

Social Construction: Class, Gender, Race Disability....

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 is socially constructed? Can you give examples of cases of social construction that you think are plausible? How would you explain, in your own words, what the following mean. Are any of them true?

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| i. America is a social construct. | v. Families are social constructs. |
| ii. Femininity is socially constructed. | vi. Race is socially constructed. |
| iii. "Giftedness" is socially constructed. | vii. Sex is socially constructed. |
| iv. "Fitness" is socially constructed. | |

A. Causal Construction

Causal construction: X is socially constructed *causally* as 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.

Interestingly, beings like us are capable of responding to how we are classified. Our classificatory schemes, at least in social contexts, may do more than just map pre-existing groups of individuals; rather our attributions have the power to both establish and reinforce groupings. How we classify things can have a causal impact on people, so they those described in a certain way become increasingly similar and come to constitute a kind or group. The *are* similar because we treat them the same way, whether they were originally similar or not. Ian Hacking suggests an important contrast:

Take the extremes, women refugees and quarks. A woman refugee may learn that she is a certain kind of person and act accordingly. Quarks do not learn that they are a certain kind of entity and act accordingly. But I do not want to overemphasize the awareness of an individual. Women refugees who do not speak one word of English may still, as part of a group acquire the characteristics of women refugees precisely because they are so classified.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.

B. Constitutive construction

There is a sense in which *professors* and *wives* are only possible within a social context: you can't be a *wife* unless you stand in a marriage relationship to a man that is sanctioned by the state. Insofar as the features which qualify one as a member of a particular type or kind include *social* (properties and) relations, things of that kind could count as social constructions too. At this point there is no reason whatsoever to think that social constructions are anything less than fully *real*; and their reality is perfectly concrete, i.e., they don't just exist "in our heads."

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.

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

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

² Hacking, op. Cit.

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 this social designation is also supposed to be tracking a natural distinction in the world having to do with people’s actual abilities.

III. Disability and Infirmary

When Wendell claims that disability is socially constructed, she means this in the two senses above: social factors are the cause of much of what we take to be disabilities, and the disabled constitute a social category over and above the natural category of the infirm.

Causal construction of disability:

- i) Social circumstances “straightforwardly create illnesses, injuries, and poor physical functioning.” (24)
- ii) “Poverty is the single most disabling social circumstance for people with disabilities, since it means that they can barely afford the things that are the necessities for non-disabled people, much less the personal care, medicines and technological aids they may need to live decent lives outside institutions...” (27)
- iii) “Culture makes major contributions to disability. These contributions include not only the omission of experiences of disability from cultural representations of life in a society, but also the cultural stereotyping of people with disabilities, the selective stigmatization of physical and mental limitations and other differences...the numerous cultural meanings attached to various kinds of disability and illness...Stereotypes of disabled people as dependent, morally depraved, superhumanly heroic, asexual and or pitiful are still the most common...” (28)

These cultural factors are plausibly considered *ideological* in the sense we discussed last time. They are understandings of ourselves and things around us that govern our behavior in response to them.

Constitutive construction of disability:

- i) “Subtle cultural factors determine conditions of normality and exclude those who don’t meet them from full participation in their societies.” (36)
- ii) What counts as “disabled” involved not just infirmity, but an inability to fully participate in the society—where this inability is at least partly due to the meanings of the infirmity in the context.

On Wendell’s view, we need to recognize that there is a social category of the disabled that seems to track the infirm, but doesn’t exactly; those who counts as disabled do so only in relation to a social context that counts their abilities as less than “normal”. Some have infirmities that are not disabilities, e.g., many of us are myopic but not disabled because we wear glasses. But in contexts where there were no glasses, we would be disabled too. In other cases people count as disabled but aren’t obviously infirm, e.g., the fast pace of life means they can’t keep up, but they are normal humans with normal capacities. So on her account, cultural norms (such as those listed in (iii) above) are also a factor in *constituting* the social category of disability.

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:

- Kadi’s paper is called “Stupidity Deconstructed.” How does one deconstruct a social construction?
- Should all social constructions be deconstructed? Why or why not? How do we decide?
- Do all social constructions function by “masking” their natural bases?
- Is gender causally constructed? Constitutively constructed? What about the other cases?

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