Race & Racism (F14)
October 1, 2014

<h1 align="center">Kinds of Social Construction</h1>

Reading:

Ron Mallon, "A Field Guide to Social Construction."
Sally Haslanger, "Social Construction: Who, What, Why, Where, How?"

I. Social Construction

What is a social construction? What is it for something to be socially constructed? What does it mean to say that, e.g., gender, or race, is socially constructed? → What is the point of saying that something is socially constructed?

> Social constructionists are particularly interested in phenomena that are contingent upon human culture and human decisions – contingent upon the theories, texts, conventions, practices, and conceptual schemes of particular individuals and groups of people in particular places and times. (Mallon 94)

What is it to debunk a concept, idea, etc? How is debunking connected to ideology critique?

> The point of claiming X is a construction, Hacking suggests, is to claim that "X need not have existed, or need not be at all as it is. X, or X as it is at present, is not determined by the nature of things; it is not inevitable" (Mallon 94, quoting Hacking *The Social Construction of What?,* 6).

What ideologies/background assumptions about the natural/social distinction are relevant, that may be the focus of critique? Biological Essentialism, Natural kind realism, Scientific realism...others?

- Idea/concept/theory v. object/kind construction
- Causal v. constitutive construction

A. Idea/concept/theory construction

> Constructionists accounts of theories typically defend particular views of what (rather than the facts or data) determines the content of accepted theories (or of a particular theory)...(95)

Idea/concept/theory constructionists are often opposing a form of scientific realism. Although focused on "science" the debate could be over any dominant epistemology. Broadly speaking, the argument of the scientific realist seems to be:

1sr) Science [or fill in the locally dominant epistemology] discovers the real joints in nature.
2sr) So if it is determined by science that p, we must organize our social practices to accommodate p.

Theory constructionist rebuttal:

1tc) Science is a social practice and scientific conclusions are often motivated by adherence to and serve the dominant structure, i.e., they are ideological.
2tc) Scientific "knowledge" should be contested.

The critique here is often in causal terms: our concepts, theories, etc. are *caused by* something other than legitimate reasons. Mallon again (96):

> ...theory constructionists emphasize determinants that they take to be the "wrong kinds of causes" or the "wrong kinds of reasons" for beliefs. In both cases, they take the causes or reasons to be the "wrong kind" because they do not seem to justify the theories. (96)

It might be worth noting that framed in this way, the constructionist critique is genetic, i.e., the source of the idea/concept/theory is problematic; this tends to raise the question of the *genetic fallacy,* i.e., good

ideas can have problematic sources and we ought to judge an idea in terms of its merit (justification, truth, etc.) rather than its causes. Sometimes, the critique is in terms of the bad causal effects of holding the idea/concept/belief. This tends towards a kind of functionalist critique:

1fc. A commitment to p functions to support the dominant power structure.
2fc. The dominant power structure is unjust, so we should reject p.

This too rests on a causal background claim, viz., that p has the *effect* of supporting the dominant structure. Note too that it isn't clearly a good argument against the truth or justification for p that it has these effects.

B. Causal construction of objects/kinds

Idea/theory/concept construction is about the causes and effects of ideas/theories/concepts (suggesting they undermine the idea/theory/concept). But other forms of construction are interested in the causal effects of ideas on the world in a different sense:

Causal construction: X is socially constructed *causally* as an F – or to be an F? iff social factors (i.e., X's interaction with other things in a social matrix) play a significant role in causing X to have those features by virtue of which it counts as an F.

Discursive construction: something is discursively constructed just in case it is (to a significant extent) the way it is because of what is *attributed to it* or *how it is classified*. (Haslanger, 19)

Hacking distinguishes[1]:

Interactive kind: A kind of classification counts as "interactive kind" insofar as it interacts with things of that kind, namely people, who can become aware of how they are classified or generally aware of their social milieu and modify their behavior accordingly. (Using the terminology of my essay, these are *discursively constructed*.)

Indifferent kind: "quark" is an indifferent kind: quarks are not altered by being aware that they are classified as quarks, and are not directly affected by being so named.[2]

Some kinds may be affected by classification, but not via awareness of being so-classified, e.g., domesticated animals. In general, interactive kinds and their members are socially constructed in the causal sense.

The paradigm cases of this sort of debunking are those in which ideas/theories/concepts have a "looping effect." The problem is not that the ideas/theories etc. are *false*. The worry is that they are true, but only true because the world has been caused to confirm our theories, e.g. sex binary, illiteracy.

The target of this debunking is sometimes biological essentialism, sometimes natural kind realism, (depending on the interpretation of "by nature" below) e.g.,

1be) The generalization that Gs are F is robust, so Gs must be F "by nature."
2be) If Gs are F "by nature," then we should accommodate that fact in our social practices (and not try to make Gs be non-F).

Constructionist rebuttal:

1le) Generalizations may be robust, not by virtue of the nature of the kind, but by virtue of the power of our social practices to enforce the generalization.
2le) By reinforcing generalizations (or failing to disrupt them) we may be imposing an injustice.

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[1] See Ian Hacking (1999) *The Social Construction of What?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 32.
[2] Hacking, op. Cit.

B. Constitutive/relational construction

When a kind is produced by a looping effect, the loop is sometimes obscured for ideological reasons. In particular, the structure by which the generalization is produced is invisible, and the features are taken to be inherent, or intrinsic, or essential, to the members of the kind.

One debunking move, then, is to reveal the structure by distinguish the features by which we identify members of the kind from the social consequences that appear to flow from those features. In short, the task is to demonstrate the way in which a structural position maps onto a "given" distinction, not because the mapping is inevitable, but because we have confused them.

Examples:
Sex/gender
Infirmity/disability
"Color"/race
sexually attracted to the same sex/"Homosexual" (Foucault)

Constitutive construction: X is socially constructed constitutively as an F iff X is of a kind or sort F such that in defining what it is to be F we must make reference to social relations (or: such that in order for X to be F, X must exist within a social matrix that constitutes F's).

Examples: wives, professors, landlords, presidents, nation-states....and?

Most categories that are constitutively constructed are obviously so. No one would be surprised to learn that landlords or presidents exist only within a social context because we have defined such social roles. But other categories are confusing because there is something social going on, but the social category seems to correspond to a natural distinction. For example, there is a social designation "disabled" that brings with it certain rights, e.g., special parking stickers, special services, educational accommodation, etc. But how does this distinction map onto those with infirmities?

IV. Social construction and ideology

The masking of social factors as natural factors is ideological. Think: what is the best way to respond to a *natural* difference between people? Treat it as "given" as something that cannot be changed? As something we just have to deal with? If the social factors that play a role in causing and constituting a category are masked, then it seems that it is not "our fault" that people cannot manage and we are not responsible. But if we note the social sources of their membership in the relevant group, and if we see that the group is disadvantaged, then we should ask whether these disadvantages are just or justified.

Questions
• Should all social constructions be deconstructed? Why or why not? How do we decide?
• Do all ideological constructions function by "masking" the social as natural (somehow or other)?
• Is race causally constructed? Constitutively constructed?

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