

Social Construction

The “Debunking” Project

Introduction

The term ‘social construction’ has become a commonplace in the humanities. Its shock value having waned and its uses multiplied, the metaphor of construction has, as Ian Hacking puts it, “become tired” (Hacking 1999, p. 35). Moreover, the variety of different uses of the term has made it increasingly difficult to determine what claim authors are using it to assert or deny and whether the parties to the debates really disagree.

In his book *The Social Construction of What?*, Hacking offers a schema for understanding different social constructionist claims along with a framework for distinguishing kinds or degrees of constructionist projects. Hacking’s efforts are useful, but his account leaves many of the philosophical aspects of social construction projects obscure, as are the connections, if any, with more mainstream analytic philosophy projects. My goal in this chapter is to argue that although Hacking’s approach to social construction is apt for some of those working on such projects, it does not adequately capture what’s at issue for an important range of social constructionists, particularly many of us working on gender and race. Moreover, a different way of understanding social construction reveals interesting connections and conflicts with mainstream analytic projects.

I agree with Hacking that it isn’t useful to try to determine what social construction “really is” because it is many different things, and the discourse of social construction functions differently in different contexts. So instead I focus on a particular kind of social constructionist project, one I call a “debunking project,” to consider how exactly it is supposed to work, how it differs from other constructionist projects, and what, if any, metaphysical implications it has.

Given the multiple uses of the term ‘social construction,’ one might wonder why it matters whether this or that project is properly characterized as a form of social constructionism. And of course, in the abstract it matters very little. But

in the current academic context, the classification of some view as social constructionist can mean that it is not worth taking seriously or, alternatively, that it is one of the views to be taken seriously. Insofar as the label carries such weight, it is useful to differentiate some of the various constructionist projects so that their intellectual affiliations and incompatibilities can be clarified.

Hacking on Social Construction

Hacking suggests that in order to understand social construction, we should ask first: What is the point of claiming that something is socially constructed? He offers this schema for understanding the basic project:

Social construction work is critical of the status quo. Social constructionists about *X* tend to hold that:

1. *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.

They often go further, and urge that:

2. *X* is quite bad as it is.
3. We would be much better off if *X* were done away with, or at least radically transformed. (Hacking 1999, p. 6)

In order for a claim of social construction to have a point, however, there is a precondition to be satisfied: “(0) In the present state of affairs, *X* is taken for granted, *X* appears to be inevitable” (Hacking 1999, p. 12).

In this schema, *X* can range over very disparate kinds of things, including ideas, concepts, classifications, events, objects, persons. Allegedly socially constructed things include: child abusers, the self, quarks, the concept of the economy, the classification “woman refugee.” Especially important to Hacking is the distinction between constructing *ideas* (which includes concepts, categories, classifications, etc.) and constructing *objects* (e.g., Hacking 1999, pp. 10–11, 14, 21–22, 28–30, 102, etc.). (Note that Hacking’s understanding of “objects” is broad and includes: people, states, conditions, practices, actions, behavior, classes, experiences, relations, material objects, substances [i.e., stuffs], unobservables, and fundamental particles (Hacking 1999, p. 22).) Although *X* in the schema above ranges over both ideas and objects, he urges us to be clear which we are talking about in order to avoid confusion.

Condition (0), on Hacking’s account, is a necessary condition for a work to be considered “social constructionist” at all. Cases that don’t appear to satisfy (0), for example, the “invention” of Japan (Hacking 1999, pp. 12–13) and the construction of “obvious” social kinds, don’t qualify as genuine social constructionist

projects. Hacking offers a framework for classifying the variety of constructionist views (given (0)), with respect to their acceptance of claims (1)–(3):

Historical constructionist: Contrary to what is usually believed, *X* is the contingent result of historical events and forces, therefore (1): *X* need not have existed, is not determined by the nature of things, etc.

Ironic constructionist: Historical constructionism PLUS: at this stage we cannot help but treat *X* as "part of the universe," but our way of thinking may evolve so that *X* is no longer viewed in this way.

Reformist constructionist: Historical constructionism PLUS (2): *X* is quite bad as it is. Although we cannot at this stage see how to avoid *X*, we should try to improve it.

Unmasking constructionist: Historical constructionism PLUS if we understand the function of *X* socially, we will see that it should have no appeal for or authority over us.

Rebellious constructionist: Historical constructionism PLUS (2): *X* is quite bad as it is. And (3), we would be much better off if *X* were done away with or radically transformed.

Revolutionary constructionist: Historical constructionism PLUS (2): *X* is quite bad as it is. And (3), we would be much better off if *X* were done away with or radically transformed. In addition, the revolutionary constructionist acts to do away with *X*. (Hacking, 1999, pp. 19–20)

It is important to note that it is common to all of Hacking's constructionists that they use a claim about the contingent causes or historical source of the phenomenon *X* to support the idea that *X* need not have existed or need not have been "at all as it is." He says explicitly, for example, that "construction stories are histories" (Hacking 1999, p. 37; also p. 48); and the point, as he sees it, is to argue for the contingency or alterability of the phenomenon by noting its social or historical origins. So, if one were to argue, on Hacking's account, that the idea of refugee were socially constructed, then the point would be that the idea of refugee is the result of historical events, that we might have lacked that idea and have had other ideas instead.

Idea-Construction

In keeping with Hacking's account, let's distinguish the "idea-constructionist" project and the "object-constructionist" project, and focus for the time being on idea-constructionist projects. Given the account so far, it isn't clear how any idea-constructionist project should be able to get off the ground, for it seems implausible that they satisfy condition (0). *Of course* what concepts and so what

ideas we have is the result of social-historical events; who is in the business of denying that? (Hacking seems to agree—1999, p. 69.) It would seem to be a matter of common sense that concepts are taught to us by our parents through our language; different cultures have different concepts (that go along with their different languages); and concepts evolve over time as a result of historical changes, science, technological advances, and so on.¹ Let's (albeit contentiously) call this the "ordinary view" of concepts and ideas.² Moving to more theoretical domains, even the most arch realist who believes that our concepts map "nature's joints" allows that groups come to have the concepts they do through social-historical processes. So what could possibly be the excitement in claiming that any particular concept emerges as a result of historical events and forces? If Hacking feels free to deny that a book such as *Inventing Japan* is a social constructionist project because it is too obvious that Japan is a social entity and so condition (0) is not satisfied (Hacking 1999, p. 13), why should we not similarly rule out all attempts to reveal the historical origins of a particular idea or concept, that is, all purportedly idea-constructionist projects?

To answer this we need to elaborate Hacking's account further. Let's begin by considering what, on Hacking's view, is supposed to be controversial or interesting in the claim that some idea or other is constructed. Hacking identifies three "sticking points"—presumably implicit in (1) or in the inference to (1)—that arise in debates between constructionists and nonconstructionist. (Although his discussion of these sticking points focuses on constructionist debates concerning natural science, it appears at various points he intends them to be characteristic of constructionist debates more generally, so I'll articulate them in more general terms.)

On his account, constructionists with respect to a domain *D*, for example, the natural world, mental illness, rocks, are sympathetic to (a) the contingency of our understanding of *D*; (b) nominalism about kinds in *D*, or more precisely, a denial that the domain *D* has an inherent structure; and (c) an explanation of the stability of our understanding of *D* in external rather than internal terms. Letting the domain be the natural world, the constructionist claims (or tends to claim) that a scientific theory different from current scientific theory might

¹ Ideas are similar, but perhaps less conditioned by language and more specific to the individual.

² Hacking more often speaks of the social construction of "ideas" and sometimes of the social construction of "the idea of *X* (in its matrix)" where the matrix is the social setting "within which an idea, a concept or kind, is formed" (Hacking 1999, pp. 10–11). The emphasis on ideas and matrices rather than concepts doesn't change the ordinary view, for if on the ordinary view concepts are influenced by society and concepts are generally thought to play a role in any idea, then ideas will be too. Given that the matrix is the social context for the idea, including, for example, in the case of woman refugee: "a complex of institutions, advocates, newspaper articles, lawyers, court decisions, immigration proceedings" (Hacking 1999, p.10), the ordinary view would certainly hold that the idea in its matrix is conditioned by social forces.

nonetheless have emerged and been as successful in its own terms as ours is in our terms (Hacking 1999, pp. 68–80); that the natural world does not have an "inherent structure" (Hacking 1999, pp. 80–4); and that the best explanation of the stable elements of current scientific theory relies on factors external to science, for example, the educational system that instills in aspiring scientists the practices and the background assumptions that give rise to the dominant theory (Hacking 1999, pp. 84–95). So on Hacking's view the idea-constructionist thesis is not simply that our ideas have a history, or that what concepts we have is influenced by social forces. Rather, the idea-constructionist holds a cluster of theses opposing what is taken to be a standard explanation of the origins of our ideas or theories and why we retain them. (Henceforward I'll use the term 'idea-constructionism' for this cluster of theses, not just the simpler claim that our ideas are the contingent result of social/historical events and forces.)

Let's take a moment to spell out the idea-constructionists' adversary a bit further. The question on which the debate hinges seems to be: Are the origin and stability of our ideas/classifications determined by "how the world is," more specifically, by the domain they purport to describe? As Hacking sees it, the constructionist says "no," and the adversary says "yes." But the suggestion that the domain of inquiry "determines" our classifications of it is a bit puzzling. Hacking clearly states that the kind of determination at issue is causal determination: the nonconstructionist maintains that the domain D has an inherent structure, that our understanding of D is in some sense inevitable because the inherent structure of D causally determines how to understand it, and that our understanding of D is stable because the stable structure of the world sustains it. Hacking's idea-constructionist claims, in contrast, that the results of our inquiry into D "are not predetermined," in particular that they are "not determined by how the world is" (Hacking 1999, p. 73), and that we remain stably committed to the results, not because the content of our theories supports them, but due to social and psychological forces at work. Hacking explicitly claims that the constructionist's point is "not a logical one" (Hacking 1999, p. 73) and emphasizes later that the real issue for constructionists is not semantics, but the dynamics of classification (Hacking 1999, p. 123). Although there is a metaphysical issue lurking behind the debate, namely, whether the world has an inherent structure, this is at issue only because the nonconstructionist invokes such a structure in explaining the origins and stability of our beliefs.

Let's call the constructionist's adversary Hacking has described a "world-idea determinist" to contrast it with Hacking's idea-constructionist who is trying to show that the results of our inquiry into D are not only not determined by the inherent structure of the world, but in fact "are not determined by anything" (Hacking 1999, p. 73). Within a debate between these opposing sides, it might seem interesting to claim that some idea of ours has social-historical origins, for the alternative seems to be that the world's inherent structure, by itself,

determines what ideas we use to describe it. There may well be, as Hacking strives to show, some scientists who maintain something as extreme as world-idea determinism, so the point is worth making. But casting social constructionism in general in these terms has several serious drawbacks:

First, the target world-idea determinism is not plausible on its face, and one does not need anything as strong as idea-constructionism to defeat it. To claim that our ideas and the classifications we use to frame them (pick any domain you want) are not in any way influenced by social conditions but are inevitable and stable because they map the relevant domain's inherent structure rules out even a minimal fallibilism.³ Surely even good scientific method requires one to allow that new data may defeat one's best theory, and conceptual innovation will be called for; certainly ordinary nonscientists, philosophers and the like don't take themselves to be infallible about any domain except perhaps the contents of their own consciousness and simple arithmetic.

Second, although the claim that our ideas are conditioned by social and historical events is plausible, Hacking has expanded idea-constructionism into something quite implausible. In the end, idea-constructionism rejects normative epistemology altogether and opts instead for sociology: reasons for belief are replaced by causes, justifications with explanations, semantics with dynamics (Hacking 1999, pp. 90–2, 121–24). It's one thing to acknowledge that the causal routes responsible for our way of thinking travel through and are influenced by the contours of our contingent social structures; it's another thing to entirely replace questions of justification with questions of causation. Although some social constructionists take this line, it is a quite radical position that hardly seems supported by the core idea-constructionist observation that our ideas are the product of social and historical forces.⁴

Third, the world-idea determinist position Hacking describes as the target of social constructionists is not a common view in philosophy and is not the sort of thing that is likely to be accepted by anyone who accepts what I've claimed is an ordinary view about ideas and concepts, namely that what ones we have are conditioned by our culture. If world-idea determinism is the social constructionists' target, it isn't surprising that philosophers in general and metaphysicians in

³ Different sorts of fallibilism may be relevant here because Hacking uses the term 'idea' to cover both concepts/classifications and theses or propositions. My point is that it is rare to find someone who holds that *either* their concepts/classifications are inevitable, given how the world is, determined by the inherent structure of the world, and so on, or that their beliefs/theoretical commitments are.

⁴ It should be noted that Hacking allows idea-constructionism to come in degrees, so plausibly world-idea determinism does too. So the adversary for a moderate constructionist may be someone who allows that reasons and justification, not just causes and explanation, are appropriate considerations in discussing a theory. But as I suggest below, the interesting moderate cases deserve more attention than Hacking accords them.

particular have paid little attention to the social constructionist literature. But more important, Hacking's constructionist doesn't have much to say to the non-specialist or nonacademic, for it rejects the "ordinary view" of concepts. This is a problem, for as Hacking himself claims, "most people who use the social construction ideas enthusiastically want to criticize, change, or destroy some *X* that they dislike in the established order of things" (Hacking 1999, p. 7). We constructionists are, on the whole, a politically motivated bunch. But what a waste of breath and ink it would be if our target is a view that most people would find quite bizarre.

Determinism?

If world-idea determinism is not a worthy target of the social constructionist, then is there something nearby that we should be considering? There are three separate issues concerning the relationship between our classifications and the world that lie in the background of Hacking's discussion: (1) what *causes* us to use certain classifications/concepts, (2) by virtue of what is a concept or classification *apt*, and (3) what, if anything, *justifies* our use of one classification scheme as opposed to another? If one is primarily interested in the origins of our ideas, then the debate between Hacking's idea-constructionist and the world-idea determinist seems to represent two ends of a spectrum of possible views. Plausibly our ideas and classifications are the product of some combination of worldly input from perception and experience and social input from language, practices, and the like. The debate as presented by Hacking is not very interesting because neither extreme view is plausible and very little is offered to cover the more interesting middle-ground.

However, if, for example, one is interested in what makes a particular scheme apt, then the issues look quite different. In a telling passage, Hacking describes the constructionist's nominalism as follows:

If contingency is the first sticking point [between the constructionist and the non-constructionist], the second one is more metaphysical. Constructionists tend to maintain that classifications are not determined by how the world is, but are convenient ways in which to represent it. They maintain that the world does not come quietly wrapped up in facts. Facts are the consequences of the ways in which we represent the world. The constructionist vision here is splendidly old-fashioned. It is a species of nominalism. It is countered by a strong sense that the world has an inherent structure that we discover. (Hacking 1999, p. 33)

Here, as mentioned before, the broad background question seems to be: are our classifications determined by how the world is or not? If the question is, what

causes us to have the classifications we do, then we have simply returned to the old world-idea determinist question: are we caused to have the classification scheme we have by the structure of the world itself? And we can agree that social-historical factors play a role. But nominalism and its adversaries aren't about what causes our classifications but what determines their correctness or aptness. The question is: is the aptness (correctness, fittingness) of our classifications determined by the structure of the world, or is their aptness determined by our choice? In other words, which way does the direction of fit run: are our classifications apt because they fit the world, or are they apt because the world fits them? In either case, aptness is not a matter of causal determination. The "inherent structurist" (Hacking's substitute term for 'realist' in the debate with the "nominalist") doesn't think that the world *causes* our classifications to be apt, neither does the nominalist think that our acts of classifying *cause* the world to have a structure. If the idea-constructionist and the inherent structurist are going to have a debate about nominalism, questions about the causal origins of our beliefs aren't really relevant.

If any part of the idea-constructionist project were to have metaphysical implications, one would expect them to show up in the constructionist's commitment to nominalism. But on Hacking's account there is no basis in the constructionist arguments for denying that the domain of our inquiry, whatever it may be, has an inherent structure. The main constructionist premise is that our concepts and ideas are the product of historical forces and could have been different. As suggested above, this is entirely consistent with the most arch realism, or "inherent structurism" about kinds (as Hacking would seem to agree—1999, p. 80). We're left, then, with nothing of metaphysical interest in the idea-constructionist project (assuming that a bald denial of a metaphysical thesis is not metaphysically interesting).

A third question in this general area (in addition to what causes us to use certain classifications and what makes them apt) is what justifies our use of the classifications we've chosen. This issue seems to lie in the background behind Hacking's "third sticking point" between the idea-constructionist and the world-idea determinist. This sticking point, as characterized by Hacking, concerns the causes of the stability of our ideas, or the results of our inquiry. Why, for example, do Maxwell's Equations or the Second Law of Thermodynamics remain stably entrenched in our physics (Hacking 1999, p. 86)? Why do we continue to use the periodic table of the elements in our chemistry? The idea-constructionist maintains that this stability is due entirely to "external factors." Hacking is frustratingly unclear where he intends to draw the line between "internal" and "external" factors, but the discussion as a whole suggests that the world-idea determinist is supposed to think that the inherent structure of our domain of inquiry is somehow causally responsible, ruling out the influence of ordinary human interests, contingent facts about the

point of our inquiry, or what technology we have available to test our hypotheses.⁵

But the problem is that again the issue has been framed in causal terms for the benefit of Hacking’s constructionist. It should be obvious that the results of any inquiry are at least partly conditioned by the circumstances of inquiry, the kind of technology that is available to the inquirer, the attitudes and biases of the inquirers, and the like, and should the circumstances, technology, resources, and so on change, this is likely to influence what conclusions we draw. Again, one need not be a social constructionist to grant this. It may be that there are scientists who believe that natural laws are “facts we run up against” (Hacking 1999, p. 86) as if their effect is then to write themselves in our notebooks. But again, if this is the constructionist target, it is hard to understand why it should be interesting to philosophers or the general public.

A nearby question that the constructionist rhetoric often seems to be addressing is: what justifies us in our ongoing commitment to a theory, classification scheme, and so on. This isn’t, or isn’t obviously, a causal question. Many different factors contribute to the justification of a theory, including coherence, supporting evidence, simplicity, fruitfulness, and so on. These are sometimes called “constitutive values” of inquiry. Feminists have also argued that contextual values are relevant to justification, for example, whether the question motivating the theory is legitimate, whether the methods allow for certain evidence to emerge, whether the community of researchers exhibits a certain diversity (Longino 1980; Anderson 1995). With the distinction between “constitutive” and “contextual” values in mind, it is possible to identify several views that seem to be floating around in the discussion. One extreme view is that nothing *justifies* our use of a particular classification scheme; the best we can do is *explain* why we use this or that classification scheme by doing sociology, or Foucauldian genealogy, perhaps. An opposing extreme view is that the world itself—its inherent structure—justifies us: because our ideas are caused by the inherent structure of the world, they’re justified. But the more philosophically interesting options concern what norms—contextual, constitutive, or some combination of both—are the basis for justification. But this last set of options aren’t seriously considered in the discussion.

Unfortunately, the debate Hacking has described between the social constructionist and the world-idea determinist seems to frame it either as entirely

⁵ Sometimes Hacking represents the issue of stability as a question of whether, given the methods we’ve embraced, the technology available to us, and so on, we could have come up with different results. Of course if we allow that we could have used the methods or the technology better or worse than we actually did, we could have reached different results. The more serious question is whether using the technology to its limits and following the methods perfectly could yield different and incompatible results. It’s hard to see how one could give a general answer to this question, for it would depend crucially on what methods and what technology one had in mind.

concerned with the causes of the stability of our ideas, or as a debate between the two most radical and implausible of the views regarding justification. So again his idea-constructionist seems to be of little interest to the philosopher or anyone but a few radicals in the science wars.

Constructed Objects

Having devoted considerable attention to Hacking's account of the idea-constructionist project, we should now turn to consider object-construction. Hacking's work on the social dynamics that produce certain kinds of people is important; his historically nuanced discussion of social categorization in, for example, the "helping professions," provides rich resources for thinking about how the social world comes to be as it is (Hacking 1986, 1991, 1992, 1995b, 1999). This work finds a place in his discussion of social construction under the rubric of "object construction." Moreover, object constructionism has, I believe, more to offer the metaphysician than we found in the idea-constructionist project.

According to Hacking's account of object-construction, some objects, in particular some objects that we might not expect to be, are the product of social-historical forces. What are some examples? Possibly the self (Hacking 1999, pp. 14–16); more plausibly, on Hacking's view, people of *certain kinds*. What kinds? Women refugees, child viewers of television, child abusers, schizophrenics. The key to understanding this claim is what Hacking calls *interactive kinds* (Hacking 1999, pp. 32, 102–105).

The "woman refugee" [as a kind of classification] can be called an "interactive kind" because it interacts with things of that kind, namely people, including individual women refugees, who can become aware of how they are classified and modify their behavior accordingly. (Hacking 1999, p. 32)

The classification "quark," in contrast, is an *indifferent kind*: "Quarks are not aware that they are quarks and are not altered simply by being classified as quarks" (Hacking 1999, p. 32). As Hacking elaborates the idea of an interactive kind it becomes clear that the interaction he has in mind happens through the awareness of the thing classified, though is typically mediated by the "larger matrix of institutions and practices surrounding this classification" (Hacking 1999, p. 103; also pp. 31–2, 103–106).

So, for example, the idea or classification "woman refugee" is a socially constructed idea (along the lines we considered in the previous sections); but this classification occurs within a matrix of social institutions that has a significant

effect on individuals. Thus, Hacking argues, the individuals so-affected are themselves socially constructed "as a certain kind of person" (Hacking 1999, p. 11). For example, if a particular woman is not classified as a woman refugee,

she may be deported, or go into hiding, or marry to gain citizenship. . . . She needs to become a woman refugee in order to stay in Canada; she learns what characteristics to establish, knows how to live her life. By living that life, she evolves, becomes a certain kind of person [a woman refugee]. And so it may make sense to say that the very individuals and their experiences are constructed within the matrix surrounding the classification "women refugees." (Hacking 1999, p. 11)

To understand Hacking's view of "object construction," the first point to note is that our classificatory schemes, at least in social contexts, may do more than just map preexisting groups of individuals; rather our attributions have the power to both establish and reinforce groupings that may eventually come to "fit" the classifications. In an earlier essay, drawing on Hacking's work, I referred to this as "discursive" construction.⁶

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 2012 [1995], p. 99)

Admittedly, the idea here is quite vague (e.g., how much is "a significant extent"?). However, social construction in this sense is ubiquitous. Each of us is socially constructed in this sense because we are (to a significant extent) the individuals we are today as a result of what has been attributed (and self-attributed) to us. For example, being classified as an able-bodied female from birth has profoundly affected the paths available to me in life and the sort of person I have become.

Note, however, that to say that an entity is "discursively constructed" is not to say that language or discourse brings a material object into existence *de novo*. Rather something in existence comes to have—partly as a result of having been categorized in a certain way—a set of features that qualify it as a member of a certain kind or sort. My having been categorized as a female at birth (and consistently since then) has been a factor in how I've been viewed and treated; these views and treatments have, in turn, played an important causal role in my

⁶ Note that a discourse, and so discursive construction, will involve more than spoken language. See Fraser (1992). For a clear explanation of one feminist appropriation of Foucault's notion of "discourse," see also Scott (1988).

becoming gendered a woman. Having been categorized as a “widow,” Christiana was forced to endure harsh rituals that disrupted her family (her children were hired out as servants) and caused her to become seriously ill.⁷ Widows in many parts of the developing world are denied basic human rights, for example, they are often stripped of property, subjected to violence, and face systematic discrimination in custom and law. In a context where widowhood is associated with certain material and social conditions that are imposed after the death of one’s husband, it is plausible to say that widows constitute a social group or kind, and that one’s being a widow, that is, being a member of that social kind or sort, is a result of social forces: Christiana’s being a widow (in a sense that entails suffering the social and material deprivations), is a result of her having been categorized as a widow in a matrix where that categorization carries substantial weight.

One might resist this description of things on several counts. To begin, one might object that Christiana’s fate was caused not by being *categorized* as a widow but by her husband’s death. Admittedly, it is misleading to say that it was the *categorization* alone that made her a widow; but likewise it is misleading to suggest that it was the death alone. (Note that if the husband didn’t actually die, but is thought to have died, the effects of being categorized as a widow might be the same as if he actually died.) The cause of her misfortune was his death in a social matrix where the death, or presumed death, of one’s husband signals, at least ordinarily, a debilitating change in social status. Can we be clearer on both the source and the product of the construction?

Hacking is especially interested in a certain kind of object construction, namely, construction works by the social context providing *concepts* that frame the *self-understanding* and *intentions* of the constructed agent. In cases like this, agents incorporate (often consciously) socially available classifications into their intentional agency and sense of self; but as their self-understanding evolves, the meaning of those classifications evolves with them. This forms a “feedback loop” (hence the term: ‘interactive kinds’) between what we might think of as objective and subjective stances with respect to the classification. Hacking’s paradigm

⁷ Christiana’s story was reported on <http://www.womenforwomen.org/> in 2002. The story has now been replaced by other more recent examples.

For more information on Widowhood Practices, see also EWD (Empowering Widows in Development): <http://www.widowsrights.org/index.htm>. According to the EWD literature, “In widowhood, a woman joins a category of women among the most marginalized, and invisible. There is little research to inform public opinion or goad governments and the international community to action. Widows hardly figure in the literature on poverty or development.

See also the Widows’ Development Organization (WiDO), Nigeria: <http://www.widoafrica.org/>. However, harsh treatment of and ritualized oppression of widows is not specific to Africa, see: <http://www.womenaction.org/ungass/caucus/widows.html>.

examples concern the labeling of various mental illnesses: multiple personality disorder, autism, and posttraumatic stress disorder. Individuals are diagnosed with such illnesses; treatment plans are developed; their self-understanding is modified. In some cases groups of those diagnosed develop support groups, communities, and political movements. As their self-understanding and behavior changes, however, the diagnosis and patient profile must evolve to take this into account.

To emphasize the importance of the agent's active awareness in this process, we might call this "discursive *identity* construction." This is a construction of *kinds* of people because (at least according to Hacking) people fall into certain kinds depending on their identities, where "identity" is understood as a psychological notion intended to capture one's self-understanding and the intentional framework employed in action. Through being categorized as a widow, Christiana comes to think of herself as a widow, to act as a widow, to live as a widow, that is, she becomes a certain kind of person. Hacking would have us say that she has been constructed "as a widow." We might unpack this as: her self-understanding as a widow (and pattern of her actions conforming to this understanding) is the result of having been classified as a widow. No doubt this is an important claim: that certain identities and ways of life come into existence and evolve in response to social and theoretical categorization (especially categorization that emerges in psychology and social work) has important social and political implications (Hacking 1995, esp. chs. 14–15). But at the same time it isn't entirely surprising that how people think about themselves is influenced by what vocabularies they are given. Is there something more behind the idea of object construction?

Reflecting on Christiana's widowhood reveals that Hacking's emphasis on the construction of "identities" is overly narrow in several respects. Note first that the notion of *kind* in philosophy has several different uses. On one use it is meant to capture a classification of things by essence: things fall into kinds based on their essence, and each thing falls only into one kind. On this view, horses constitute a kind because they share an equine essence, but red things don't constitute a kind because apples, t-shirts, and sunsets don't share an essence. However, on a more common use, the term 'kind' is used as equivalent to "type" or "sort" or "grouping." So far I've been using the term 'kind' in the latter sense and will continue to do so. Of course, there are many ways to sort people into groups. One way is in terms of their (psychological) "identity." Other ways include: by appearance, ancestry, religion, neighborhood, income, nationality, parental status, even by insurance carrier or long distance phone service. If we are exploring the ways in which categorization can have an impact on what sort of person we are, then its impact on our "identities" is one thing to look at. But if we are concerned with the ways in which categorization can cause or perpetuate

injustice, then it will be useful to look at effects that aren't necessarily internalized in the way that Hacking suggests, that is, effects of classifications that aren't used to frame our intentions and don't come to be part of our self-understandings. In moving away from an emphasis on the psychological we are also in a position to rethink the sources of construction and to expand them beyond a narrow range of "discourse" that focuses on concepts and language to other aspects of the social matrix.

Christiana's husband dies. The death, at some level, is a biological event. That it was Christiana's *husband* who died, is, of course, a social matter, for marriage is a social institution. What about Christiana's becoming a widow? This is more complicated still, for the meaning of "widowhood" varies across social groups. Social constructionists interested in the impact of categorization on individuals are usually interested not only in the nominal classification "widow" or "wife" (etc.), but also in the system or matrix of practices and institutions that create "thick" or "robust" social positions, that is, social positions that entail a broad range of norms, expectations, obligations, entitlements, and so on. It is one thing to have one's husband die; it is another thing to be socially positioned as a "widow" in a community where widowhood is a subordinated status.

The distinction between "thick" and "thin" social positions I'm relying on deserves more attention than I can devote to it here. However, the basic idea is that some social positions carry with them more demanding norms, expectations, and obligations than others; some carry more privileging entitlements and opportunities than others. "Thin" social positions carry very little social weight. "Thick" social positions can empower or disempower the groups standing in those positions. Being a widow in the contemporary United States is a much thinner social position than being a widow in, say, the region where Christiana lives.

Given the norms and expectations that constitute the position of widow in some contexts, women who lose their husbands are disempowered. Typically in contexts where a group is systematically mistreated, there are explanations and rationalizations of the mistreatment. For example, in some traditions, because a widow has special connection to the deceased she is considered unclean and must go into ritual seclusion. She may not touch herself, even to bathe or feed herself. She relies on older widows to care for her. Initially she may be given no clothes or only "rags"; eventually she must wear special clothes of mourning. If she refuses (as some Christians do) to participate in the rituals, she is, in effect, "excommunicated" from the village: the villagers are prohibited from communicating with her or engaging in any commerce with her (Korieh 1996, chs. 2, 3).

Needless to say, someone whose belongings are taken from her, is dressed in rags, and is denied the opportunity to bathe and feed herself will likely appear "unclean." In this case, the widow's supposed metaphysical uncleanness is the justification for the rituals that result in her physical uncleanness and social

alienation (she may not touch herself, even to bathe, *because* she is unclean). Although her eventual condition may itself seem evidence for the rightness of the treatment, of course it is simply evidence for its effectiveness.

In such contexts the social constructionist is concerned to argue that the thick social position of "widow" is not naturally or metaphysically justified, that her appearance is not evidence of the rightness of the rituals, that the practices structured apparently as a response to the condition of "widowhood" actually create the condition. (On this sort of self-fulfilling ideology more generally, see Geuss 1981, pp. 14–15.) Although there may be independent social reasons, to maintain rituals in spite of false natural or metaphysical assumptions underlying them, usually the social constructionist's point is to argue that the rituals or practices in question are unjust and should not be maintained in their current form and that the supposed metaphysical or natural justification for them is misguided.

This example of widowhood is intended to show that there is something wrong with seeing object construction as a process that primarily works with and on ideas. On Hacking's account, object construction starts with a socially available concept or classification that is incorporated into an individual's self-understanding. The concept is then modified as her self-understanding evolves and ultimately the changes force a reconceptualization of the classification by others. This is an important and interesting phenomenon. But focusing on this process makes it seem that the impact of social forces on us and the locus of social change is primarily cognitive: social categories are offered to us that we internalize and modify, offering back a revised classification that others then adjust to (or not). Disrupt the classifications and you disrupt the social structure.

Hacking of course allows that ideas occur in matrices, so there are structural and material elements playing a role in making the classification concrete. But a matrix is a complex, usually unwieldy, and somewhat haphazard collection of institutions and practices together with their material manifestations. Narratives and scripts accompany the practices; rules are part of the institutions. But one may be profoundly affected by the matrix without accepting the narrative, following the script, or even knowing the rules. A Christian widow in a non-Christian context may refuse to "identify" as a widow or to participate in the local widowhood practices. Nevertheless, the status of widow is, without her acquiescence, imposed upon her. I would propose that she is, as much as the more compliant woman, socially positioned as a widow, that is, a member of the social kind *widow*.

Moreover, the matrix may shape one's life without one's falling into any of its articulated classifications. Consider Christiana's children who were sent to live with others as servants after she was widowed. There may be no named category or social classification: "child of a widow," but there is nonetheless a social position created by widowhood practices for the fatherless children. And it might be

an important political move to make this category explicit, to name it, to argue that the severe economic consequences of a father's death are not "necessary" or "natural," to empower the children within it, and lobby for a reconceptualization of their entitlements.

So although language and explicit classification can play an important role in identifying groups and organizing social practices around groups, and although group membership can become an important part of one's self-understanding, it is also important to note how social matrices have an impact on groups of individuals without the group being an explicit or articulated category and without the members of the group internalizing the narrative and the norms associated with it. In other words, we need a way of thinking about "object construction" or better, the formation of social kinds, that acknowledges the causal impact of classification, but also gives due weight to the unintended and unconceptualized impact of practices.

In summary, in thinking about the ways that classification can make a difference (pun intended) it is important not to focus so narrowly on "identities" that we lose sight of the ways that classification can affect us without influencing our self-understanding or without our even being aware of it. We need also to account for the ways that social practices can constitute "thick" social positions without explicit categorization being, at least in the first instance, a primary factor in creating or maintaining the position. This suggests at least a two-dimensional model is required to understand this form of social construction: one dimension represents the degree to which explicit classification is a causal factor in bringing about the features that make for membership in the kind (as opposed to the features being an unintended byproduct of social practices); the other dimension represents the degree to which the kind in question is defined by "identification" with the social position.⁸ For example, widowhood in some parts of the world is an explicit category that has an impact on creating and maintaining a "thick" social position; yet one need not identify with that position in order to be positioned as a widow (one might be positioned as a widow while rebelling against it). Child of a widow is an implicit category, though again one need not identify with that position in order to occupy it. Other positions,

⁸ Thus far I've been assuming that the kinds we're concerned with correspond with "thick" social positions, that is, positions defined within a network of social relations and typically entail a range of norms, expectations, obligations, entitlements, and so on. But one might argue that not all social kinds are like this and, more significantly, our classifications and practices can have a significant impact on the world that extends well beyond this. Hacking himself has used the example of classifying some microbes as pathogenic; this classification can have a profound effect on the kinds of microbes so classified. One might argue, then, that certain bacteria are socially, even discursively, constructed insofar as they are the result of mutations in previous bacteria that we classified as pathogenic and treated with antibiotics. Those interested in the subtle (and not so subtle!) effects of humans on ecosystems might have use for speaking of social construction in this broad sense.

however, involve greater agency in conformity to the practices defining them; for example, the category of student, refugee, or voter. Even here, though, we should distinguish conformity to the practices, and acceptance of the assumptions behind them. For example, a refugee may conform to the rules defining refugee status, without coming to think of herself *as a refugee*, or intentionally acting *as a refugee*.

In the previous section we saw how the social world had a causal impact on our ideas; in this section we've considered how the social world (including our ideas and classifications) has an impact on things to form them into kinds. The—perhaps by now obvious—point is that ideas and objects interact in complex ways and transform each other over time. Broadly speaking, social construction is about this complex interaction. Thus far it may appear that social construction is all about causation (this, after all, seems to be Hacking's view); but there remain questions about kinds and classification that have not yet been addressed.

Social Kinds

One of the important messages of Hacking's work on social construction is that we must distinguish *what* is allegedly being constructed, namely ideas or objects, in order to avoid confusion. In other words, he has focused on distinguishing different *products* of construction, but in every case construction is a causal *process*. But we should also be careful to distinguish different ways in which things are constructed, in particular, different ways things might "depend for their existence" on a social context.

Hacking believes that gender is a perfect example of a case in which the idea and the object are both socially constructed:

There are many examples of this multi-leveled reference of the *X* in "the social construction of *X*." It is plain in the case of gender. What is constructed? The idea of gendered human beings (an idea), and gendered human beings themselves (people); language; institutions; bodies. Above all, "the experiences of being female." One great interest of gender studies is less how any one of these types of entity was constructed than how the constructions intertwine and interact. (Hacking 1999, p. 28)

Here Hacking suggests that "gender" (in different senses) is both an idea-construction and an object-construction. Gender is an idea-construction because the *classification* men/women is the contingent result of historical events and forces and does not correspond to and is not stable due to the world's inherent

structure. And yet the classifications “woman” and “man” are interactive kinds: gender classifications occur within a complex matrix of institutions and practices, and being classified as a woman (or not) or a man (or not) has a profound effect on an individual, both in terms of the social consequences for her and in terms of her experience and self-understanding. That is, women and men are constructed *as gendered kinds of people*.

Although on Hacking’s view the claim that gender is constructed has more than one sense, on both senses it is a causal claim: the point is either a causal claim about the source of our “ideas” of man or woman or a claim about the causes of gendered traits. However, there are contexts in which the claim that gender is socially constructed is not a causal claim; rather the point is constitutive. The point being made is that gender is not a classification scheme based simply on anatomical or biological differences, but should be understood as a system of social categories that can only be defined by reference to a network of social relations. In this case, the concept of gender is introduced as an analytical tool to explain a range of social phenomena, and we evaluate the claim by considering the theoretical usefulness of such a category (Scott 1986).⁹ There is room for much debate, not only over the question whether we should employ such a category, but if we do, how we should define it, that is, what social relations (or clusters of social relations) constitute the groups *men* and *women*. The debates here parallel others in social theory: One might debate whether the category “underclass” is useful to explain a wide range of social and cultural phenomena and, if so, how we should define it.

Although Hacking is generous in suggesting that feminist theorists, following Beauvoir, have been important in developing the notion of construction, he suggests that the claim that gender is socially constructed is redundant, and not, at least at this point in time, particularly useful (Hacking 1999, p. 39). Gender is, on any definition, a social phenomenon: “no matter what definition is preferred, the word [‘gender’] is used for distinctions among people that are grounded in cultural practices, not biology” (Hacking 1999, p. 39). The point seems to be that if one means by the claim that gender is socially constructed the constitutive claim that gender is a social category, then one’s point is no better than a tautology. That the social classifications *men* and *women* are social classifications is redundant. “If gender is, by definition, something essentially social, and if it is constructed, how could its construction be other than social?” (Hacking 1999, p. 39).

⁹ There are moments when Hacking seems to acknowledge that some forms of construction are not causal but constitutive. I discuss one such passage below (Hacking 1999, p. 39), but his discussion does not reveal an understanding of the distinction. For example, constitutive constructions are treated as “add-on” entities, “the contingent product of the social world” (Hacking 1999, p. 7). This misses the point that a social construction claim may function to challenge the presumed content of our conceptual repertoire and not simply its origins. More on this later.

It is odd that Hacking should frame his rhetorical question this way, for as we've seen, on his view, to say that something is socially constructed is to say that it is, in some way, socially caused. But we should avoid conflating social kinds with things that have social causes. Sociobiologists claim that some social phenomena have biological causes; some feminists claim that some anatomical phenomena have social causes, for example, that height and strength differences between the sexes are caused by a long history of gender norms concerning food and exercise.¹⁰ It is an error to treat the conditions by virtue of which a social entity exists as causing the entity. Consider, for example, what must be the case in order for someone to be a husband in the contemporary United States: A husband is a legally married man. Being a legally married man does not *cause* one to be a husband; it is just what being a husband consists in.

It is also significant that not all social kinds are obviously social. Sometimes it is assumed that the conditions for membership in a kind concern only or primarily biological or physical facts. Pointing out that this is wrong can have important consequences. For example, the idea that whether or not a person is White is not simply a matter of their physical features, but concerns their position in a social matrix, has been politically significant, and to many surprising.

To help keep distinct these different ways in which the social can function in construction, let's distinguish:

X is socially constructed causally as an F iff social factors (i.e., *X*'s participation in a social matrix) play a significant role in causing *X* to have those features by virtue of which it counts as an *F*.

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 factors (or: such that in order for *X* to be *F*, *X* must exist within a social matrix that constitutes *F*'s).

In summary, social constructionists are often not just interested in the causes of our ideas and the social forces at work on objects, but are interested in how best to understand a given kind, and in particular whether it is a natural or social kind. Because on Hacking's view social constructionisms are concerned with causal claims, it doesn't capture what's interesting in claiming that something is, perhaps surprisingly, a social kind.

¹⁰ For example, recent race theorists such as Lucius Outlaw suggest that race is a social category but caused by natural forces (Outlaw 1996). Hacking himself also mentions Hirschfeld, but really muddles the debates over race and essentialism (Hacking 1999, pp. 16–18).

Natural Structures and Social Structures

How should we construe the constructionist project of arguing that a particular kind is a social kind? What could be interesting or radical about such a project? Is Hacking right that it is not useful to point out that a social kind is a social kind?

I am a White woman. What does this mean? What makes this claim apt? Suppose we pose these questions to someone who is not a philosopher, someone not familiar with the academic social constructionist literature. A likely response will involve mention of my physical features: reproductive organs, skin color, and so on. The gender and race constructionists will reject this response and will argue that what makes the claim apt concerns the social relations in which I stand. In effect, the constructionist proposes a different and (at least in some contexts) surprising set of truth conditions for the claim, truth conditions that crucially involve social factors. On this construal, the important social constructionist import in Beauvoir's claim that "one is not born but rather becomes a woman," is not *pace* Hacking (Hacking 1999, p. 7) that one is caused to be feminine by social forces; rather, the important insight was that being a woman is not an anatomical matter but a social matter; for Beauvoir in particular "Here is to be found the basic trait of woman: she is the Other in a totality of which the two components are necessary to one another" (Beauvoir 1989, p. xxii; also 1989, pp. xv–xxxiv).

This project of challenging the purported truth conditions for the application of a concept I call a "debunking" project. A debunking project typically attempts to show that a category or classification scheme that appears to track a group of individuals defined by a set of physical or metaphysical conditions is better understood as capturing a group that occupies a certain (usually "thick") social position. Hacking is right that the goal is often to challenge the appearance of inevitability of the category, to suggest that if social conditions changed, it would be possible to do away with the category. But an important first step is to make the category visible *as a social category*. This sometimes requires a rather radical change in our thinking. For example, elsewhere, following in Beauvoir's now long tradition, I have argued for the following definitions of man and woman:

S is a woman iff

- (i) *S* is regularly and for the most part observed or imagined to have certain bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction;
- (ii) that *S* has these features marks *S* within the dominant ideology of *S*'s society as someone who ought to occupy certain kinds of social

position that are in fact subordinate (and so motivates and justifies *S*’s occupying such a position); and

- (iii) the fact that *S* satisfies (i) and (ii) plays a role in *S*’s systematic subordination, that is, *along some dimension*, *S*’s social position is oppressive, and *S*’s satisfying (i) and (ii) plays a role in that dimension of subordination.

S is a man iff

- (i) *S* is regularly and for the most part observed or imagined to have certain bodily features presumed to be evidence of a male’s biological role in reproduction;
- (ii) that *S* has these features marks *S* within the dominant ideology of *S*’s society as someone who ought to occupy certain kinds of social position that are in fact privileged (and so motivates and justifies *S*’s occupying such a position); and
- (iii) the fact that *S* satisfies (i) and (ii) plays a role in *S*’s systematic privilege, that is, *along some dimension*, *S*’s social position is privileged, and *S*’s satisfying (i) and (ii) plays a role in that dimension of privilege.

(Haslanger 2012 [2000])

These definitions are proposed, not as reconstructions of our commonsense understanding of the terms *man* and *woman* but as providing a better explanation of how gender works.

What does this mean? There are two clusters of questions that should be distinguished. The first is whether employing a classification *C* (e.g., a distinction between the two groups as defined above) is theoretically or politically useful. The second is whether the theoretical understanding of *C* captures an ordinary social category, and so whether it is legitimate or warranted to claim that the proposed definitions reveal the commitments of our ordinary discourse. Those who hold the view that we have privileged access to the meanings of our terms will be suspicious of any attempt to provide radical analyses of our discourse. However, such semantic confidence is not warranted. It is broadly recognized that we often don’t know exactly what we are talking about—at least not in all senses of “what we’re talking about”—and that reference can be successful even under circumstances of semantic ignorance. I, like Putnam, cannot distinguish between beeches and elms. But that does not prevent my words “beech” and “elm” from referring to the correct species of tree (Putnam 1975b, 1973). If, however, there is no avoiding some form of semantic externalism, then it is perfectly reasonable to suppose that familiar terms that we ordinarily think capture physical kinds in fact capture social kinds.

To see how this might work, consider an early (simplified) version of scientific essentialism (Putnam 1975b, 1973; Kripke 1980). The term ‘water’ may refer to the natural kind *water* even in contexts where no one is in a position to say what all and only instances of water have in common, for reference can be fixed by ostending certain paradigm instances with the intention to refer to the kind shared by the paradigms. The ordinary speaker might not be in a position to say what the kind in question is, or even identify the paradigms (I cannot point out a beech tree). Rather, we rely on a “semantic division of labor”: I intend to mean by “beech” what others who are familiar with the paradigms mean, and it is up to the “experts” to determine what kind the paradigms share. Putnam and others assumed that the relevant “experts” would be *natural scientists* (the issue was framed as a question about the use of natural kind terms), and that the kind sought by the experts would be the *essence* of the paradigms.¹¹ However, we need not accept these naturalistic and essentialist assumptions. In my mouth, the term ‘underclass’ refers to a social kind even though I am not in a position to define the kind. I defer to certain social scientists to refine the relevant range of paradigms and to provide a social theory that gives explanatory weight to this category and determines its extent. If I come to learn the currently accepted definition of ‘underclass’ and believe that it has problematic implications or presuppositions, then I may need to stop using the term. Note, however, that although in the examples thus far I have supposed that the speaker intends to participate in the semantic division of labor, semantic externalism does not depend on my intention to defer. Even if I think I know perfectly well what arthritis is, when I believe that I have arthritis in my thigh, the content of my belief is determined by experts on joint disorders (Burge 1979).

¹¹ Note that Hacking himself relies on a version of scientific essentialism in clarifying the sense in which, for example, “autism” is a social construct. He argues:

Now for the bottom line. Someone writes a paper titled “The Social Construction of Childhood Autism.” The author could perfectly well maintain that (a) there is probably a definite unknown neuropathology *P* that is the cause of prototypical and most other examples of what we now call childhood autism; (b) the idea of childhood autism is a social construct that interacts not only with therapists and psychiatrists in their treatments, but also interacts with autistic children themselves, who find the current mode of being autistic a way for themselves to be.

In this case we have several values for the *X* in the social construction of *X* = childhood autism; (a) the idea of childhood autism, and what that involves; (b) autistic children, actual human beings, whose way of being is in part constructed. But not (c) the neuropathology *P*, which ex hypothesi, we are treating as an indifferent kind. A follower of Kripke might call *P* the essence of autism. For us, the interest would not be in the semantics but the dynamics. How would the discovery of *P* affect how autistic children and their families conceive of themselves; how would it affect their behavior? (Hacking 1999, p. 121)

Hacking, however, inherits the naturalistic bias of the early scientific essentialists in allowing that there may be an underlying kind that the natural scientist discovers, but in ignoring the possibility that in other cases there are social kinds underlying our discourse that the social scientist discovers.

Debunking constructionists can be understood as relying on a kind of semantic externalism. We use the terms 'Black,' 'White,' 'Hispanic,' and 'Asian.' But can an ordinary speaker say what it is that all and only White people have in common? We can identify a range of quite different cases. Contemporary race theorists have argued that the cases don't fall within a meaningful biological kind. One conclusion, then, is to maintain that the term 'White race' is vacuous, that the predicate "is a White person" has no extension (Appiah 1996). The social constructionist about race will claim, however, that the cases share membership in a social kind. This is not to claim that they all share an essence, so are all essentially White, but that our best social theory finds the category useful and provides an account of what the cases have in common (Haslanger 2012 [2000]). The goal is not *just* to find something that all and only the cases have in common. Rather, it is to find a theoretically valuable kind that captures more or less the usual range of samples or paradigms. Both scientific and social theory can tell us that what we thought was a paradigm case of something doesn't fall within the kind it proposes as the best extension of our term. Whether we go with the theory or our pretheoretic beliefs about the extension is a judgment call of the sort made in the process of finding reflective equilibrium.

Of course, social constructionists often make great efforts to distance themselves from the kind of realism that is commonly associated with scientific essentialism. Scientific essentialism is associated with many views in metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophy of language that are not part of the debunking constructionist's agenda. For example, it is open to the constructionist to maintain that theoretical commitment to certain kinds or categories is at least partly a political choice, especially in the context of social theory. This brings us back to some of the issues raised in the discussion of object construction.

Recall the widow Christiana and her children. As noted above, there may not be an explicit or named social category *child of widow*, yet in developing a social theory for the society in question, it may be important to introduce such a category in order to understand the social and economic forces that result in the outcomes one is concerned to explain. What outcomes one is interested in explaining, what social forces one postulates, what form of explanation one seeks, are matters that are influenced by constitutive and contextual values (Anderson 1995). Moreover, the theoretical decisions may have political repercussions. One may, for example, introduce a category for *child of widow* in order to point out injustice and argue for changes to existing practices and institutions.

More complicated are decisions about how to theorize social categories for which there are explicit terms, for example, widow, Hispanic, woman, middle-class. There will be many cases in which what is common to the range of paradigms could be captured by several different theoretical models or several different classifications within a model. For example, consider 'widow.' In considering widows where widowhood is a "thick" social position and involves

practices of subordination, one might choose to define the term ‘widow’ (or the corresponding term in the native language) thinly to mean simply “woman whose husband has died,” and to argue that widows need not and should not be treated as they are. Alternatively, one might choose to define the term ‘widow’ to capture the thick social position—with its associated rituals and deprivations—and to argue that there should be no more widows. A third option would be to seek a middle-ground: to define ‘widow’ so it is not so tightly bound to the practices of a particular society that we cannot consider the fate of widows across cultures but theorize the category (roughly) as a site of subordination grounded in the loss of standing provided by one’s husband, due to his death. Each of these options (and others) will not only have theoretical advantages and disadvantages, but will also have political advantages and disadvantages both locally and more globally.

There are two points to be drawn from this example. First, although typically debunking constructionists will want to “debunk” the assumption that a social category is grounded in or justified by nonsocial (natural or metaphysical) facts, there may also be cases in which the project is to “debunk” the assumption that a thick social category is grounded in and justified by thinly social facts (possibly in conjunction with natural or metaphysical facts). So, one might argue that (“thick”) widowhood is a social construct, where the point is that it is wrong to see widows as the social kind consisting of women whose husbands have died, and who for some reason or other come to be poor, childless, and filthy. Rather, the claim would be that the (“thick”) condition of widows as poor, childless, and so on, is something that “we”—our institutions and practices—have created. The purpose here would not be to suggest that the ordinary notion of “widow” is wrongly thought to be a natural category, but that the social position of widow is more robustly social than ordinarily thought.

Second, the debunking constructionist may need to respond to the two questions raised above in different ways depending on context: (1) is the classification *C* useful politically and/or theoretically useful, and (2) should we take the theoretical classification *C* to capture the commitments of ordinary discourse? How one answers these questions will depend on many factors, including of course theoretical and empirical concerns. But it will also depend on one’s broader purposes in theorizing, the political context of one’s theorizing, and one’s particular position within that context.

Conclusion

Although Hacking’s discussion of social construction is valuable and provides insight into the ways in which the notion of construction is often used and misused, there are important constructionist projects he neglects. In particular, he tends to ignore or dismiss the kind of project I’ve been calling the “debunking”

project in which constructionists argue that there is a theoretically important social kind or category that has not been adequately acknowledged, or not been adequately acknowledged to be social. Debunking constructionists may seem to be offering radical and implausible "analyses" of our ordinary concepts, in fact they can be better understood as working within a semantic externalist model that looks to social theory to provide us with an account of our social terms, just as scientific essentialism looks to the physical sciences to provide an account of our naturalistic terms. Debunkers sometimes surprise us, however, in suggesting that what we thought were natural terms are in fact social terms.

There are of course many philosophical issues the debunking constructionist needs to address; the project raises interesting philosophical questions about the relationship between, for example, our everyday understandings of social phenomena and social theory, our everyday understandings of what we mean and what might make our terms apt, the epistemic demands/constraints on theorizing and the political demands/constraints on theorizing. But in raising these questions, debunking constructionism, in contrast, say, to Hacking's "idea-constructionism," is much more philosophically palatable and meaningfully engaged with ongoing work in philosophy in general and metaphysics in particular.

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