and hand-washing ought to be definitional properties of the terms in question. We might deny the proposals, and so judge the normative generics false, but the point is: they are still *felicitous*. My thought is this: it is more appropriate to propose definitions of terms like 'good duck,' 'real man,' 'brave girl,' and 'committed doctor.' Our notions (or concepts or characterizations) of these terms are not well-established. They are, in a sense, up for grabs.

Here is how my view differs from Krifka's. First, I don't want to go as far as to say that indefinite singular generics are definitional. Rather, I treat a generic of the form 'An F is G' as giving a criterion or condition – G – that needs to be met in order for something to count as F. This distinction is subtle, but present. To illustrate: 'A pig has lungs' seems like a true indefinite singular generic. But having lungs does not seem like part of the definition of 'pig.' Rather, having lungs is a condition that needs to be met for something to be a pig.

Second, I disagree with Krifka about the characterization of kind terms and definitions. Like many others, Krifka holds that in a generic sentence of the form 'An F is G,' F is a natural kind term, and that for such terms, G is a defining property. Even if we were to grant the earlier point that G be a characteristic, rather than a defining property, I still disagree with Krifka (and others) that F is a natural kind term (or a kind term at all, though this is another story for another time). Krifka writes that "as we have seen, the predicate must count as one that is plausibly related to being a member of a kind... it must be plausible that it runs in a kind. If this fails, this leads to the known reduction in

acceptability, as in *#A madrigal is popular* or *#A barn is red.*" The problem with this interpretation of generic sentences is that it does not accommodate generics that involve modifications of the subject term. 'A standard barn is red' and 'a catchy madrigal is popular' are felicitous indefinite singular generics, but Krifka's view risks predicting that 'standard barn' and 'catchy madrigal' are natural kinds. Given the plethora of modified generics we have seen, and the potential to generate indefinite singular generics with any number of uncommon modifier-subject combinations, I think it is prudent to shy away from identifying a generic sentence as consisting in a definitional predication of a natural kind term.²⁵

IV. Upshots and Disagreement

A metalinguistic theory of indefinite singular generics gives us a nice way of dealing with the linguistic data about normative generics, *and* it has helpful consequences from a normative and social standpoint. We can understand an indefinite singular generic expression as a statement about how the *term* in the generic statement is or should be interpreted.

This jibes with – among other things – Haslanger's view of normative language and the social world: 'in saying "Friends don't let friends drive drunk," one usually implicates that there is something *about what it is to be a friend* that entails that one stops friends from drunk driving.'²⁶ And presumably, when one denies that friends don't let friends drive drunk, one denies the above implication. On an account like the one I propose, we can understand bare plural generics as following from indefinite singular ones. And we get a nice explanation for why there are bare plural normative generics counterparts available for every indefinite singular normative generic, but not vice versa. If we say 'An F is G' and mean that 'we ought to call x F only if x is G,' then it follows that

²⁵ One more way in which my view differs from Krifka is that I disagree that bare plural generics are equally capable of expressing metalinguistic claims as are indefinite singular generics. One example of this is the generic pair 'liars are jerks' and 'a liar is a jerk.' Uttered in the same context, I think these generics have different normative forces, and that only the latter is a metalinguistic claim (while the former is descriptive).

²⁶ Haslanger 2014, 367 (original emphasis). Also see Leslie 2014.

'Fs ought to be G.'²⁷

Another advantage of the metalinguistic theory is that it explains why certain normative generics sound (and are) more pernicious than others. If in the midst of a discussion about my philosophical career, my mother sits me down and says “women stay home and raise families,” the force of the utterance seems different than an utterance of “a woman stays home and raises a family.” Intuitions may vary on this, but my reading is that the latter is more cutting. The bare plural utterance says something like: here’s what women should do (or, here is what women do and thereby ought to do). The latter says: in order to call yourself a woman – in order to count as a woman – you need to stay home and raise a family. And when the latter content is conveyed to someone who self-identifies as a woman, in defiance of that self-identification, the normative force is more directed (although perhaps no less bad) than “women stay home and raise families.”

A third common social phenomenon we can shed light on with this account of normative indefinite singular generics is the use of indefinite singular normative generics in parental and otherwise pedagogical speech. Some indefinite singular generics are more readily normative in certain scenarios: ‘a boy doesn’t cry,’ for example, may not immediately permit a normative reading, but we can imagine a parent saying this to a younger child in a scenario where she is (albeit misguidedly) teaching her son what it is to be a boy.²⁸ It is interesting to note the structural similarity of expressions like ‘a table has four legs,’ ‘a dog barks,’ ‘a child is an immature adult,’ ‘a woman is kind and nurturing.’ All uttered in the same pedagogical context, it would be no wonder if claims made by indefinite singular generics about the social world became entrenched in our cognition much like the way we conceptualize tables and chairs (and deceptively so).²⁹

²⁷ This is because in uttering ‘An F is G’ with normative force, we’ve established that G is a condition for F-hood.

²⁸ Thanks to Sofia Ortiz-Hinojosa for pointing out that many indefinite singular generics permit normative readings in “stern governess” contexts. See Sterken 2012 for a similar suggestion.

²⁹ See Leslie 2008, 2013, 2014 among others for much more sophisticated discussions of this kind of phenomenon.

Adopting a metalinguistic view of normative indefinite singular generics also allows us to accommodate relevant data about disagreement. When we disagree about normative generics, we disagree differently than we might about descriptive ones. Specifically, we disagree about how we ought to characterize the generic term. For example, in the following dialogue:

A: A real boy doesn't cry.

B: No, a real boy can cry whenever he wants to.

A and B seem to disagree about the meaning of *real boy*. If 'real boy' is a socially constructed term, then the acceptance or rejection of generic statements involving that term reflect the characterizational reading of those generics. This is nice, because it would allow disagreement about the truth-conditions of such a generic to determine what we mean by 'real boy,' and so influence the appropriateness (or inappropriateness) of uttering such a statement.

We need a way of understanding the inconsistent patterning of indefinite singular and bare plural normative generics. And we should be pursuing a theory that allows us to question assumptions latent in generic normative statements. A metalinguistic theory of indefinite singular generics fit the bill nicely: it both accommodates the data, and gives us a framework to address the social implications of normative generic statements.

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