

Chapter 3: Reification

“Conjuring Up Spirits”

Cursed be the social lies that warp us from the living truth.

- Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Reifications are a particularly troublesome type of generalization because of the unobtrusive way they obscure individual differences. This chapter explains how that works, provides examples, and prescribes countermeasures.

To reify something means to treat an abstraction as if it were a concrete, even living, thing. If someone suggests we need to "lift America's spirit," for instance, he or she is reifying "America." Why? Because they are speaking of "America" as if it were a single person with a single spirit to be lifted, rather than a highly diverse union of nearly 302,404,765 million very different individuals as of 07/21/07.

We encounter reifications every day. For instance, we come across them routinely in newspapers, magazines and on TV. Here are some headlines from just one page of a major metropolitan newspaper with the reifications underlined. "Drug company did not act on AIDS virus warning;" "City and union extend strike deadline;" "Chinese Police detain wife of political prisoner;" Clinton calls on U.N. to cut down on waste."

These aren't particularly troublesome reifications because the details follow in the body of the story. We learn who in the drug company failed to act, which city and union officials extended the strike deadline, and so forth. At times however, particularly when controversies are boiling, such vital details never emerge. When that happens, reifications become dehumanizing, misleading and singularly troublesome.

On the commentary page of this same newspaper, for example, there is a column with many undetailed reifications. The headline is, "U.N. should clean up its act." The columnist charges that "*...the U.N.'s bureaucracy has long ago forsaken its commitment to Article 100 of the [U.N.] Charter.*" (Article 100 forbids U.N. staffers from seeking or receiving instructions from any government.) " He denounces. "U.N. apparatchiks [who] have tried to cover their trail ... ," and he charges that "*The U.N. bureaucracy ... inhabits a culture of paranoia, fearful always that a powerful member country or a powerful block of countries is looking over their shoulder.*"

"When an idea is wanting a word can always be found to takes its place."

— Johann W. von Goethe

What's wrong with this argument? A great deal is. There are over 20,000 U.N. employees working worldwide at hundreds of different jobs; but the author of the column never even hints at that. Instead the columnist uses reifications to encourage us to lump all these very different people together as "the U. N. bureaucracy" and "apparatchiks" — a scornful term for unprincipled, uncaring Soviet era bureaucrats. Some U.N. employees may, in fact, act like *apparatchiks*. Others, however, surely do not. Consider, for example, those who gave their lives trying to deliver food to starving, besieged Bosnians. Do they deserve to be referred to so contemptuously?

(The columnist's reifications also involve name-calling which is discussed in a later chapter. He decries "U.N. apparatchiks," not "U. N. officials." He denounces the "U.N. bureaucracy," not "U.N. administrators.")

Emotionally loaded reifications of this sort are extremely common in disputes. That's because this sort of rhetorical one-two punch is quite powerful and tends to seduce people into thoughtless commitments. We can see this in the work of propagandists and advertising writers. Practitioners of both occupations use reifications masterfully. Consider Hitler's murderously effective ranting against "the Jew." He pounded home the notion that "the Jew" was a single monstrous organism infecting and threatening to kill Germany. This systematic dehumanization smoothed the way for genocide. With the assistance of reifications, it was not a matter of murdering blameless human beings, but of solving "the Jewish question."

"Why is propaganda so much more successful when it stirs up hatred than when it tries to stir up friendly feeling?"
— Bertrand Russell

Most reifications do not have homicidal consequences. Nevertheless they still encourage bigotry or at least simple-minded thinking. A candidate for the U.S. Presidency, for instance, declared in a national debate that there was a pressing need to "lift America's spirit." His prescription might seem reasonable until we stop to consider the hundreds of millions of different individuals in America, only some of whom might need their spirit lifted.. Isn't it obvious that "lifting America's spirit" is so much hot air? But because the candidate obscured this diversity by reifying "America" he made his prescription seem plausible.

Reification and the Analysis of Disputes

Now let's learn how to apply knowledge of reifications to the analysis of disputes. Here is a step-by-step approach.

Step 1) Distinguish reifications from group names.

Reifications refer us to groups in a way that obscures individual differences within them. This serves persuasion, but it destroys critical judgment. It is one thing to refer to a group, say a baseball team, by their name — the Trenton Thunder for example. It is quite another to reify that team and speak of it as if it were a single individual. For example, "The Trenton Thunder lacks desire." In theory, everybody on the Thunder's roster could be deficient in the will to win; but it's far more likely that, if true, the charge applies only to particular team members. On the other hand, you can accurately say, "The Trenton Thunder need a new bus for road trips." Or, "The Trenton Thunder finished second in their division."

It also makes perfect sense to refer to the United States of America collectively in certain contexts. The U.S. is, after all, a legally recognized member of the community of nations and can declare war, enter into solemn treaties, have formal relations with other nations, and so forth. In the final analysis, however, the United States is NOT some sort of mega-person. On the contrary, it is always *specific individual* Americans, not "America," who declare war, enter into treaties, and so forth. But reifications obscure this all-important reality.

Step 2) Be particularly watchful for reifications that play on prejudice

Prejudice and reifications work well together. Perhaps that's because they both depend on ignoring individual differences. Take, for example, the half-serious assertion that "white men can't jump." That reification is convincing to many. But it refers to hundreds of millions of very different individuals as if they constituted a mega-person.

What happens when we trash the reification and consider individuals instead? It quickly becomes apparent that there are numerous "white" track and field world record holders in jumping events.

"All generalizations are false, including this one."
— Stuart Chase

Prejudicial stereotypes depend heavily on reifications. "The Jews are...;" "Blacks never...;" "Whites always..." The reifications beginning such statements encourage total depersonalization, sometimes with murderous consequences. Osama bin Laden, for instance, regularly reifies "America," speaking of us as if we are of one mind, one purpose, one identity. That makes us much easier to hate and kill individuals. Once he reifies us into sameness for his followers, it is no longer a question of murdering thousands of distinctly different people by piloting planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon; it is a matter of "...punishing America."

Step 3) Reduce reifications: first by replacing them with smaller groups, then, if possible, with individuals

Consider the statement "Canadians are having second thoughts about NAFTA." (That's the North American Free Trade Agreement.) When you spot a reification like this, see what happens to its accuracy when you reduce it to smaller groups with more specific characteristics. For instance, if we replace "Canada" with native Canadian Indians living in the wilds of northern Quebec, there's a good chance they've never heard of NAFTA.

Of course it's even more illuminating to further reduce things to individual Canadians. Since we may not know anyone from there, we can make up people whose counterpart might easily exist. Imagine, for instance, a fifth grader living in Montreal whose mother just abandoned him? Is he having second thoughts about NAFTA? Or imagine an eighty-five year old nun who is an Alzheimer's victim and lives in the Sisters of the Sacred Heart Retirement Home in, say, Calgary, Alberta. Is she rethinking the North American Free Trade Agreement? Notice how silly, "Canadians are having second thoughts about NAFTA" becomes when think in terms of individuals.

That's what's wrong with reifications. Most importantly, they completely obscure the importance of individual differences.

Step 4) Apply personal attributes to suspected reifications

Try applying personal attributes, e.g. hates chocolate, needs fresh air, to suspected reifications and see if they still make sense. For example, "America is slimming down" could be made more specific with "America now has a 32-inch waist." Does that still make sense? If it doesn't, the suspect term, in this case "America," is a full-blown reification. Does "America need its spirit lifted?" How about, "America needs three Prozac anti-depressant tablets daily after meals?" We can readily see how little sense this makes.

Chapter Highlights

This chapter defines reification and explains how it obscures key issues in disputes. Disputes involving reifications can appear to be scholarly and “objective” but suffer from all the problems the most obvious slogans have. Upon encountering reifications in controversies, reduce them to smaller groups, then to individuals and see what happens. Typically, claims supported by reifications become much less persuasive.

In later chapters, we will give specifics on how to deal with the kinds of definitional problems reifications generate. (See Chapter 4: *Definitions*)

Other Related Chapters in This Text

- 2, Slogans
- 4, Definitions
- 6, Name Calling
- 10, What is Society?

Keywords for Further Data Base Search

- slogan
- propaganda
- generalization
- inference
- prejudice
- stereotype

Test Yourself

Consider the following statements and decide whether or not reifications are being used. If so, note in the last column important differences being obscured. Follow the example.

Examine for Reification	Y/N	If "Yes," Difference Obscured?
1. Foreign trade helps America.	Yes	One difference obscured is which "America;" or more specifically, which Americans? Also obscured is what type of foreign trade.
2. The Yankees are in a losing streak.		
3. Germany is threatening Central Europe.		
4. The orchestra played Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.		

5. Generation X lacks ambition.		

Answers

The odd numbered statements contain reifications; the even ones do not.

In #1 both "foreign trade" and "America" are reifications. Trade in autos is not the same thing as trade in rice. Different Americans are affected differently.

In #2 Yankees is a group concept because the team's being on a losing streak does not tell us about individual performance. A pitcher might have the most wins ever, and yet the team may still be on a losing streak.

In #3, both Germany and Central Europe are reifications. We are probably talking about heads of government, not arbitrary individuals in any given country.

In #4, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony can only be played by an orchestra. Individual players can only participate by playing specific parts.

In #5, generation X is a reification. It at best indicates an average. Individual members of the generation can still be quite ambitious.

Chapter Review Sheet

1. Describe the chapter briefly in your own words.

2. What are the core ideas developed in this chapter? If more than one, list them in order of their importance to you.

3. Briefly explain the importance to you of your first choice.

4. Briefly describe a scenario in which you could apply one of the ideas from the chapter to improve your professional practice.

5. Connect this chapter to at least one thing you already know.

6. Suggest one way to make this chapter more effective.
