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Study Questions

1. Explain the shift from "oppression" as defined in dominant political discourse to its use by the new left social movements described at the beginning of Young's article.

2. What does Young mean by a "face" of oppression?

3. Explain the five faces of oppression discussed by Young.

4. Young claims that her list is comprehensive. Is she right about this? Think about each of the groups that new left social movements typically take to be oppressed in light of each of Young's five "faces"; e.g., does cultural imperialism adequately capture the "Othering" experienced by women?

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

Sally Haslanger

Gender and Social Construction: Who? What? When? Where? How?

I. INTRODUCTION[1]

The idea of social construction is a crucial tool of contemporary feminist theory. No longer willing to regard the differences between women and men as "natural", feminists have studied the variety of cultural processes by which one "becomes" a woman (or a man), ultimately with the hope of subverting them. Along with this has come a critique of those patterns of thought by which gender, as well as other hierarchical social relations, has been sustained.

Although there is consensus that we need the notion of social construction to theorize adequately about women, there is a broad diversity in how the term "social construction" is used and where it should be applied. As just indicated, beyond the thesis that *gender* and other social categories such as *race* and *nationality* are socially constructed, one also finds the claims that the "subject", "knowledge" and "truth" are each socially constructed. On occasion it is possible to find the claim that "everything" is socially constructed, or that "reality" is socially constructed. But once we come to the claim that everything is socially constructed, it appears a short step to the conclusion that there is no reality independent of our practices or of our language, and that "truth" and "reality" are only fictions employed by the dominant to mask their power.

Dramatic claims rejecting the legitimacy of such notions as "truth" and "reality" do appear in the work of feminist theorists, yet one also finds there a deep resistance to slipping into any form of idealism or relativism. For example, to quote Catharine MacKinnon's typically vivid words:

> Epistemologically speaking, women know the male world is out there because it hits them in the face. No matter how they think about it, try to think it out of existence or into a different shape, it remains independently real, keeps forcing them into certain molds. No matter what they think or do, they cannot get out of it. It has all the indeterminacy of a bridge abutment hit at sixty miles per hour. (MacKinnon 1989: 123)

To start, it will be useful to consider carefully different things one might mean in saying that something is

socially constructed. Although I won't address the full range of cases mentioned above, I hope that the distinctions I discuss will be useful in exploring options for interpreting, criticizing or defending such claims. My focus here will be to consider how the different senses of construction might apply in the case of gender.

II. KINDS OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

In the very broadest sense, something is a social construction if it is an intended or unintended product of a social practice. Artifacts such as washing machines and power drills might on some views count as social constructions, but more interesting cases include: the Supreme Court of the US, chess games, languages, literature, and scientific inquiry.[2] Because each of these depend for their existence on a complex social context, they are in the broad sense in question social constructions. Note, however, that there is also 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. Although these various items, be they objects, events, sets of individuals, etc., are very different sorts of things and are "constructed" in different ways, at this point there is no reason whatsoever to think they are anything less than fully *real*; and their reality is perfectly concrete, i.e., they don't just exist "in our heads".

A. The Construction of Ideas and Concepts

However, things get more complicated quite quickly. It is important to distinguish first the construction of *ideas* and the construction of *objects*. (Hacking 1999: 9–16). Let's start with ideas.[3] On one reading, the claim that an idea or a concept is only possible within and due to a social context is utterly obvious. 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, etc. Let's (albeit contentiously) call this the "ordinary view" of concepts and ideas. Even someone who believes that our scientific concepts perfectly map "nature's joints" can allow that scientists come to have the ideas and concepts they do through social-historical processes. After all, social and cultural forces (including, possibly, the practices and methods of science) may help us develop concepts that are apt or accurate, and beliefs that are true.

We may sometimes forget that what and how we think is affected by social forces because our experiences seem to be caused simply and directly by world itself. However, it does not take much prompting to recall that our culture is largely responsible for the interpretive tools we bring to the world in order to understand it. Once we've noted that our experience of the world is already an interpretation of it, we can begin to raise questions about the adequacy of our conceptual framework. Concepts help us organize phenomena; different concepts organize it in different ways. It is important, then, to ask: what phenomena are highlighted and what are eclipsed by a particular framework of concepts? What assumptions provide structure for the framework?

For example, our everyday framework for thinking about human beings is structured by the assumptions that there are two (and only two) sexes, and that every human is either a male or a female. But in fact a significant percentage of humans have a mix of male and female anatomical features. Intersexed bodies are eclipsed in our everyday framework. (Fausto-Sterling 1993). This should invite us to ask: why? Whose interests are served, if anyone's, by the intersexed being ignored in the dominant conceptual framework? (It can't be plausibly argued that sex isn't important enough to us to make fine-grained distinctions between bodies!) Further, once we recognize the intersexed, how should we revise our conceptual framework? Should we group bodies into more than

two sexes, or are there reasons instead to complicate the definitions of male and female to include everyone in just two sex categories? More generally, on what basis should we decide what categories to use? (Fausto-Sterling 1993; Butler 1990, Ch. 1). In asking these questions it is important to remember that an idea or conceptual framework may be inadequate without being false, e.g., a claim might be true and yet incomplete, misleading, unjustified, biased, etc. (Anderson 1995).

The point of saying that a concept or idea is socially constructed will vary depending on context; sometimes it may have little or no point, if everyone is fully aware of the social history of the idea in question or if the social history isn't relevant to the issue at hand. On other occasions, saying that this or that idea is socially constructed is a reminder of the ordinary view of concepts and, more importantly, an invitation to notice the motivations behind and limitations of our current framework. Every framework will have some limits; the issue is whether the limits eclipse something that, given the (legitimate) goals of our inquiry, matters. However, sometimes a social constructionist is making a more controversial claim. The suggestion would be that something or other is "merely" a social construction, in other words, that what we are taking to be real is only a fiction, an idea that fails to capture reality. Feminists have argued, for example, that certain mental "disorders" that have been used to diagnose battered women are *merely* social constructions. Andrea Westlund points out how

> [b]attered women's "abnormalities" have been described and redescribed within the psychiatric literature of the twentieth century, characterized as everything from hysteria to masochistic or self-defeating personality disorders (SDPD) to co-dependency . . . Moreover, such pathologies measure, classify, and define battered women's deviance not just from "normal" female behavior but also from universalized male norms of independence and self-interest. (Westlund 1999)

Such diagnoses invite us to explain domestic violence by reference to the woman's psychological state rather than the batterer's need for power and

control; they also "deflect attention from the social and political aspects of domestic violence to the private neuroses to which women as a group are thought to be prone." (Westlund 1999, 1051). Westlund and others have argued that although victims of domestic violence often do suffer from psychological conditions, e.g., major depression, there is a range of gender coded mental disorders included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder* (DSM) for which there is little, if any, good evidence. These diagnoses, it could be claimed, are *merely* social constructions in the sense that they are ideas used to interpret and regulate social phenomena, but do not describe anything real. Applying this to the case at hand would entail that "Self-Defeating Personality Disorder" doesn't really exist. The description of SDPD, if it captures anything at all, isn't a mental disorder of the sort alleged.

So in considering the claim that something is socially constructed, we should ask first: Is it an object or an idea? If it is an idea, it is important to determine how that idea functions within a broader framework of ideas and concepts and to consider how the framework structures our experience: does it illegitimately or inappropriately privilege one set of phenomena over another? Of course in some contexts privileging certain phenomena is useful and even necessary: medical sciences are not "neutral" with respect to what phenomena count as significant and how they are categorized; medicine has a legitimate concern with human health and the organisms that affect human health. However, other things being equal, medicine that privileges phenomena related to men's health, or the health of the wealthy, would not be epistemically or politically legitimate. (Anderson 1995). Considering what is left out of a framework of categories and what assumptions structure it can reveal biases of many sorts. In extreme cases we may find that the idea in question does not describe anything real at all, and instead is just a fiction being treated as real. In such cases work must be done to demonstrate that what's at issue is only a fiction. But that's not all, for we should also ask: How are such fictions established and maintained? Whose interests do they serve?

B. *The Construction of Objects*

Now consider objects (understanding "objects" in the broadest sense as virtually anything that's not an idea). There is a sense in which any artifact is a construction; but claiming that scissors or cars are social constructions would not have much point, given how obvious it is. Social constructionists, on the whole, are arguing for a surprising thesis that they believe challenges our everyday view of things. It is much more surprising to say that women or Asian-Americans, homosexuals, child abusers, or refugees, are social constructions. What could this mean?

In considering the construction of objects the first point to note is that 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 which may eventually come to "fit" the classifications. This works in several ways. Forms of description or classification provide for kinds of intention; e.g., given the classification "cool", I can set about to become cool, or avoid being cool, etc. But also, such classifications can function in justifying behavior; e.g., "we didn't invite him because he's not cool", and such justifications, in turn, can reinforce the distinction between those who are cool and those who are uncool. In an earlier essay, drawing on Ian Hacking's work, I referred to this as "discursive" construction:

> *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 1995, 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.[4] 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 becoming gendered a woman. (See also Haslanger 1993). But discourse didn't bring me into existence.

It would appear 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. As we saw above, the everyday distinction between males and females leaves out the intersexed population that might have been given its own sex/gender category. Arguably, in fact, some cultures have divided bodies into three sexual/reproductive groups (Herdt 1993). At the same time the classifications "woman" and "man" are what Hacking calls "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), or third, fourth, fifth . . . sex/gender or not, has a profound effect on an individual. Such classification will have a material affect on her social position as well as effect her experience and self-understanding. In this sense, women and men—concrete individuals—are constructed *as gendered kinds of people*, i.e., we are each object constructions.

There is yet a further sense, I'd like to argue, in which something might be a social construction. (Haslanger 2003). So far we've been focusing on social *causation*: to say that something is socially constructed is to say that it is caused to be a certain way, and the causal process involves social factors, e.g., social forces were largely responsible for my coming to have the idea of a husband, and social forces were largely responsible for there being husbands. But often when theorists argue that something

is a social construction their point is not about causation. Rather, the point is to distinguish social kinds from physical kinds. In the case of gender, the idea would be that gender is not a classification scheme based simply on anatomical or biological differences, but marks social differences between individuals. Gender, as opposed to sex, is not about testicles and ovaries, the penis and the uterus, but about the location of groups within a system of social relations.

Consider, for example, the category of landlords. To be a landlord one must be located within a broad system of social and economic relations which includes tenants, private property, and the like. It might be that all and only landlords have a mole behind their left ear. But even if this were the case, having this physical mark is not what it is to be a landlord. Similarly, one might want to draw a distinction between sex and gender, *sex* being an anatomical distinction based on locally salient sexual/reproductive differences, and *gender* being a distinction between the social/political positions of those with bodies marked as of different sexes. One could allow that the categories of sex and gender interact (so concerns with distinctions between bodies will influence social divisions and vice versa); but even to be clear how they interact, we should differentiate them. Using the terms "male"/"female" to mark the current familiar sex distinction and "man"/"woman" the gender distinction, one should allow that on this account of gender, it is plausible that some males are women and some females are men. Because one is a female by virtue of some (variable) set of anatomical features, and one is a woman by virtue of one's position within a social and economic system, the sex/gender distinction gives us some (at least preliminary) resources for including transgendered as well as transsexual persons within our conceptual framework.

I shall return to the question of what social positions might constitute gender below. Before that, however, it is important to note that social kinds cannot be equated 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, e.g., that height and strength differences between the sexes are caused by a long history of gender norms

concerning food and exercise.[5] 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. 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?

I am a White woman. What does this mean? 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, etc. 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. On this construal, the important social constructionist import in Beauvoir's claim that "one is not born but rather becomes a woman" (de Beauvoir 1989/1949) is not that one is caused to be feminine by social forces (even if this is true); rather, the important insight was that being a woman is not an anatomical matter concerning, e.g., one's reproductive organs, but a social matter.[6]

Because being a woman is a function of one's role in a social framework broadly speaking, if we allow that social phenomena are highly variable across time, cultures, groups, then this also allows us to recognize that the specific details of what it is to be a woman will differ depending on one's race, ethnicity, class, etc. My being a woman occurs in a context in which I am also White and privileged; my actual social position will therefore be affected by multiple factors simultaneously. I learned the norms of WASP womanhood, not Black womanhood. And even if I reject many of those norms, I benefit from the fact that they are broadly accepted.

The social constructionist's goal is often to challenge the appearance of inevitability of the category in question; as things are arranged now, there are men and women, and people of different races. But if

social conditions changed substantially, there would be no men and women, and no people of different races. It would be possible, then, to do away with the conceptual frameworks that we currently use. But an important first step is to make the category visible as a *social* as opposed to *physical* 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 (Haslanger 2000)[7]:

S *is a woman* if and only if

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, i.e., *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* if and only if

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, i.e., *along some dimension*, S's social position is privileged, and S's satisfying (i) and (ii) plays a role in that dimension of privilege.

Allowing for the possibility of new and non-hierarchical genders, I also suggest:

A group G *is a gender* relative to context C if and only if members of G are (all and only) those:

i. who are regularly observed or imagined to have certain bodily features presumed in C to be evidence of their reproductive capacities[8];

ii. whose having (or being imagined to have) these features marks them within the context of the ideology in C as motivating and justifying some aspect(s) of their social position; and

iii. whose satisfying (i) and (ii) plays (or would play) a role in C in their social position's having one or another of these designated aspects.

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

What is involved in explaining "how gender works"? There are two clusters of questions that should be distinguished:

1. Is the classification C (e.g., a distinction between the two groups as defined above) theoretically or politically useful?

2. Does the proposed theoretical understanding of C capture an ordinary social category? Is it legitimate or warranted to claim that the proposed definitions reveal the commitments of our ordinary discourse?

I offer the definitions above as a "debunking" of our ordinary understanding of the distinction between men and women as primarily anatomical/biological. The best way of understanding the groups of individuals so familiar to us, men and women, is to understand them in social and hierarchical terms. The anatomical understandings we take for granted, in effect, mask the social reality. So in response to question (1) I claim that the definitions proposed are theoretically and politically useful; but in response to question (2) I allow that I have not captured our ordinary understanding of the terms. But this is intentional.

III. CONCLUSION

On the account of social construction I've sketched, there are several different senses in which gender, race, and the like are socially constructed. First, the conceptual framework of gender that we take as just

"common sense" is only one way of dividing up people according to the shape and functioning of their bodies. There are (and have been) other ways; there are (I believe) better ways.

Moreover, there are ideas associated with gender that are "merely" constructions, e.g., fictions about biological essences and genetic determination are used to reinforce belief in the rightness and inevitability of the classifications. This is not to say, however, that gender is not "real". Although some ideas about gender are fictions, these fictional ideas have functioned to create and reinforce gender reality, i.e., hierarchical social groups based on beliefs about reproductive differences, that are all too real. These categories of people are, I would argue, not just ideas, but are social entities. Such entities are socially constructed in the sense that they are caused by social forces, but also because the conditions for membership in a gender group are social (as opposed to, say, merely physical or anatomical) conditions.

Finally, individual members of such groups are, in a rather extended sense socially constructed, insofar as they are affected by the social processes that constitute the groups. Human beings are social beings in the sense that we are deeply responsive to our social context and become the physical and psychological beings we become through interaction with others. One feminist hope is that we can become, through the construction of new and different practices, no longer men and women, but new sorts of beings.

NOTES

1. Note that this essay draws significantly from my previous work, in particular (Haslanger 1995, Haslanger 2000, Haslanger 2003).

2. Some (e.g., Hacking 1999, Ch. 1) have argued that in cases of something obviously social, it is incorrect, or at least inapt, to say that it is socially constructed, suggesting that it is part of the meaning of the claim that the item in question is typically "taken for granted," "inevitable". (Hacking 1999, 12). I prefer to say that the unmasking element of social contruction claims are not part of the meaning, though it may be inapt to make such claims in the case of obviously social phenomena. The inaptness of the assertion can be explained by saying that in general, there is a linguistic maxim against stating the obvious. (Grice 1975).

3. Like Hacking, I will use the terms "idea" and "concept" without making precise distinctions between them for the purposes of our discussion. In contrast to concepts, ideas are often propositional, and plausibly more specific to the individual.

4. Note 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.

5. More generally, 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 US: A husband is a man legally married to a woman. Being a man legally married to a woman does not *cause* one to be a husband; it is just what being a husband consists in.

6. For Beauvoir, roughly, women are positioned as "Absolute Other", i.e., as "Other" in relation to a group counting as "Subject" where the relation between these two groups never reverses so the "Other" becomes "Subject". (Beauvoir 1989, xxii; also Beauvoir 1989, xv–xxxiv)

7. Note that in the fuller account I suggest a "focal analysis" of gender that distinguishes gender as a social category from gender norms, gender identity, gender symbolism, and other gendered phenomena. For example, on my account one may be in the social category of woman if one is socially positioned in the way described, but still not have a woman's *gender identity*, understanding gender identity to be a psychological or subjective matter.

8. It is important here that the "observations" or "imaginings" in question not be idiosyncratic but part of a broader pattern of social perception; however, they need not occur, as in the case of *man* and *woman*, "for the most part". They may even be both regular and rare.

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Study Questions

1. How does Haslanger characterize the "ordinary" view of concepts and ideas? In her view, are all concepts and ideas "socially constructed"? What is interesting or important about claiming that a particular idea or concept is socially constructed?

2. What is "discursive construction" in Haslanger's view? Is everything discursively constructed? If not, give an example of something that is not.

3. Haslanger proposes definitions of "woman," "man," and "gender" that make explicit that these are positions in a social framework and so are social kinds. Explain Haslanger's definition of "woman" in your own words.

4. Haslanger states that her definitions do not capture people's ordinary understandings of "woman," "man," and "gender." Given this, in what way does she believe that her definitions are useful?

Susan Wendell

The Social Construction of Disability

I [have] argued that neither impairment nor disability can be defined purely in biomedical terms, because social arrangements and expectations make essential contributions to impairment and disability, and to their absence. In this chapter, I develop that argument further. I maintain that the distinction between the biological reality of a disability and the social construction of a disability cannot be made sharply, because the biological and the social are interactive in creating disability. They are interactive not only in

that complex interactions of social factors and our bodies affect health and functioning, but also in that social arrangements can make a biological condition more or less relevant to almost any situation. I call the interaction of the biological and the social to create (or prevent) disability "the social construction of disability."

Disability activists and some scholars of disability have been asserting for at least two decades that disability is socially constructed. Moreover, feminist