

What are generics?

Adults often use **generic language** to communicate information about social groups to children (e.g., “boys play sports”, “girls don’t do that”)

Generics make explicit claims about the nature of kinds, e.g., that boys generally play sports (Carlson, 1977)

But they may also implicitly convey information about other groups not explicitly mentioned (e.g., girls do not play sports)

What can children infer from generics?

Children understand that generics make explicit claims about kinds from an early age (e.g., Cimpian & Markman, 2009; Rhodes, Leslie, Bianchi, & Chalikh, 2017)

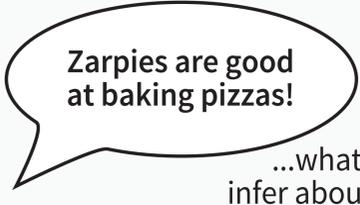
But little is known about what implied meanings children can infer from generics

For other types of language, children as young as 3 can go beyond the literal meaning of a speaker’s statement to infer implied meanings (e.g., Stiller, Goodman, Frank, 2015; but see e.g., Huang & Snedeker, 2009, for some cases where children do not)

In the present study, we test:

What can children infer about unmentioned social groups from generic claims?

E.g., given a social dichotomy between zarpies vs gorps, when children hear:



...what do they infer about gorps?

Method

Study 1a: Main Study

60 4-year-olds ($M = 4.55$ years)
60 5-year-olds ($M = 5.38$ years)
60 6-year-olds ($M = 6.44$ years)
58 mTurk adults ($M = 38.1$ years)

Study 1b: Replication with minimal intro to social dichotomy (no Box 3)

70 4- to 6-year-olds ($M = 5.57$ years)

Conditions:

Varied language heard during test phase (Box 6):

Generic: “Zarpies are good at baking pizzas”

Specific: “This zarpie is good at baking pizzas”

DV: Rated yes/no whether additional zarpie and gorp also have property (Box 7a/b)

Studies were pre-registered: <https://osf.io/c3fpv>

Learning phase:



Introduced to narrator who wants to tell participants about a special town.

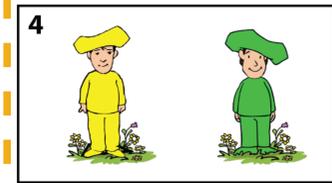


Narrator described novel social dichotomy between zarpies and gorps. Participants asked to recall group names.

Study 1a only

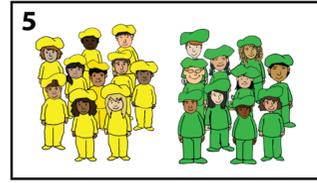


Participants heard a set of generic statements about both groups.



Participants asked to point to the zarpie and gorp to check knowledge of group distinction.

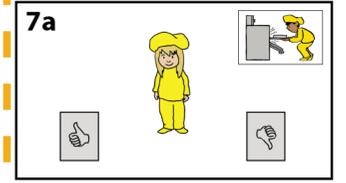
Test phase (4 trials):



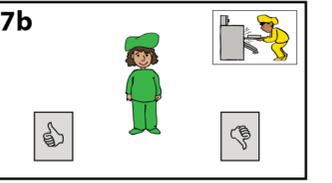
Narrator drew a random individual from a sample of zarpies and gorps.



Narrator described property in generic (“Zarpies are good at baking pizzas”) or specific form (“This zarpie is good at . . .”).



Narrator randomly selected a zarpie from sample. Participants responded yes/no if that zarpie is also good at the property.

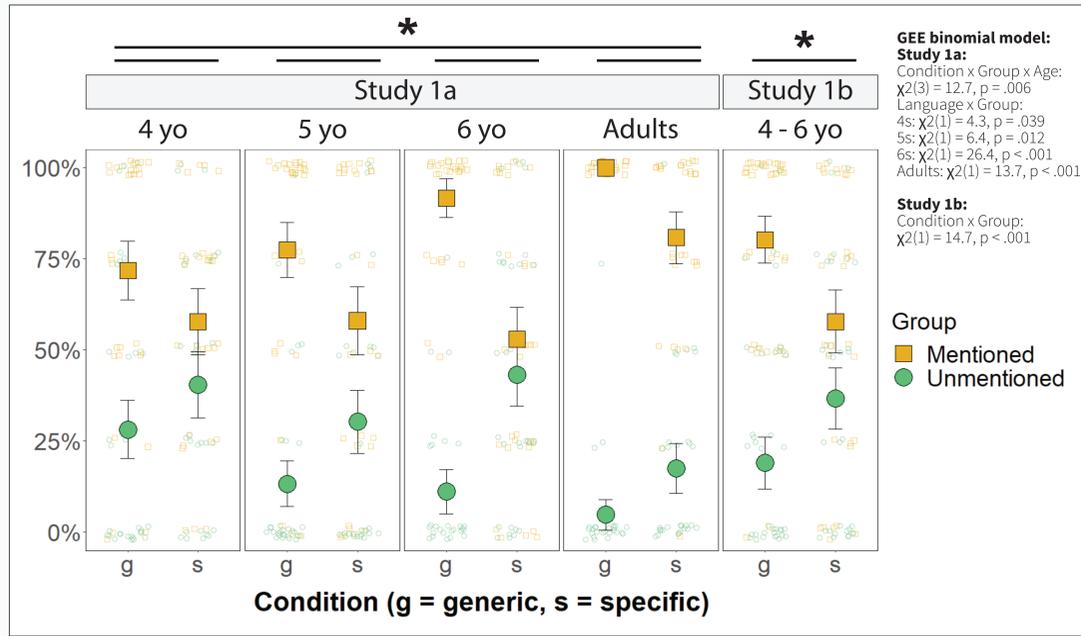


Narrator did the same for a random gorp. Order in which participants were asked about zarpie vs. gorp was randomized.

Condition Manipulation

Percentage of trials participants extended property

Large shapes reflect group averages, small shapes reflect individual averages



Kids who heard generics (“Zarpies are good at baking pizzas”) said another zarpie was good at baking pizzas but that gorps were not

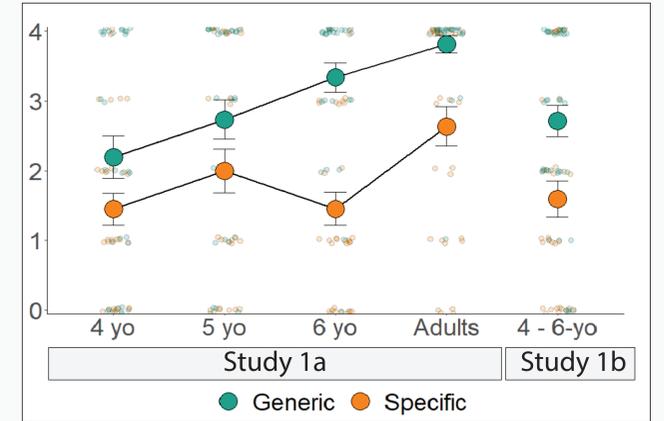
Those who heard specific claims (“This Zarpie is good at baking pizzas”) did not share this intuition

Individual patterns of responses show age-related increase in strength of inference

Study 1b’s replication suggests kids make this inference even for very unfamiliar groups

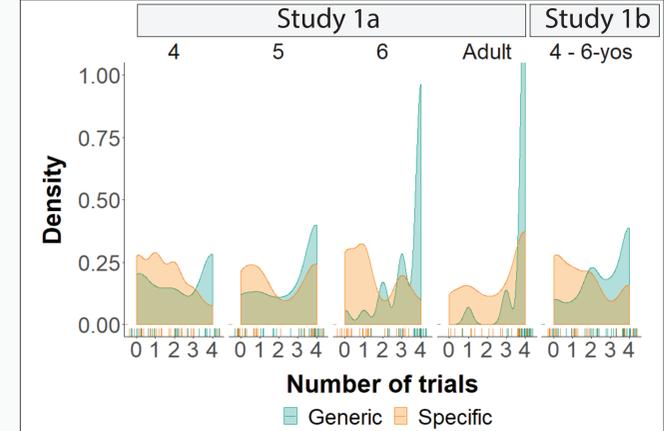
of trials participants made inference

i.e., when participant said “yes” to individuals from mentioned group but “no” to ones from unmentioned



Individual patterns of inference

i.e., breaking out small dots from above graph



Takeaways

Children as young as 4 can make inferences about unmentioned social groups from generic statements, and this tendency increases with age

These types of inferences may provide a mechanism by which parents inadvertently convey social stereotypes to young kids

Our next steps

Cognitive process that underlies this inference?

Do children make similar inferences from generic claims about real-world social groups?

This project was funded by NICHD R01HD087672 to M.R.
 digital copy available at: kelseymoty.github.io/files/srcd19
 @kelseymoty