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# One Recipe for Two Flavors of Generics: How Contextual Restrictions and Stability Give Rise to Essentialist and Structural Generics

Thursday, 30 March 2023, 4pm – 5.30pm  
Philosophy Meeting Room AS3-05-23

Many argue that generics—like “birds have hollow bones” and “women are nurturing”—reinforce essentialist thinking, attributing observable properties to an inherent category essence. Others argue that generics can be a conduit for structural thinking, conveying regularities stemming from stable external constraints acting on category members. Are these underwritten by different psychological principles? Ny Vasil and I develop a proposal about two interpretations of generics—aligned with essentialist and structural representations—based on a common principle of conveying robust generalizations. Specifically, we propose that generics can express generalizations with relatively unrestricted scope and generalizations that are covertly contextually restricted. We argue that in both cases, generalizations that are stable across background conditions (e.g., changes in time, location, other properties) *within* the scope of the generic are taken to be more acceptable. Along the way we consider ways generic thinking relates to causal cognition, the human goals of predicting, controlling, and manipulating, and ways kind representations themselves might affect our acceptability judgments.



## Katherine Ritchie

I am an Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, Irvine. Previously I taught at the CUNY Graduate Center and at the City College of New York. My current research lies at the intersection of inquiry on representation and the social world. I am particularly interested in the nature of social groups (teams, committees, races, genders) and the ways we represent groups in thought and language (e.g., via kind representations or through nouns or generic statements). One central thread in my research is to show how metaphysics and insights about our mental and linguistic representational devices can help inform viable social-political projects. I'm a member of the Editorial Board of the journals *Inquiry*, which publishes in all areas of philosophy, and the *Journal of Social Ontology*, an open access interdisciplinary journal devoted to social ontology and collective intentionality.

All are welcome