



Social Construction

Ásta Sveinsdóttir*

San Francisco State University

Abstract

What is social construction? This essay offers a survey of the various ways in which something could be socially constructed and then addresses briefly the questions whether social constructionism involves an untenable anti-realism and what, if anything, unifies all social construction claims.

1. Introduction

While debates over the social construction of various things have raged on for decades in other fields, it is only just now that social construction has become a respectable topic of conversation in mainstream philosophy circles, even though a few prominent philosophers have been writing about it for quite some time.¹ Perhaps a reason for that is that philosophers working on social construction have tended to draw on both the analytic and the continental tradition in their theorizing and that in itself is something that is slowly entering the mainstream. Even as late as 2006, influential philosophers such as Paul Boghossian (2006) were dismissing social construction claims as vacuous, incoherent, or confused, and a persistent charge has been that the social constructionists confuse the metaphysical and the epistemic: when arguing that some X is socially constructed, the charge goes, social constructionists marshal evidence for the claim that the idea or conception of X is socially constructed but then want to draw the conclusion that X itself, not just the idea of X, is so constructed. Then the idea that X itself could be socially constructed is summarily dismissed as involving a radical anti-realism where everything is language, or text. To be sure, the arguments offered in fields ranging from sociology and anthropology to literature in support of social construction claims haven't always supported the conclusions drawn, and the positions and the arguments for them could have benefited from more clarity. But, by now, there is a growing body of philosophical literature on social construction and clear that social construction claims don't just rest on confusion. They do, however, vary greatly in what is supposed to be constructed and how.

This essay is intended as an introduction to social construction. The main focus will be social construction claims where X itself is to be socially constructed, and the strategy will be to survey the various ways in which that could be. We will then address briefly the question whether social constructionism involves an untenable anti-realism and conclude with a discussion of what, if anything, unifies all social construction claims.

2. *What is constructed? Is the claim epistemic or metaphysical?*

There are many types of social construction (and hence, social construction claims). The first distinction we need is that between the epistemic and the metaphysical: is it X itself that is socially constructed, or is it our idea or conception or knowledge of X that is? If the latter, then the claim that X is socially constructed is an epistemic claim in the sense that social practices are somehow implicated in our epistemic access to X. This is what Ian Hacking calls

'idea construction' and discusses at length in his *The Social Construction of What?* (1999). As my focus in this essay is on the metaphysics of social construction, we will only discuss one type of idea construction, which is such that the idea of X causes changes in X itself, and thus, although it is a type of idea construction, there are metaphysical consequences. This is the important phenomenon of *the looping effect*, identified by Hacking and much discussed in the subsequent literature.

The *looping effect* is the phenomenon where X is being described or conceptualized as F makes it F. This phenomenon only applies to cases where X is a subject capable of reacting to being thought of or conceptualized in some way. In those cases, Hacking suggests, the availability of a self conception or a way of being has the effect that the people so conceptualized start to behave more and more in a way that fits that conception. Hacking discusses examples that involve the classification of people by authorities, including psychological diagnoses like that of multiple personality disorder. When a person is diagnosed with multiple personality disorder, they are offered a conception of themselves as explanatory of their experience. The availability of the diagnosis results in people conforming more to the conception (exhibiting more symptoms) than before they were diagnosed (1999). This is the key to Hacking's own account of human kinds which he labels 'dynamic nominalism': the conception of the kind and the kind come into being together. On Hacking's account, there isn't the human kind *person with multiple personality disorder* before the availability of the diagnosis and the conception of a person with multiple personality disorder. The kind or type² of person comes into being hand in hand with the availability of the conception of that type or kind of person.

How is this possible? Hacking's idea comes from Hegel via Foucault. Very briefly, on Hegel's account of the development of consciousness in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), Consciousness forms a conception of itself and attempts to act out or actualize that conception. In acting as if the conception is true, the conception comes to fit better and better, until an internal contradiction in the conception itself comes to the fore. In the face of that contradiction, Consciousness then forms a new conception of itself that incorporates what it has learned from the contradiction and, in turn, attempts to actualize that conception. This is Hegel's dialectic. But, Consciousness does not only form a conception of itself, it also forms conceptions of what isn't itself, whatever Other it encounters. When the Other is an inanimate object, it cannot resist Consciousness' conception of it, but when the Other is itself a consciousness, we have a dynamic relationship between two subjects who form conceptions of themselves and each other and attempt to actualize those conceptions, act as if they are true. Hegel describes a struggle unto death over whose conceptions are to prevail which results in one being the master, the other the slave. It is the master's conception of itself and the other that has prevailed, and the slave has chosen to accept those conceptions for itself rather than death. There are nuances and complications in Hegel's account of subjectification and objectification, of course, but Hegel's insight is still with us. Whose conceptions – of people themselves and of others, but also of anything whatsoever, including general world-views – prevail may not be determined by comparing the conceptions with something like an independently reality or the facts but in a power struggle where the conceptions of the powerful prevail.

Hegel was an idealist, and there was no room for any epistemic check on the conception, except an internal contradiction in the conception itself. But, we don't have to take on board Hegel's idealism in order to benefit from his insight. We can acknowledge the immense forces of power in determining which conceptions of things prevail, even if we want to leave room for the role of epistemic reasons, including, but not limited to, reasons from internal contradiction. That scholars disagree over whether Foucault himself allows for a role for epistemic reasons or whether the development of institutions and cultural practices is determined by power relations alone³ should not commit us to the view that the only force of human culture is power.

How do we use Hegel's insight to explain the looping effect? When an entity in power forms a conception of people it has power over, the people have to respond to being conceived of in that way. They can take on that conception as their own, or they can try to resist. The cases of the looping effect are not confined to those where the authority is epistemic authority, as in the case of multiple personality disorder, where the doctors' epistemic authority plays a role. Hacking discusses the interesting case of two different ways of thinking about what it is to be an alcoholic: the alcoholic as someone who is failing morally, and the alcoholic who has a disease that needs curing. He thinks of Alcoholics Anonymous as working with the conception of the alcoholic as someone who has a moral failing, and AA members come to see themselves in terms of the conception offered to them. Likewise, that the medicalization model of alcoholism offers a conception of the alcoholic as someone who has a disease of the body and patients diagnosed with that disease come to see themselves in those terms. People struggling with alcoholism are here offered two different ways of thinking of themselves and their predicaments with different results: either they can think of themselves as being morally culpable or they think of themselves as physically ill. In each case, they act accordingly and come increasingly to exhibit features belonging to the two conceptions of an alcoholic in question.

We have lingered with this special type of idea construction because even though it is the idea of X that is socially constructed in the sense that it is, of course, a product of social forces, given certain conditions, X itself is affected, so we can classify this kind of case as a case of social construction in the metaphysical sense. We will not dwell on other types of idea construction. Instead, in what remains, we will focus exclusively on the case where the social construction claim is understood as a metaphysical thesis and X itself is claimed to be socially constructed.

3. Causal Construction

Even though we have now chopped off a huge branch of the tree that is social construction, many branches remain. We will introduce them with a concrete example. Let's consider the claim *disability is socially constructed*. This will, actually, turn out to be a host of claims, with varying implications.

An individual has various physical features and, depending on the physical environment, can be more or less mobile within that environment. Let's say Sam can't walk and is in a wheelchair (S has feature W; S is W).

If the environment fits well the way the wheelchair works – there are smooth sidewalks with inclining curbs and all buildings are without thresholds and one story high, there is never any snow or floods, and so on – then Sam can move around freely in their environment. If, on the other hand, there are some buildings that are taller than one story, without an elevator, then there are parts of the physical environment Sam does not have access to. We can call this *physical consequences of being in a wheelchair, given the physical environment* (physical consequences of being W, given the physical environment).

But suppose it so happens that all parties take place on second floors of buildings. No one intended it that way; it just happens. Perhaps it's a fad to have party venues with gorgeous views. The point is simply that no one intentionally picked second floor venues because it would exclude anyone; no one really thought about it very much. But, the consequences are that Sam cannot go to parties anymore, and now, there are not only physical consequences of Sam's being in a wheelchair, but social consequences of a certain sort as well. We can call this *unintentional communal consequences of being in a wheelchair, given the physical and social environment*.⁴ A meaner version of this is when someone, Kim, has realized that if they throw a party on the second floor, Sam cannot attend, and Kim deliberately decides to do so, perhaps to block a fellow suitor

and have the luxury of an evening of courtship in the absence of their rival. That case would be *intentional communal consequences of being in a wheelchair, given the physical and social environment*.

Suppose now that the voting booth is on the second floor of a building without an elevator, but no one had intended this. Again, no one had given it much thought; it just sort of happened that way. While the voting commission is eager for as many voters as possible to take part in the election, some, like Sam, cannot vote. This would be *unintentional institutional consequences of being in a wheelchair, given the physical and social environment*. And a meaner version of this is when some election officials have realized that if they put the voting booth on the second floor, Sam and others cannot vote, and deliberately decide to place the voting booth on the second floor to prevent Sam from voting. That would be *intentional institutional consequences of being in a wheelchair, given the physical and social environment*. We have, of course, many actual examples of this phenomenon, such as when polling places are only open during hours a certain section of the population cannot possibly make.

The types of consequences identified above can be lumped together under the heading *social consequences of having W, given the physical and social environment*, and the type of social construction in question we can call *social construction as social consequences*. This is a type of social construction Susan Wendell discusses in her 'The Social Construction of Disability' in (Wendell 1990).

But, social constructionist claims do not only concern social consequences of features or phenomena. Sometimes, the physical environment gets changed as a result of social forces. Suppose that a certain kind of vehicle, The Hopper, gets to be very popular, and this type of vehicle requires very high curbs for parking. Then, in the absence of legislation pertaining to such things, curbs become increasingly higher in the area and formerly non-curbed sidewalks become not only curbed, but acquire very high curbs. This is a case of the popularity of a vehicle *causing changes* in the physical environment, and the type of social construction is *social construction as social causal construction*, much discussed by Hacking, as well as Haslanger and Mallon. In our example, aspects of the physical environment itself, namely the curbs, are socially constructed in that social forces contributed to the existence or change in the physical features of the curbs. But since we are focusing on the example of the claim that disability is socially constructed, is this a case where disability is socially constructed as well? Yes, because any loss of mobility (and therefore increase in disability, given the physical environment) is a causal effect of the same social forces. Areas Sam could traverse freely before are now off limits, all because of the popularity of The Hopper.

This example brings out that although the type of social construction identified before, *social construction as social consequences of a feature*, is also a type of causal construction, it is helpful to distinguish types of causal construction by their focus: is the social phenomenon the cause or the effect? The causal construction discussed by Hacking, Haslanger, Mallon, and others is a construction where the social is the *cause*. In the first type discussed by Wendell, the focus is on the social *effects* of a feature. As we see in the above example, though, social forces can effect changes in the physical environment that can have physical and social consequences so these types of construction interact in a variety of ways.

There is a special case of the social causing changes in the physical environment with debilitating consequences that is noted by Wendell. This is the type where social norms or ideals have the effect that certain bodies are not only abnormal, but disabled. When society is organized around what the normal or ideal is, that has a disproportionate effect on those who are defined abnormal. For instance, if public transportation is designed with 4 feet tall people in mind, then 6-foot tall people will have a hard time fitting through the bus doors and into the seats on the bus. Similarly, if the ideal of femininity involves being exceedingly thin and most clothes are designed around that ideal, then women who are not exceedingly thin, which may even be most of the population, have a hard time finding fitting clothes. There are two senses of 'normal' at

work here: the statistically normal, and the ideal, and both can have the effect of marginalizing or making abnormal whomever they don't fit, with debilitating effects. This type of construction we can call *social construction as norms causing changes in the physical environment in such a way that having feature W is disabling*.

Finally, it isn't only the physical environment we interact with that can be changed as a result of social forces. Social forces can also cause changes in the physical features of individuals, making them physically impaired where they were not so before. We can have social forces (laws, regulations, corporations, community practices, etc.) cause environmental pollution which in turn cause debilitating diseases or restrict access to basic necessities causing debilitating conditions in populations. In this case, social forces cause the very feature in question. We can call this *social construction as social forces causing feature W*.

4. Constitutive Construction

So far, we have only considered causal construction. Not all types of social construction are of the causal kind, however. As Haslanger has discussed (2012), an important type of social construction is what she calls 'constitutive construction' and defines thus⁵:

Constitutive construction Something is constitutively constructed if in defining it we must make reference to social factors.

Intuitively, X is constitutively constructed just in case social phenomena make up or constitute X. The notion of *constitution* is the familiar one: just as a material object is constituted by the materials that make it up, arranged in a certain way, so a social phenomenon is constituted by the phenomena (physical and social) that make it up, again, arranged in a certain way.

Constitutive construction features prominently in debunking projects where the aim of the social construction theorist is to debunk widely held beliefs about the phenomenon in question, for example, when it is widely held that a phenomenon is natural, and the aim is to show that it is in fact social. Examples of this are claims to the effect that sex or intelligence is socially constructed, when they are widely held to be a matter of biology. Another prominent example is the status of race, where a social constructionist offers that race is a social, and not a biological, phenomenon. And to continue with our example of the social construction of disability, a social constructionist would claim that disability is socially constructed as part of a debunking project: while it is widely held that disability is a matter of physical impairment, it really is a social phenomenon. Ásta Sveinsdóttir offers a way to flesh out this claim thus⁶: for disability to be socially constructed is for a feature, physical impairment, to have *social significance* in a context such that people taken to have the feature get conferred unto them extra social constraints and enablements that are over and above the constraints and enablements that mere physical impairment brings. In effect, people taken to have the feature in question (here physical impairment) get conferred onto them a social status, which consists in constraints and enablements on their behavior. For instance, there can be institutional constraints such as laws banning people with physical impairments from driving even though the person in question could physically drive, or communal constraints, where no one takes what you say seriously because of the difficulty you have with articulating words clearly, even though you have epistemic authority on the matter at hand. There can also be enablements. People taken to have physical impairment can be granted special privileges, such as being permitted to park in certain designated areas, or to preside over religious rituals.

While the notion of constitutive construction is integral to debunking projects, it is also central to accounts of social phenomena where the social status of the phenomenon was never in question. This is, for example, the central notion of social construction for Haslanger even

though a paradigm case of social construction for her is *gender* (the other is race), and the social status of gender is not at all in dispute.⁷ In this kind of case, the social constructionist intervention does not merely lie in the claim that something is socially constructed constitutively, since everyone is expecting it to be, but *how* it is so constructed. Haslanger's notion of social construction is to capture the type of social construction involved in the post-Beauvoirean feminist slogan *gender is the social significance of sex*, and she holds gender to be constitutively constructed by a system of hierarchical power relations.⁸

We can read Ásta Sveinsdóttir's account of social construction⁹ as an alternative account of constitutive construction to Haslanger's. While for Haslanger, gender, for example, is constituted by a hierarchy of power relations, on Ásta's account, gender is a social status constituted by the constraints and enablements conferred on people taken to possess the feature that grounds the conferral in each context.¹⁰ She thinks that in different contexts, different features are being tracked in the conferral of gender: in some contexts, it may be sex assignment, in others socio-economic role, and so on. Then, people taken to have the relevant target property (e.g. sex assignment) get conferred onto them constraints and enablements in the context and that is what gender in that context consists in. Hers is an account of *social construction as social significance* which works like this: gender is the social significance of the target property in each context; in context C1, it may be the social significance of sex assignment, in C2 the social significance of socio-economic role, and so on. So, for a feature, such as sex assignment, to have social significance is for extra constraints and enablements to be conferred onto people taken to have the feature in question.

5. Social Construction and Realism

As mentioned in the beginning, it has been a persistent theme to lump social constructionism together with an untenable anti-realism, where everything collapses into language, text, or discourse.¹¹ It should be clear from the above discussion that the question of realism is only properly addressed when it comes to constitutive construction. If we say, e.g., that racial categories are socially constructed, what are we saying about the status of those categories? There is now a considerable literature on precisely that question¹² and on the metaphysical status of various human kinds in general.¹³ What all social constructionists about races, genders, or other human kinds share are the following two claims:

- (1) Human kind terms refer.
- (2) What human kind terms refer to are social phenomena.

The first claim distinguishes social constructionists from eliminativists and error theorists; the second distinguishes them from theorists that hold that the human kinds under consideration are biological phenomena. However, whether the social constructionist is realist or nominalist or how exactly to account for social phenomena depends on the particular theorist.¹⁴ Ian Hacking and Sally Haslanger have both addressed that issue specifically, so we will sketch their commitments.

Hacking's account, as mentioned before, is a dynamic nominalism. It is a nominalism because the type of person comes into being with being named and does not exist independently of the name; it is dynamic in that there is an interplay between describing (naming) the type of person and the type itself such that describing the type has an effect on the entities so described, and they in turn can influence subsequent descriptions of themselves.

Haslanger's critical realism about social construction has it that genders and races, while socially constructed, are real, objective, natural, types. In this way, she distances herself from the social constructionist theorists who embrace anti-realism of various stripes. For Haslanger, saying

that a type is 'real' means that talk about that type is truth-apt (in contrast to the error-theorist or the eliminativist). An objective type is a type that is a proper object of empirical enquiry. And a natural type is one that is part of the causal order: either it itself can be a cause or an effect or it supervenes on entities that do.

As we can glean from the brief sketch above, each of the theorists offers an account of the social construction of human kinds or types that does not obviously involve a self-refuting anti-realism. How tenable each of these accounts is is a substantial philosophical question and won't be answered here. The present point is simply that to say that human kinds are socially constructed need not involve commitments to everything being text or language, as the caricature charge would have it.

When is it, then, that a social constructionist is threatened with an untenable anti-realism? It is when the type of social construction offered is such that everything becomes socially constructed in *the same way* such that, for example, there is no way to draw a distinction between natural and social phenomena. As long as the social construction theorist can draw a distinction among different types of social construction, even if everything turns out to be socially constructed somehow, the threat of everything collapsing into language or text or concept is staved off.¹⁵

6. Final Remarks

What has been given here is a catalog of sorts of types of social construction and associated claims, and you can see that social construction claims vary considerably. But, can we say anything about all social construction claims? Is there anything that unifies them?

Social construction claims are, first and foremost, offered as explanations of phenomena that are socially important, often as alternative analyses of social problems or as part of raising consciousness regarding something that should be regarded as a social problem. Social constructionist analyses are not unified by their content, but by their purpose, as crucial components of various liberatory programs. Locating the role of social phenomena in the construction of the reality we live in points the way to possible solutions to problems we face; it also shifts responsibility onto us, the participants in the social practices and institutions implicated.¹⁶

Short Biography

Ásta Kristjana Sveinsdóttir is an associate professor of philosophy at San Francisco State University. She holds a BA in mathematics and philosophy from Brandeis, an AM in philosophy from Harvard, and a PhD in philosophy from MIT. Recent papers include "The Social Construction of Human Kinds" (*Hypatia*), "Knowledge of Essence" (*Philosophical Studies*), and "Who's Afraid of Feminist Metaphysics?" (*APA Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy*). She is at work on a monograph entitled *Categories We Live By: the construction of gender, sex, race, and other social categories*, which is under contract with Oxford UP. Her website: <http://online.sfsu.edu/asta>

Notes

* Correspondence: Department of Philosophy, San Francisco State University, 1600 Holloway Ave, San Francisco, CA 94132, USA. Email: asta@sfsu.edu

¹ Hacking 1999, 2002; Haslanger 2012; Mallon 2003, 2004, 2006, 2008/2013.

² 'Type' and 'kind' are used interchangeably in this essay.

³ Cf. Habermas' famous criticism in 1986.

- ⁴ We reserve the use of ‘communal’ for non-institutional social consequences following Ásta Sveinsdóttir in *Categories We Live By*.
- ⁵ Haslanger 2012, p. 87. See also Mallon’s slightly different formulation in Mallon 2008/2013: X constitutively constructs Y if and only if X’s conceptual or social activity regarding an individual y is metaphysically necessary for y to be a Y.
- ⁶ Ásta Sveinsdóttir 2012; see also her *Categories We Live By*.
- ⁷ Cf. Hacking 1999, p. 39.
- ⁸ Haslanger 2012, p. 234.
- ⁹ Ásta Sveinsdóttir 2012.
- ¹⁰ The ‘grounding’ or ‘target’ properties can be sex assignment, self presentation, role in biological reproduction, role in preparation of food, etc. Cf. Ásta Sveinsdóttir 2011 and 2012.
- ¹¹ Cf. Introduction to Butler 1993.
- ¹² Apart from Haslanger and Mallon, see also, e.g., Gooding-Williams 1988, Mills 1998, Piper 1992, Root 2000, and Young 1989.
- ¹³ Apart from other authors mentioned already, see also, e.g., Andreassen 2000, Appiah 1996, Alcoff 2006, Díaz-León 2013, Glasgow 2008, Hardimon 2003, Mikkola 2006, 2011, Spencer 2012, Stoljar 2011, Sundstrom 2002, and Zack 1993.
- ¹⁴ Different theorists also use ‘realism’ and ‘nominalism’ in different ways. In particular, Mikkola 2008/2011 and Alcoff 2006 use them differently than they are used here.
- ¹⁵ This is why Judith Butler’s account does not collapse into radical linguistic constructivism. See Butler 1990, 1993; Ásta Sveinsdóttir 2011.
- ¹⁶ Thanks are due to Rachel Cooper, Dana Harvey, and an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments on an earlier version. All remaining errors are the author’s responsibility.

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