Normative Generics and Social Kind Terms

Word Count: 9182

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 cases where a normative generic is felicitously expressed using the bare plural, but not with the indefinite singular. In this paper, I argue for a *metalinguistic* understanding of indefinite singular normative generics (following Krifka 2012), by centering observations about normative generics. According this view, utterances of *indefinite singular* normative generics propose to establish or change the way the term is used in the conversation or context, while utterances of *bare plural* normative generics express ought-claims. I end by examining the effect of normative generic statements on our characterization of social terms and discussing the ways in which social kind terms are especially apt for metalinguistic characterization and negotiation.

A generic statement makes a generalization about certain kinds: for example, *tigers are striped*, *ducks lay eggs*, and *mosquitos carry West Nile virus*.[1] Among the myriad puzzling features of generics is their resistance to a straight-forward truth conditional analysis. It is difficult to say in virtue of what the above examples are true or false. Generic sentences aren't universal quantifications: tigers are striped, but albino tigers aren't. They're not true in virtue of

[1] This is the dominant characterization of generics, following Burton-Roberts 1976, Lawler 1973, Leslie 2012, Leslie & Lerner 2016. See Liebesman 2011 for a notable exception.

being true by majority: 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. Another well-documented 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*. 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 songs are popular* expresses that for the most part, madrigal songs are popular (Cohen 2001). *A madrigal song is popular*, on the other hand, has a non-generic existential reading: there is one specific madrigal song currently knocking the socks off its listeners. It is well-established that bare plural generics and indefinite singular generics pattern differently.[2] I explore this phenomenon as it applies to *normative* generic statements.

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 (McConnel-Ginet 2012, Haslanger 2014, Leslie 2015b). 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 readings of normative generics are available. 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 communicate the speaker's approval of this norm. Some normative

[2] See Burton-Roberts 1976, Lawler 1973, Carslon 1982, Cohen, 2001, Greenberg 2003, Leslie 2008, Krifka 2012, among others.

generic statements are expressible *only* in the bare plural locution, and not in the indefinite singular. Consider the sentence pair:

(1) Boys don't cry.

(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, why does a generic reading then become available when we consider a modified indefinite singular sentence? – such as:

(2*) A real boy doesn't cry.

One possible reason for the difference in patterning between (1) and (2) is that indefinite singular readings are more difficult to generate in the first place (Greenberg, 2003, Cohen 2001, Krifka 2012).[3] I hold that a refinement of one existing explanation for this general difficulty – Krifka's metalinguistic defintional view of indefinite singular generics – can offer a solution to this puzzle posed by normative generics. We should look to a *metalinguistic* theory of indefinite singular generics to understand the patterning of normative indefinite singular generics. A metalinguistic view helps explain the patterning of (1), (2), and (2*), and additional data that I will consider in the upcoming sections.

This sort of approach will help us weigh into two important debates in semantics and social philosophy of language: the difference in patterning between indefinite singular and bare plural generic statements; and the normative and social impacts of normative generics. There is already a rich debate about why the indefinite singular patterns differently from the bare plural or even the definite singular. Normative generics should figure into that debate, given that a

[3] I thank *** for this point.

good number of generics are normative generics.[4] Second, normative generics are a sub-genre of normative and social language: they are used to express stereotypes, biases, dismissals, among other things. It will be important to figure out how we talk and – among other things – disagree about normative generics and their underlying assumptions.

Normative generics are generics. But they differ from descriptive generic statements in important ways. In the next section, I discuss some recent characterizations of normative generics (section 2). I then argue that observations 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 (section 3). I follow Plunket and Sundell (2013) – who in turn follow Sundell (2011) and Barker (2002) – in using the term *metalinguistic* to pick out what happens when the use 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 use Manfred Krifka's (2012) theory of *definitional* generics to illustrate a metalinguistic view of indefinite singular generics. I then consider some implications of this for normative generics in various contexts, including social and normative language (section 4). My conclusion is twofold. First, semantically, the patterning of indefinite singular and bare plural normative generics support a metalinguistic theory. Second, down the line, such a theory can help us gain a greater understanding of the ways indefinite singular normative generics are used to *negotiate* the usage of certain kind terms.

II. Normative and Indefinite Singular Generics

[4] 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.

i. Normative generics

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 (and sometimes less) than descriptive information about the world.[5]

According to Sarah-Jane Leslie, a generic statement like *boys don't cry* is normative by way of having a 'hortatory force' (Leslie, 2015B). 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.

Sally Haslanger (2014) discusses another feature of normative generic sentences: the way they influence and reflect the social world. For example, a normative generic 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

[5] A variety of sentences are candidates for being called 'normative generics.' 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. I am most interested in these generics for the purpose of this paper because they most closely resemble descriptive generics, yet seem to convey something more. In the rest of the paper, I try to flesh out what this "something more" amounts to.

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."

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, the generic *boys don't cry* is not judged true or false in the same way that *boys are children* is. Instead, its truth conditions — if it has any — are closer to those of the sentence *boys ought not cry*. 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 (Haslanger 2014, Leslie 2015B).[6]

ii. Normative patterning

The first focal point of this paper is that 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 minimal pairs that illustrate this.

1. Boys don't cry.
2. #A boy doesn't cry.

3. Girls are tough.
4. #A girl is tough.

5. Children are seen but not heard.

[6] 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.

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 open doors for ladies.
12. A gentleman opens doors for ladies (Cohen 2001).

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.[7] 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.

[7] I will address this in section five.

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).[8]

III. Metalinguistic Generics

i. Krifka on Definitional Generics

In light of the patterning data and arguments in the previous section, 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. Then, I propose a theory in a similar spirit.

Manfred Krifka's (2015) *definitional theory* of generics is one among several theories that endorse a definitional or analytic reading of indefinite singular generics (such as Lawler's 1973 idea that indefinite singular generics are definitional, and Burton-Roberts' 1976 notion of *analytic* indefinite singular generics). I choose to explicate Krifka's 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 this particular one. 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

[8] Cohen (2001) points this out with the felicity of "a good king is kind" as contrasted with the infelicitous "a king is kind."

language use: “Descriptions presuppose that the language is fixed… definitions communicate about the language that is being used… descriptive generics make generalizations about patterns that appear in the world; definitional generics restrict the language used to describe the world” (Krifka 2012, p. 3). 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 propose a shift in the language (and hold world fixed).

So, ‘a tiger is striped’ says that being striped is part of the definition of being a tiger, whereas ‘tigers are striped’ says that in general, or for the most part, tigers are striped. Thus, the indefinite singular locutions says something different than the bare plural locution. This explains why generics of the form *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.’

Krifka proposes a modified notion of common ground to help model the difference between definitional and descriptive generics. We evaluate a generic sentence at an indexed pair: a set of *admissible interpretations* i, and a set of possible worlds w. So, for any expression α, we can give its extension at $[\![\alpha]\!]^{i,w}$ 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. 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, $[\![\alpha]\!]^{i,w} \neq [\![\alpha]\!]^{i',w}$, then ⟨i, w⟩ and ⟨i′, w⟩ 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, $[\![\alpha]\!]^{i,w} \neq [\![\alpha]\!]^{i,w'}$, then there must be some factual differences between the indices ⟨i, w⟩ and ⟨i, w'⟩.

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 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 [[Φ]] is accepted definitionally at a common ground ⟨I,W⟩… then the set of possible worlds stays the same, but only such interpretations i remain admissible for which the proposition [[Φ]] is true in all possible worlds of the common ground."

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 describing 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. (Krifka 2012)

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: we can more easily hear the *a* sentences as generics than the *b* sentences. Krifka's metalinguistic theory gives us a nice way of accommodating this data. All the *a* sentences, expressed using the bare plural, are descriptive generic sentences: they say that for the most part, barns tend to be red, ducks monogamous, parties fun, and berries delicious. The reason that the *b* sentences do not read felicitously is 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. I would like to extend a metalinguistic account to normative indefinite singular generics. 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. I propose the following metalinguistic theory about the patterning of normative indefinite singular and bare plural generics.

ii. Normative Indefinite Singular Generics

I propose the following to explain the difference between indefinite singular and bare plural normative generics:

> **Normative Indefinite Singular (IS)**: A normative generic assertion of '*An F is G'* is a proposal to restrict the usage of 'F' to things with property G.

On this reading, 'A boy doesn't cry' does not say that x is *not* a boy if x cries; it says that x should not be *called* a boy if x cries. Indefinite singular normative generics are expressions about how we should use language, and bare plural normative generics express how the world should be. By contrast, bare plural normative generics have the following interpretation:

> **Normative Bare Plural (BP)**: A normative generic assertion of '*Fs are Gs*' is an assertion that *Fs ought to be Gs*.

To be clear, this proposal holds that both indefinite singular and bare plural generics can be normative. But I maintain that there is a *different* kind of normativity that comes in at the indefinite singular level: that of metalinguistic negotiation or usage. The normativity of indefinite singular normative generics, according to this view, is that of people telling each other how certain expressions should be used. Bare plurals are normative in the way that Haslanger and Leslie suggest, with respect to the world and how individuals in it should behave (according to the speaker).

The idea is that normative indefinite singular generics establish or propose a revision to the usage about the characterization of the term in question. A normative indefinite singular generic proposes a modification of our existing usage of 'boy': that the speakers modify their usage to *exclude* the crying things from falling under the term 'boy.' We might, then, expect the behavior of indefinite singular generics 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:

(25) ? He's not a boy – he cries!
(26) ? She's not a girl – she isn't tough!

(27) She's not a friend – she lets her friends drive drunk!
(28) He's not a gentleman – he doesn't hold doors open!

Sentences (27) and (28) sounds more felicitous than (25) and (26). That is, we can imagine coherent utterances of (27) and (28) more easily than we can (25) and (26), even though we may disagree with all of the statements. 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 the interpretation of 'boy' in the cultural imaginary is more fixed with respect to crying, while 'friend' leaves more room for interpretation.

Some more data support this suggestion. Observe that we can incorporate almost any predicate G to 'an N F is G,' where N is some normatively flavored adjective, and the resulting sentence is a felicitous normative generic.[9] 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.

[9] Cohen 2001 and Greenberg 2003 observe this with descriptive (non-normative) adjectives and generics.

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 in 33-36. 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 refrain from judging the normative generics as true, but the point is: they are still *generics*. A metalinguistic understanding of indefinite singular generics accommodates this data well: 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.

There are a few ways in which this view differs from Krifka's. First, Krifka holds that indefinite singular generics are metalinguistic insofar as they are *definitional*. Instead, 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. This modification also allows us to get around Cohen's (2001) conflation of definitional views with essentialist views, which I reject for reasons we will see in the next section. According to Cohen, 'A madrigal is popular' "is bad [because] being popular is not an essential property of madrigals, hence [the generic] is not a proper definition and is ruled out" (Cohen 2001, p. 15). But if we instead reframe definitional generics as proposing a criterion or condition that needs

to be met for F to count as G, then we can explain the infelicity of 'A madrigal is popular' without resort to essentialist views of generics.

Second, my analysis differs from Krifka's with respect to 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, it is not the case 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 Competing Views of Indefinite Singular Generics predicts that 'standard barn' and 'catchy madrigal' are then 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. One more way in which my view differs from Krifka is that he holds that bare plural generics are equally capable of expressing metalinguistic claims as are indefinite singular generics. I disagree; one example of this is the generic pair 'liars are jerks' and 'a liar is a jerk.' Uttered in the same context, these generics have different normative forces, and that only the latter is a metalinguistic claim (while the former is descriptive).

Now, we will argue that competing views of indefinite singular and normative generics cannot accommodate the data as well as a metalinguistic view.

The sentences above are problematic for theories that hold that indefinite singular generics are about *essence*.[10] 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 (Lawler 1973, Leslie 2007, 2012, 2013, Haslanger 2011) . On this kind of view, the reason that (2) – *a boy doesn't cry* – is infelicitous is because it's not the case that stoicism is essential to boyhood. By contrast, *a lady doesn't curse* is felicitous because the speaker *does* hold that politeness is essential to ladyhood.

The essences view predicts 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?). 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.[11] 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*.

There are many ways in which a metalinguistic proposal is consistent with Cohen's (2001) view on indefinite singular generics. Like Krifka, Cohen gives a view on which bare plural and indefinite singular generics differ semantically. Also eschewing a view of indefinite singular generics as reflecting essence, he proposes a "rules and regulations" reading of indefinite singular generics (following Carlson 1995), where an indefinite singular generic signals that some kind of rule is in effect. The rule can have any number of flavors: "physical, biological, moral, legal, or linguistic" (Cohen 2001, p. 10). For Cohen, the normativity of indefinite singular

[10] Such theories are held by Lawler 1973, Burton-Roberts 1977, among others.
[11] See Greenberg 1998 and Cohen 2001 for this point more generally, outside of normative generics.

generics arises from the rule-indicating feature of indefinite singular generics. Since rules are by nature normative, indefinite singular generics come across that way, too.

For example, Cohen considers the generic:

(12) A gentleman opens doors for ladies.

On Cohen's view, (12) signals that a rule is in effect; in this case, the rule being in effect means it is "socially accepted" (p. 13). Thus, the rule signaled by (12) is that "opening doors for ladies is part of the social norms dictating the appropriate behavior of gentlemen" (p. 13). By contrast, a metalinguistic view posits that (12) is a definitional generic. Rather than indicating a criterion for the *behavior* of gentlemen, it stipulates a definition of gentleman such that opening doors must be part of that. If one uses the term 'gentleman' to refer to someone who does not open doors for ladies, then, they are using the term incorrectly. So more broadly, this metalinguistic proposal differs from Cohen's in that the 'rule' in question will always be linguistic. Given this, we need not saddle ourselves with a further metasemantic metaphysics of rules, and instead avail ourselves of an already recognized notion of metalinguistic speech and negotiation (following Horn 1985 Sundell 2011, Plunkett & Sundell 2013). The normativity of normative indefinite singular generics for us, then, comes from the normativity of metalinguistically stipulating or negotiating a term in a given context. So, unlike Cohen, our view holds that 'a gentleman' is normative in virtue of its definitional properties.
Further normativity can be explained by the fact that it is referencing a social kind and a social norm. The previous two points will be addressed in the final section.

One advantage this gives us over Cohen's view is that it helps explain certain *infelicitous* indefinite singular generics. For Cohen, indefinite singular generics are infelicitous by default,

but can be generated if the context allows for a rules-and-regulations reading.[12] So, sentence (12) is by default infelicitous, unless we are in a rules-and-regulations context, like where a man is failing to hold a door open. When the rule in question is linguistic, indefinite singular readings can only be generated if "the property be perceived to be potentially essential" (Cohen 2001, p. 15). But as we have just seen, the data above challenges any essentialist view of indefinite singular generics. Firstly, sentences 29-36 show that felicity is not about the property predicated; rather it is about modifying the kind term. Secondly, shifting our definitional concepts away from essences towards criteria and conditions allows us to explain the intuitive felicity of indefinite singular sentences like 'a pig has lungs,' without proliferating essential properties (or potential essential properties). Finally, a metalinguistic view allows us to consider felicity in terms of when it is appropriate to stipulate or modify the definition or use of a term.

iii. Leslie on Normative Generics

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 (following 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).[13]

Leslie proposes (following Knobe and Prasada 2013) that certain terms — like *woman* and *scientist,* and unlike *bartender* and *banana* — have two readings: a descriptive reading and a normative, ideal reading. Normative expressions, including normative generics, reveal the

[12] This is because Cohen holds a view of generics on which they must have a kind-denoting topic, and indefinite singular sentences do not contain such topics (Cohen 2001, p. 6).
[13] This view has been recently challenged (Asher 2012, Sterken 2014, Liebesman 2011, among others).

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*. 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).

But Leslie's 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 both bare plural and indefinite singular locutions (Leslie 2007, 2008), then why isn't the normative generic reading of 'a boy doesn't cry' available?[14] 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?

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 meaning of 'boy' (see Bear & Knobe 2017 for something along these lines). She 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]

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

[14] This is because 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 (whereas the *majority* property generic readings are the ones that are available using the bare plural but backfire with the indefinite singular).

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

triggering the normative reading of the subject term in question. If we deem 'a girl is tough' and 'a boy shares his toys' infelicitous, but find that 'a brave girl is tough' and 'a friendly boy shares his toys' have normative force, then we need a more intricate story about how those adjectives give rise to the normative reading of 'girl' and 'boy.' Second, this line of response will over-generate predictions of 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*, while denying that terms like 'bicycle' and 'bartender' have dual characters.[16]

IV. Embeddings and Context

i. Embeddings

Adopting a metalinguistic view of normative indefinite singular generics allows us to account for the embedding behavior of generics. Consider the difference between:

(37) If boys don't cry, then Jimmy shouldn't.

(38) ? If a boy doesn't cry, then Jimmy shouldn't.

-- and between

(39) Do women stay home and raise families?

[16] Indeed, the research that Leslie (2015b) draws upon (Knobe & Prasada 2013) finds that not all concepts have dual characters.

(40) ? Does a woman stay home and raise a family?[17]

Finally, bare plural and indefinite singular generics behave differently under different scopes of negation – which is further evidence for a metalinguistic view. Although indefinite singular sentences like (2*) ('a real boy doesn't cry') are negated, they don't allow for wide-scope negation in the way that bare plurals do. Consider:

(41) It's not the case that boys cry.

(42) ? It's not the case that a boy cries.

-- or more colloquially:

(43) You're wrong that boys cry.

(44) ? You're wrong that a boy cries.

It is difficult to give (42) or (44) anything other than an existential interpretation, while (41) and (43) sound fine as generics. This data makes sense if we understand indefinite singular generics to be making a metalinguistic claim; the patterning is in line with other metalinguistic sentences. Consider similar embeddings of Horn's metalinguistic sentences – "we don't *like* coffee, we *love* it!" and "That was no lady, that was my wife!" (Horn 1985, original emphasis):

(45) ? It's not the case that around here we like coffee; we love it.

(46) ? You're wrong that around here we like coffee; we love it.

[17] See Cohen 2001 for a discussion of embeddings of indefinite singular generics.

(47) ? It's not the case that she's a lady; she's my wife!

Metalinguistic discourse is not fully apt for embedding in the way that standard linguistic discourse is. Indefinite singular generics behave the way that other metalinguistic discourse does in embedded scenarios.

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 characterization of those terms. This 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.

ii. Two kinds of felicity

There are two general kinds of purported counter-example to the metalinguistic view. The first has to do with the data: there are many indefinite singular generics that *do* sound felicitous (that I have claimed do not). The second notes that certain indefinite singular generics do not come across as making a metalinguistic claim at all.

First, the purported counterexamples. Someone might say there is nothing infelicitous about sentences like 'a boy doesn't cry' or 'a girl is tough.' We just need to get ourselves into the right mindset and the right context.[18] I have two things to say here. First, I think the observation that there is nothing infelicitous about sentences like 'a *boy* doesn't cry' and 'a *girl* is tough,' and other indefinite singular generics where focus is placed on the term in question, is right (Cohen 2003). But this is completely consistent with (and supports) a metalinguistic view of indefinite singular generics. Focus, as Horn (1985) made famous, is an indicator of metalinguistic discourse. In his paradigmatic examples – "Around here we don't LIKE coffee – we LOVE it" – metalinguistic negation is signaled by focus. Because the words "like" and "love" are pronounced with more emphasis, we can understand that these are metalinguistic usages of the words; the speaker is indicating that "love" — not "like" — is the more appropriate word to use to describe their feelings for coffee. So, the fact that we can get felicitous readings of indefinite singular generics when we add focus is, according to some, further evidence for a metalinguistic view.

Second, the observation that certain normative indefinite singular generics are felicitous in the right context is also consistent with a metalinguistic view. The question of felicity can be addressed with recourse to metalinguistic discourse: 'when does it make sense to make a generic claim using the indefinite singular' is co-extensive with the question, 'when does it make sense to make a metalinguistic claim about Fs?' – or even 'when does it make sense to state the meaning of F?' There are contexts where making such a statement or claim will make more sense than others. And the contexts where making such a claim makes sense tend to be those contexts where indefinite singular generics are felicitous. For example (as is noted by Sterken 2012 and Krifka 2012, among others), contexts of parental and pedagogical speech are rife with indefinite singular generics. As we've seen, so are contexts where people are insulting or shaming each other into not being part of the category (or calling themselves such). Out of

[18] See Sterken 2015.

context, saying 'a lady doesn't curse' or even 'a table has four legs' sounds out of place, or even a bit senseless. But there are many times where it *is* coherent to utter such a generic. For example, if my friend starts cursing like a sailor (about the three-legged table), what's conveyed when I say 'a lady doesn't curse' is something like 'you don't get to call yourself a lady unless you stop cursing.' One of the things that the above patterning data brings out is that certain normative indefinite singular generics are more frequently felicitous than others. I think this is explained by the fact that certain terms in our language are more well-defined than others. Social kind terms tend to be less well-defined (or, at least, we agree less about their definitions and extensions), and so there will be more contexts in which it's appropriate to make metalinguistic claims about them.

But there is a third kind of context that seems *not* to be explained by the metalinguistic proposal about indefinite singular generics. This brings me to the second kind of counterexample. This objection holds that an utterance of certain indefinite singular generics, like 'a real girl is tough,' says nothing metalinguistic: it just says that girls should be tough. The force of saying 'a real girl is tough' to my niece just is to get her to act tough.

The above kind of example can be explained by appealing to the entailment relations between indefinite singular and bare plural generics. As we mentioned at the beginning of the paper, indefinite singular generics entail their bare plural counterparts, but not vice versa. That is, an utterance of 'a real girl is tough' will entail that 'real girls are tough.' And on my view, an utterance of 'real girls are tough' does have the kinds of effects described in the objection above. So, what is going on here is that the stronger claim, — 'a real girl is tough' — entails the weaker claim — 'real girls are tough' — and the entailment makes salient the pragmatic and semantic effects of the entailed sentence. A rough paraphrased entailment of the indefinite singular (but not the bare plural) can be put this way: "if you want to be a real girl, then you need to be tough." It does sound like that is part of what we are saying in the case described. That being said, there

just may be cases where an indefinite singular generic doesn't have the metalinguistic effect (although I will predict that these are rare) – just as there are cases where declaratives don't come across as assertions, questions don't come across as questions, etc. The paradigmatic cases of indefinite singular generics, however, will be metalinguistic. And because the indefinite singular entails the bare plural, utterances of 'a boy doesn't cry' will be twofold normative: there will be the initial normativity of the hortatory force that accompanies the bare plural, but also a second kind: that of dictating or negotiating how we should use the expression in question. This is why some indefinite singular generics fail to strike us as normative: when it is conversationally inappropriate for the speaker to propose or negotiate how we use a certain term, especially if that term is more or less fixed in lexicon of the context of the conversation.

iii. Normative Generics and the Social World

A metalinguistic proposal for indefinite singular generics explains the patterning of felicity of indefinite singular normative generics. But it also explains the *normativity* of indefinite singular normative generics. Just as in some contexts, it makes sense for a speaker to propose something about the usage or meaning of a term, in some contexts a speaker's doing so carries normative force.

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.'[19] And presumably, when one denies that friends don't let friends drive drunk, one denies the above implication. On a metalinguistic account we can understand bare plural generics as following from indefinite singular ones.

[19] Haslanger 2014, 367 (original emphasis). Also see Leslie 2014.

Another advantage of the metalinguistic theory is that it explains why certain normative generics can be 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 (Krifka 2012, Sterken 2012).[20] 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. 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

[20] Thanks to *** for pointing out that many indefinite singular generics permit normative readings if we imagine them being uttered by a "stern governess." Krifka 2012 notes that definitional language is frequently important for language acquisition (p. 6). See Sterken 2012 for a similar suggestion.

the social world became entrenched in our cognition much like the way we conceptualize tables and chairs (and perhaps deceptively so).[21]

It follows from my view that felicitous normative indefinite singular generics tend to center contested social terms: like *gentleman, lady, friend* (in contrast with terms like *boy, girl,* and *child*). 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 can be explained by the intuition that it is more natural to propose modifications to the definitions and usages of terms that don't have widely agreed upon extensions. Social kind terms tend to be less well-defined, or at least, we agree less about their definitions and extensions, so there will be more contexts in which it's appropriate to make metalinguistic claims about them.[22]

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 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. A metalinguistic theory of indefinite singular normative generics both accommodates the data, and gives us a framework to address the social implications of normative generic statements.

[21] See Leslie 2008, 2013, 2014 among others for much more sophisticated discussions of this kind of phenomenon.
[22] See Hacking 1999, Haslanger 2000, Sterken 2019, and Dembroff 2019 on social kind terms, amelioration, and contested terms.

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