Let's talk structure
the positive consequences of structural representations of social categories

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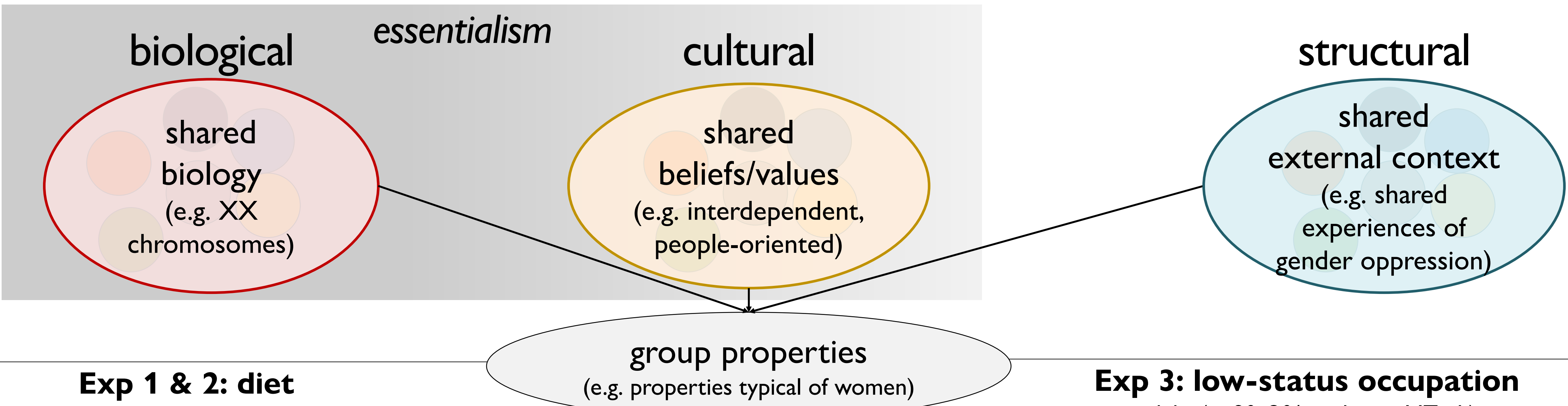Department of Psychology
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How should we represent social categories (e.g. gender, race)?

We know *essentialism* of social categories (e.g. positing a biological essence) is problematic.

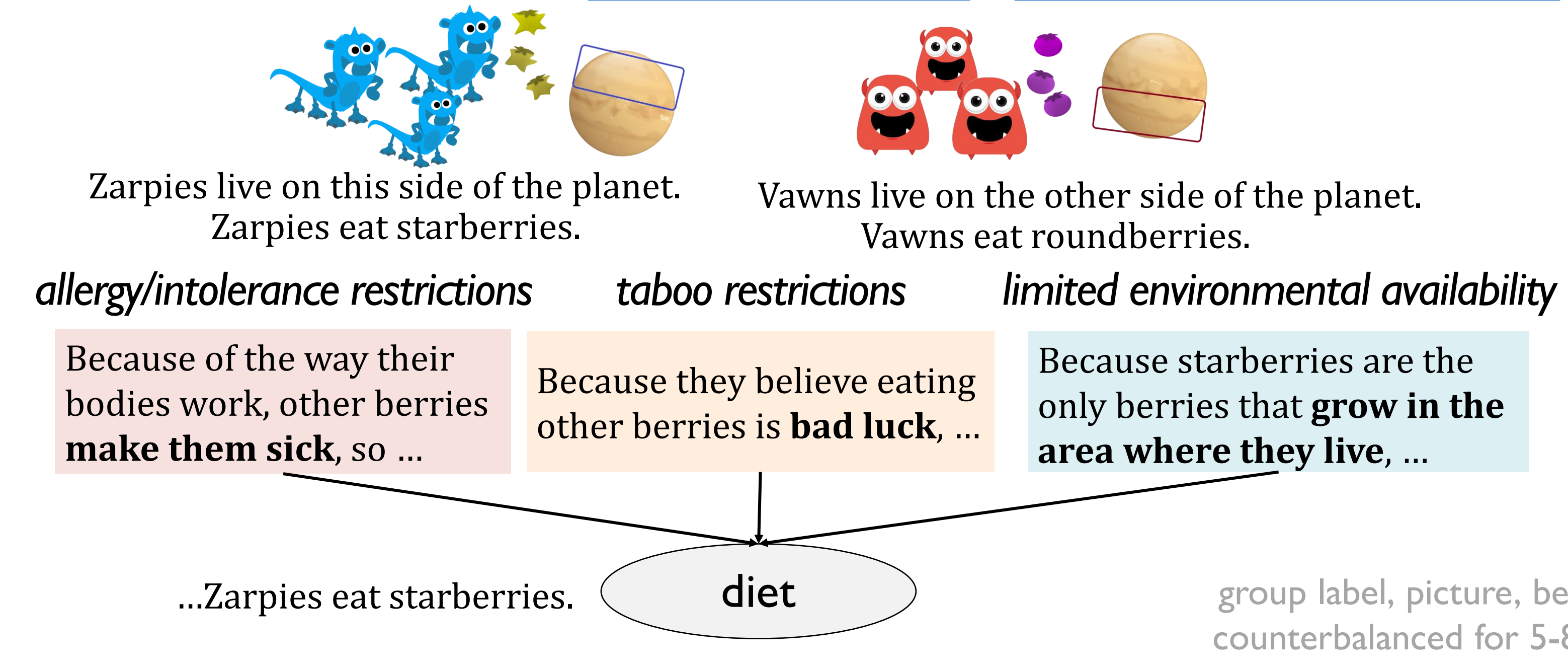Is characterizing a group in terms of shared beliefs/values also problematic?

Could structural representations be a more positive alternative?

essentialism

biological — shared biology (e.g. XX chromosomes)

cultural — shared beliefs/values (e.g. interdependent, people-oriented)

structural — shared external context (e.g. shared experiences of gender oppression)

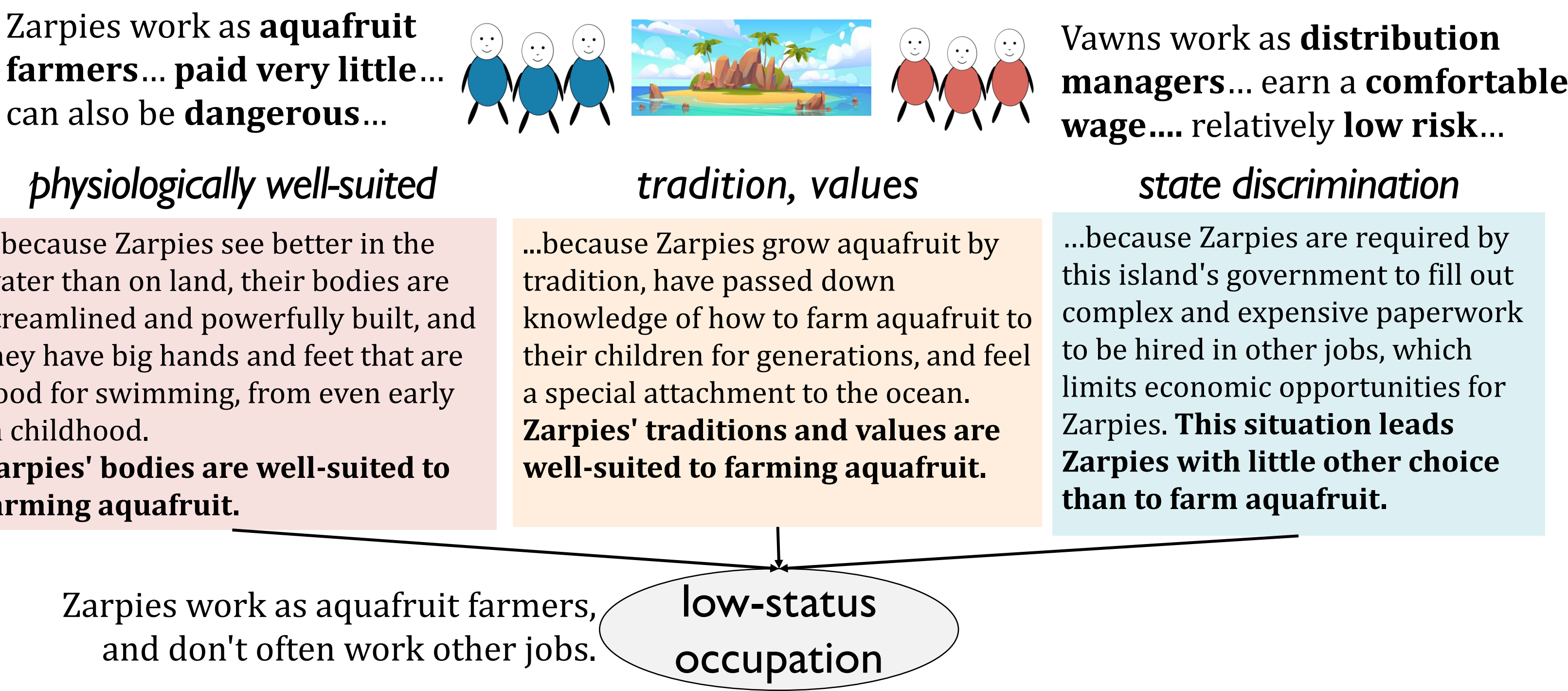group properties (e.g. properties typical of women)

Exp 1 & 2: diet

adults (n=167, ~55/condition, MTurk)

5-8yo (n=67, ~22/condition, Zoom via Children Helping Science & Stanford Social Learning Lab system)

Zarpies live on this side of the planet. Zarpies eat starberries.

Vawns live on the other side of the planet. Vawns eat roundberries.

allergy/intolerance restrictions
Because of the way their bodies work, other berries **make them sick**, so …

taboo restrictions
Because they believe eating other berries is **bad luck**, …

limited environmental availability
Because starberries are the only berries that **grow in the area where they live**, …

…Zarpies eat starberries. → **diet**

group label, picture, berry counterbalanced for 5-8yo

Exp 3: low-status occupation

adults (n=90, 30/condition, MTurk)

Zarpies work as **aquafruit farmers**… **paid very little**… can also be **dangerous**…

Vawns work as **distribution managers**… earn a **comfortable wage**…. relatively **low risk**…

physiologically well-suited
…because Zarpies see better in the water than on land, their bodies are streamlined and powerfully built, and they have big hands and feet that are good for swimming, from even early in childhood. **Zarpies' bodies are well-suited to farming aquafruit.**

tradition, values
…because Zarpies grow aquafruit by tradition, have passed down knowledge of how to farm aquafruit to their children for generations, and feel a special attachment to the ocean. **Zarpies' traditions and values are well-suited to farming aquafruit.**

state discrimination
…because Zarpies are required by this island's government to fill out complex and expensive paperwork, which limits economic opportunities for Zarpies. **This situation leads Zarpies with little other choice than to farm aquafruit.**

Zarpies work as aquafruit farmers, and don't often work other jobs. → **low-status occupation**
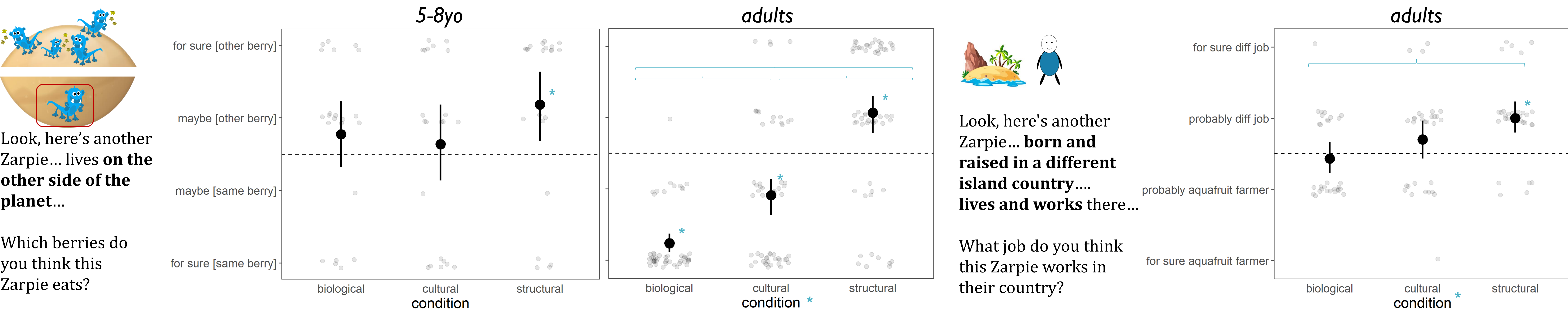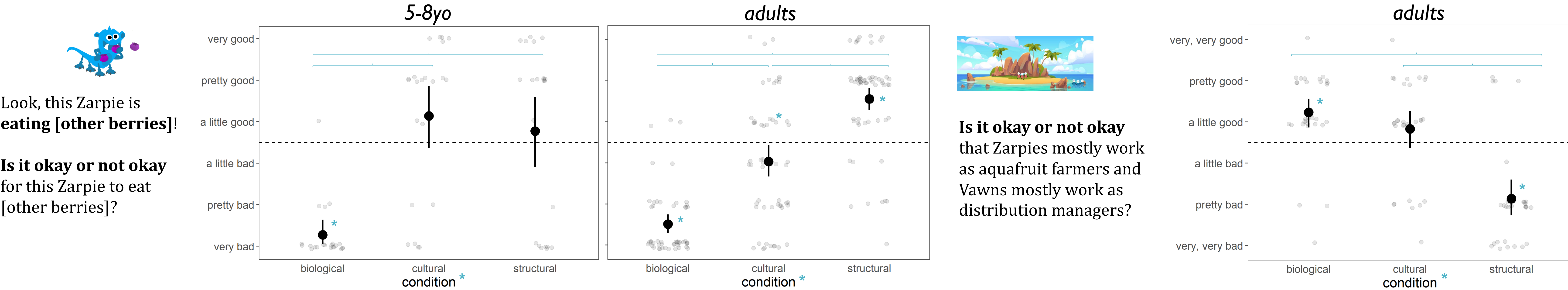

Cultural representations may be a mild form of essentialism.

Structural representations lead to a variety of positive consequences, suggesting **we should think about social categories in a structural way.**

What is the case: more context-sensitive generalization, i.e. less stereotyping, in adults

5-8yo

adults

Look, here's another Zarpie… lives **on the other side of the planet**…

Which berries do you think this Zarpie eats?

for sure [other berry] / maybe [other berry] / maybe [same berry] / for sure [same berry]

condition: biological / cultural / structural

Look, here's another Zarpie… **born and raised in a different island country**…. **lives and works** there…

What job do you think this Zarpie works in their country?

adults

for sure diff job / probably diff job / probably aquafruit farmer / for sure aquafruit farmer

condition: biological / cultural / structural

What should be the case: less negative attitudes towards non-conformity, more negative attitudes towards present disparities

5-8yo

adults

Look, this Zarpie is eating [other berries]!

Is it okay or not okay for this Zarpie to eat [other berries]?

very good / pretty good / a little good / a little bad / pretty bad / very bad

condition: biological / cultural / structural

Is it okay or not okay that Zarpies mostly work as aquafruit farmers and Vawns mostly work as distribution managers?

adults

very, very good / pretty good / a little good / a little bad / pretty bad / very, very bad

condition: biological / cultural / structural

How to change what is the case: more interventions on structural context, fewer interventions on the group

5-8yo: what could we do / *adults*: what would you do, so that the Zarpies can eat [other berry]?

5-8yo (κ=0.81)

adults (κ=0.92)

- change group biology *5-8yo* *adults*
- change group beliefs/culture *adults*
- change environment (increase food access) *5-8yo* *adults*
- change the food
- other

If you could make anything happen, **what would you do to get the Zarpies to work as distribution managers?**

change group: *
- change group biology
- change group beliefs/culture *

change structural context: *
- provide job training to group
- create more jobs or access to jobs *
- change job wages, value, hours, work
- other

adults (κ=0.72)

condition: biological / cultural / structural

⊣ = 95% bootstrap CIs
— = statistically significant diff. between means (FDR-corrected)
* = main effect of condition (controlling for difficulty of intervention)
  or statistically significant diff. from midpoint (one-sample t-test)