

Generic language helps fuel stereotypes, researchers find

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Hearing generic language to describe a category of people, such as "boys have short hair," can lead children to endorse a range of other stereotypes about the category, a study by researchers at New York University and Princeton University has found. Their research, which appears in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)*, also points to more effective methods to reduce stereotyping and prejudice.

The study focused on "social essentialism," or the belief that certain social categories, such as race or gender, mark fundamentally distinct kinds of people. For instance, social essentialism facilitates the belief that because one girl is bad at math, [girls](#) in general will be bad at [math](#). While previous [scholarship](#) has shown that essentialist beliefs about social categories, such as gender or race, appear as early as preschool, it has been less clear on the processes that lead to the formation of these beliefs.

This dynamic was the focus of the *PNAS* study.

Specifically, the researchers tested whether generic language plays a powerful role in shaping the development of social essentialism by guiding children to develop essentialist beliefs about social categories that they would not otherwise view in this manner. In addition, in order to understand how social essentialism is transmitted, they examined whether or not holding essentialist beliefs about a social category leads [parents](#) to produce more generic language describing the category when

talking to their children.

In the study, the researchers introduced four-year-old children and their parents to a fictional category of people—"Zarpies"—via an illustrated storybook. Each page presented a picture of a single person displaying a unique physical or behavioral property. The characters were diverse with respect to sex, race, and age in order to eliminate the possibility of existing essentialist beliefs influencing the results. For instance, if all of the "Zarpies" were Asian, subjects might apply essentialist beliefs to the group if they generally have essentialist beliefs about race. In the experiment, the adults read the book twice while an experimenter read the book to the children two times.

In two experiments, in which a single line of text described the accompanying pictures, hearing generic language about a novel social category led both preschool-age children and adults to develop essentialist beliefs about the category. For example, subjects in a generic-language condition ("Look at this Zarpie! Zarpies are scared of ladybugs") were significantly more likely than those in a specific-language condition ("Look at this Zarpie! This Zarpie is scared of ladybugs!") to express essentialist beliefs—even a few days after the experiment.

A third experiment sought to understand how social essentialism is transmitted—specifically, can parents communicate such beliefs to their children through conversation? To study this, parents were introduced to the category "Zarpies" via a paragraph that led them to hold essentialist beliefs about Zarpies (i.e., by describing Zarpies as a distinct kind of people with many biological and cultural differences from other social groups) or non-essentialist beliefs about Zarpies (i.e., by describing Zarpies as a non-distinct kind of people, with many biological and cultural similarities to other populations).

After reading the introductory paragraph, parents received a picture book containing the illustrations used in studies one and two, with no accompanying text. They were asked to talk through the picture book with their child and describe the people and events depicted, just as they would a picture book at home. No other instructions were provided. The entire parent–child conversation was videotaped and transcribed.

There was no difference in number of utterances or references to the characters between the two conditions. However, a higher percentage of the character references were generic in the essentialist condition compared with the non-essentialist condition. In addition, parents produced more negative evaluations in the essentialist condition than in the non-essentialist condition.

"Taken together, these results showed that generic language is a mechanism by which social essentialist beliefs, as well as tendencies towards stereotyping and prejudice, can be transmitted from parents to children," said the study's lead author, Marjorie Rhodes, an assistant professor in NYU's Department of Psychology.

She added that these results do not show that generic language creates essentialist thought, but, rather, that children's cognitive biases lead them to assume that some social categories reflect essential differences—and that generic language signals to them to which categories they should apply these beliefs.

"Understanding the mechanisms that underlie the development of social essentialism could provide guidance on how to disrupt these processes, and thus perhaps on how to reduce stereotyping and prejudice," added co-author Sarah-Jane Leslie, an assistant professor in Princeton's Department of Philosophy. "We often change the way we speak about a given social group, so grounding these changes in mechanisms shown to influence the formation of essentialist beliefs could lead to more

effective efforts to reduce societal prejudice."

Provided by New York University

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