

# How Race Is Socially Constructed

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## Abstract

The claim that race is socially constructed establishes that the correlation of racial identity with various socioeconomic and health outcomes is due to social rather than (e.g.) biological factors. However a mainstream way of understanding the social construction of race – the view that race is essentially social – is sharply at odds with many widely held intuitions about the nature of race (Hardimon (2017), Garcia (2019)). In this paper I defend a particular way of understanding the social construction of race such that it can satisfy such intuitions and debunk racialism. This account serves to naturalise the social construction of race, for it shows the commonality between social construction and other forms of emergence.

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## 1 Introduction

There is widespread agreement that social structures are responsible for the correlation of racial group membership with various differences in socioeconomic and health outcomes. This is, of course, closely related to the suggestion that race is socially constructed. However, advocates for the social construction of race often face the challenge that socially constructed race

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violates common intuitions about racial identity. I propose a conception of social construction that establishes that social structures are responsible for the correlations between racial identity and various outcomes, but can also satisfy such intuitions. This will also serve to naturalise social construction by demonstrating the commonality between social construction and physical emergence.

Several philosophers, including Garcia (2019); Hardimon (2017); Spencer (2019), have argued against Haslanger's (2012) popular account of social construction on the grounds that it makes one's position in a social hierarchy essential to one's racial group membership – call this the '*intuition objection*'. The worry is two-fold: first, that this would mean that race would not survive the end of racism; and secondly, and in my view more importantly, this is at odds with many peoples' understanding of their own racial identity.<sup>1</sup> The claim is that, *pace* Haslanger to be Black is not essentially to be sociopolitically disadvantaged, and that the Black identity is not primarily characterised by or reducible to such disadvantage.

On the other hand, the social constructionist view serves crucial political ends – call this the '*debunking role*'. Diaz-Leon (2018) shows that the satisfaction of this role involves the demonstration of both historical contingency and non-universality of the salience of the terms. Thus, a social constructionist view of race manifestly recognises the historical contingency of the ways that race functions in contemporary and recent societies and explicitly denies that there is any biological mechanism responsible for the prominent racial disparities in socioeconomic and health outcomes.

In this paper I demonstrate the compatibility of the *intuition objection* with the *debunking role*. That is, I set out an account of the social construction of race that satisfies the anti-social-constructionist intuitions while establishing that contingent social structures are responsible for the correlation between racial identity and various social outcomes. The key is to deny core components of Haslanger's account: in particular, I show that a kind's having defining properties that are social should be distinguished from that kind's being socially constructed. I contend that a property is socially constructed if and only if social structures are responsible for its explanatory salience. This then allows that a kind or property may be defined non-socially and, thus, not be essentially social even if it is socially

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<sup>1</sup>Good studies are hard to come by but Roth and Ivemark (2018) suggests on the basis of qualitative interviews that a significant proportion of individuals' self-ascribed identity varies on discovering their DNA test results.

constructed.

I start in §2 by setting out Haslanger's (2019) account and argue that, while it satisfies certain core desiderata, it violates common intuitions too radically. In §3 I set out my own account that, I claim, does better than Haslanger's in this regard, while also allowing social construction to play its crucial political role. In §4 I set out one putative mechanism whereby non-social underlying properties are made salient in social contexts, thus accounting for their social construction. I conclude in §5 by noting that the establishment of a kind as socially constructed is orthogonal to much of the discussion in the metaphysics of race debate but prompts the important questions: which social structures are responsible, and to what extent are they responsible, for that kind's salience? And how can such structures be eradicated or replaced?

## 2 Haslanger on Race

Sally Haslanger's well-regarded philosophical work offers the most detailed and explicit account of the social construction of race available in the literature:

(Haslanger, 2019, 25):

Social/Political Race (SPR): A group  $G$  is racialized relative to context  $C$  iff<sub>df</sub> members of  $G$  are (all and only) those

- (i) who are observed or imagined to have certain bodily features presumed in  $C$  to be evidence of ancestral links to a certain geographical region (or regions)—call this “color”;
- (ii) whose having (or being imagined to have) these features marks them within the context of the background ideology in  $C$  as appropriately occupying certain kinds of social position that are in fact either subordinate or privileged (and so motivates and justifies their occupying such a position); and
- (iii) whose satisfying (i) and (ii) plays (or would play) a role in their systematic subordination or privilege in  $C$ , that is, who are along some dimension systematically subordinated or privileged when in  $C$ , and satisfying (i) and (ii)

plays (or would play) a role in that dimension of privilege or subordination.

On this account, the group of white people in the UK are racialised in the UK context because members of that group are: (i) observed/imagined to have bodily features (e.g. skin colour etc.) which are presumed to be evidence of ancestral links to, say, the UK/Europe; (ii) marked by the dominant ideology as occupying certain social positions that are privileged along some dimension because of counting as white; (iii) in fact privileged along some dimension systematically because of their observed/imagined bodily features and the positions which this marks them as occupying.

Haslanger's account, thus, clearly satisfies the *debunking role* – on this account racialisation is both historically contingent and non-universal. Therefore I think that Haslanger's account gets something right about race.

However, it's important to note that this account also faces the *intuition objection*. Her view links racial identity essentially to political subordination and privilege. This strikes many people as wrong, and the mismatch with common intuitions is so strong that it can cause serious offence. For many individuals, especially those from groups that do in fact experience sociopolitical subordination, their race constitutes a significant component of personal identity, and to characterise this as merely about a position in a sociopolitical hierarchy is in tension with such feelings.

For example, it's commonplace for people considering adoption to wish to adopt children of the same race, but this desire cannot be a desire to have children who are systematically racially subordinated/privileged.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, but more controversially, the widespread rejection of putative cases of transracialism suggests that accounts that essentially (rather than contingently) link race with sociopolitical hierarchy get something wrong.

Since Haslanger's account includes the 'observed or imagined' qualification, this means that ancestry or skin colour needn't be actual, just observed for racial grouping/identification, and this is at odds with how the terminology is generally used. In fact we use racial terminology rather differently: we tend to regard genetic testing or discovered ancestry as *factive*, and commonly hear expressions like 'he passes for white but he's black', or 'people don't know what race she is, but she's actually Asian', neither of

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<sup>2</sup>See e.g. Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption (2022).

which would make much sense on a Haslanger-style account.<sup>3</sup>

These are the intuitions on which Garcia is drawing in his critique:

When we say that [subject] S is an [member of race] R we do not mean to state her social, institutional role, but to talk about her origin. . . . I here maintain, we cannot make sense of the claim that my being a member of the Black race consists in the social circumstance of various people regarding or treating me a certain way. My race, if I have one, has to be something in me and in a way that is independent of and unaffected by what happens in society's thinking. . . . So, races are not socially constructed (in the important sense that they are not socially constituted)

[(Garcia, 2019, 7,11,12)]

Hardimon (2017) also argues against the social construction of race on Haslanger's conception. He argues that racial kinds should be understood as corresponding, roughly, to groups defined in terms of ancestry. Hardimon goes on to criticise what he calls 'socialrace' which corresponds to race as socially constructed in Haslanger's sense. Hardimon claims that race isn't socialrace, because socialrace has social defining properties, and it is, consequently, distinct from the race concept Hardimon claims is found in common usage.

It is logically possible that socialraces could be found in a world in which the apparent differences in human skin color were actually the result of the nocturnal activity of race fairies, spray-painting hues of black, brown, yellow, red, and pink on the skin of sleeping souls in the dead of night.

[(Hardimon, 2017, 134)]

While I don't want to commit to a view of Hardimon's general project, I contend that the account of social construction developed below isn't undermined by Hardimon's objections to socialrace. That's because, on my account, race's being socially constructed does not imply that racial properties are essentially social. Rather, racial properties may be non-social, while

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<sup>3</sup>The survey results in Cox and Tamir (2022) are suggestive of the link between ancestry and identity; see also Sharfstein (2011) for an account of passing in the Black community.

their salience to scientific explanations is explained by the existence of social structures.

It's worth noting that Hardimon may be happy with this claim, and his views are fairly close to my own insofar as he accepts that race is 'moderately socially constructed', in the sense that it is maintained by human action ((Hardimon, 2017, 126)). As such, my proposal could be seen as friendly to his – I just do more to spell out a detailed account of social construction.

Haslanger's response may be to dismiss such critiques: why care about such intuitions? Of course one is free to assert, as she does (Haslanger (2019)), that there is a linguistic division of labour for such terms. That, in fact, such intuitions should be set aside and we should defer to those experts – the philosophers – in the meaning of racial terms.

My concern about such claims is as follows:

First, even if there is a sense in which they should, it's just implausible to think that the general public will, in fact, defer to philosophers in their understanding of the meaning of a set of terms that are both used ubiquitously and play such a central role in individuals' understanding of themselves and their place in their local and national communities. As a consequence the fact that such deferral is unlikely means that social constructionism may well be dismissed *tout court*. And then it's unclear quite how to fulfil the *debunking role*. That is, if race is understood as not socially constructed but racial properties are taken to refer to, say, something ancestral any correlations between racial identity and various outcomes are liable to be misinterpreted.

Second, I think there's something worrisome about academic philosophers' claiming insight into the nature of the identity of any particular group that trumps that groups' self-understanding. In particular, given that most professional philosophers are white, it's distasteful in a sense for philosophers to dictate rather than defer to the ways in which many (most?) people of colour would understand their racial identity.<sup>4</sup>

In short, I argue here that, all else being equal, an account that better accords with our intuitions and with common usage of racial terminology but that can still play the debunking role is to be preferred.

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<sup>4</sup>That such intuitions are widespread is even granted by Haslanger (2019), and is the reason that she appeals to a linguistic division of labour.

In the next section I'll argue that a conception of socially constructed race that better accords with these intuitions is available by distinguishing socially defined race, or socialrace from socially constructed race. So the claim is that philosophy has no need to assert that such intuitions should be trumped.

### 3 An Alternative Account of Social Construction

Let's start with a definition, and then show how it fulfils the criteria set out above:

a property P is socially constructed if and only if social structures or facts are responsible for P's salience to (especially scientific) explanations.

On this account properties are the primary objects of social construction. If, then, one talks of the social construction of kinds, as is common in discussion of human kinds, those kinds inherit their social construction from the social construction of their properties. One consequence of approaching the subject in this way is that many kinds have some socially constructed properties and some non-socially constructed properties. Given this definition, the social construction of many properties and kinds is a matter of degree. So there will be borderline cases where it is not determinate whether or not a given property or kind should count as socially constructed.

(Munton, 2023, 13) provides an account of how to understand salience: "a salience structure can be understood as a default accessibility ordering over a space of possible information". Salient properties are those to which we have more immediate access, or which seem to us to be especially relevant to our judgements or assessment of a situation.

Explanatory salience features in the definition in order to emphasise that the properties of interest are those that play a role in our descriptions and accounts of the world. Salience can come in degrees and corresponds to how positively relevant any property is to our explanations.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>My focus on salience is related to its use by Ásta (2018), however I think the extra layer of conferred properties to which she appeals complicates the account and is not necessary for my purposes.

By including the parenthetical ‘especially scientific’ I aim to draw attention to the fact that scientific explanations tend to have privileged status in our representations of the world, and therefore it’s these explanations on which we should focus when seeking to establish whether or not a given property is socially constructed. Importantly, I intend ‘scientific’ broadly in the sense that historical, anthropological, political, etc. explanations would count. The claim is that where a property is salient to such privileged explanations, and that salience is due to social structures, then that property is socially constructed.

In addition, explanation is taken to be factive. That is, the existence of an explanation implies that there are worldly dependencies relating the *explanans* to the *explanandum*. In the absence of such dependencies there are no explanations, and the putative properties or kinds don’t correspond to anything in the world. As such, there are no explanations involving phlogiston or caloric.<sup>6</sup> So if no explanations refer to such kinds, they would not qualify as socially constructed on this account.

A crucial upshot of the account is that socially constructed kinds needn’t have social defining properties. Rather, whatever the nature of the properties in terms of which the kind is defined, social structures are responsible for the salience of such properties to explanations.<sup>7</sup> In other words, this account of social construction allows that the defining properties of socially constructed kinds may be biological, physical, or social; socially constructed kinds are not necessarily social kinds, where social kinds are those with social defining properties. This enables a crucial distinction between social properties and socially constructed properties. While being a police officer is both social and socially constructed, it may be that being a member of a certain race corresponds to underlying non-social properties (such as ancestry properties), but racial kinds would still count as socially constructed.

To cash this out, consider the view of race defended by Hardimon (2017). On this view, members of a particular race are linked by the minimal feature of having a shared relatively recent ancestry from a certain region – call this the ‘populationist’ account. Or alternatively, consider the

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<sup>6</sup>At least insofar as those kind terms do not refer. See Myrvold (2020) for the suggestion that explanations involving such kinds are possible.

<sup>7</sup>This distinction is closely related to that in Epstein (2017; 2019) between anchors and grounds, importantly however the structures responsible for salience can be much broader than the anchors that determine the group membership conditions.

claims due to Spencer (e.g. Spencer (2015) and elsewhere) and Hardimon (2017) that these populations can be understood in genomic terms. On both such views, the defining properties of races are non-social, in the sense that they could be well defined for groups absent relevant social structures.

While I do not wish to defend either conception of race,<sup>8</sup> I think it important that both are compatible with the social construction of race. Assuming that there is some way of identifying racial kinds with populationist or genomic categories, that does not imply that populationist or genomic races play any, or any significant, positive explanatory role independent of the existence of social structures.<sup>9</sup>

Take the use of racial kinds in medicine as an example – see e.g. (Hardimon, 2017, Ch. 8), and Msimang (2020) for differing views on this example. If the salience of racial kinds for medical explanations is a consequence of social structures – e.g. HC384 (2020) includes jobs, housing, and guidance among others as partial explanations for racial disparities in Covid-19 outcomes – then such racial kinds are socially constructed. As such, the applicability of this account of social construction to any particular set of kinds is conditional on the availability of scientific explanations in terms of those kinds.

On a counterfactual conception of explanation this view of social construction comes out especially clearly: the question is, what would one have to change for property P to lose its positive role in (many of) our explanations?<sup>10</sup> If the answer is that social structures would have to change then P is socially constructed. So, for example, where there are significant racial disparities in health outcomes, one might explain why an individual suffers from heart disease by adverting to their race. The individual's race is, then, socially constructed insofar as such explanations would fail to be good explanations in the absence of racially oppressive social structures. As such this account plays the *debunking role*.

Irrespective of whether the underlying properties are biological, social, or something in between, races count as socially constructed if social structures are responsible for racial properties' role in scientific explanations, broadly construed. Thus, an individual's racial membership

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<sup>8</sup>In particular, I find the objections to Spencer developed in Winsberg (2019) to be compelling.

<sup>9</sup>See e.g. Yudell et al. (2016) and references therein for the argument that races are not biologically relevant.

<sup>10</sup>See e.g. Woodward (2003).

may be a direct consequence of their fairly recent ancestry, and so their race is not essentially linked to sociopolitical subordination/privilege. However, insofar as the relation between racial membership and educational/health/socioeconomic disparities is due to the existence of oppressive social structures, race is socially constructed: social structures are responsible for race's salience for such explanations. That's how this account delivers a far better fit to commonplace intuitions without endorsing racialism.

To clarify the account it may help to give one further example: if society were structured such that individuals with particular Zodiac signs experienced significant subordination or privilege on account of their sign, we should regard such identities as socially constructed. This is true even were the Zodiac sign's defining properties – whether these are just the position of the earth relative to the sun or some more complex astronomical states – astrophysically defined. In such a society, these identities would be socially constructed precisely because they would play an essential role in explaining various (e.g.) socioeconomic outcomes.

It should be clear that this account avoids the *intuition objection*: it legitimates deference to individuals as to the defining properties of their racial identities – these may be (e.g.) populationist, genomic, cultural, or social. Nonetheless the salience of such kinds is historically contingent since it depends on social rather than biological or physical structures. If social structures weren't in place to make the properties corresponding to race salient to explanations, then racial categories would not be useful ways to divide up the human population. One could, for instance, imagine dismantling racial hierarchies such that racial categories play no role at all in prediction or explanation of social outcomes, and yet this need not correspond to the end of race altogether.

Lastly, it's worth situating this account with respect to Haslanger's (2012, 87) causal and constitutive social construction. Diaz-Leon (2015) explains this distinction with the example that a watch is causally socially constructed because social factors are responsible for its creation, but not required for its definition, whereas a landlord is constitutively socially constructed since the term's definition must refer to social factors.

The problem with this account is that it conflates social properties with socially constructed properties. While social kinds may well be either caused or constituted by social factors, socially constructed kinds cor-

respond to a broader category of kinds whose salience is a consequence of social structures. That is, I think Haslanger's approach is too narrow because it would rule out populationist races from being socially constructed, if races on that conception are not relevantly similar either to watches or to landlords. Neither causal nor constitutive construction adequately emphasises what I take to be the most important feature of social construction – that social structures are responsible for the salience of socially constructed kinds for (especially scientific) explanation. It's this feature that plays the debunking role: it establishes that the correlation between ancestry and various social outcomes does not justify racialism or its analogues.

## 4 Mechanisms of Construction

While much work remains to be done it's helpful at this stage to set out one story for how it is that the underlying properties that determine racial identity can come to be salient. This serves to underline the compatibility of the widespread intuitions that racial identity is significantly determined by ancestry with the *debunking role*. It demonstrates that there's nothing in particular about these properties that is relevant to their salience other than their heredity and easy identifiability.

Bright et al. (2022) sets out an answer to the question "why would the fact that racism stabilises capitalism explain the fact that capitalist social orders produce racially stratified labour forces?" (p. 5). The answer to this question is useful to my purpose because their modelling involves very limited assumptions as to the nature of racial kinds. In particular they just assume that within a collection of traders, individuals are marked out by tags that others can recognise and identify when engaging in trading practices. They go on to note that in societies that have tags "[e]quilibria can emerge where, say, all yellows make high bargaining demands when they meet blues, while blues make low demands in response. This new possibility emerges because tags provide an arbitrary asymmetry on which to condition strategies" (p. 8). Note that the asymmetry is arbitrary and the details of the underlying properties are irrelevant.

They also note, importantly for the evolution of racial stratification, that "[t]he most advantaged position one can hold in these models is membership in a group that discriminates against another" (p. 9), this helps explain why racial stratification gets established, and the further fact that

“[c]ritically, in the sorts of models here, inequitable bargaining conventions should be unstable if actors can easily change their tag ... a powerful group should prefer tags that cannot be imitated by an oppressed group in order to preserve their bargaining advantages” (pp. 11,18). This means that a classification that depends on biological or population based characteristics that have a stable phenotypic manifestation are particularly effective at leading to such societal structures.

Lastly they ask whether tags that are heritable would make a difference to the stability of discriminatory practices and they show that new agents’ having fixed unchangeable tags, with little to no choice over which tags they adopt, reinforces the generation of inequitable and discriminatory bargaining practices.

Therefore, in sum, these models demonstrate how an heritable tag that is easily recognisable can swiftly lead to the evolution of discriminatory bargaining practices. If these models could be shown to generalise this would provide an important mechanism for the social construction – the constructed explanatory salience – of underlying heritable and recognisable properties, notwithstanding that such properties are otherwise irrelevant to how one’s life goes.

This is not to say that these models are unquestionably right. They are clearly toy examples of how society might work, but they provide an important how-possibly that makes sense of widespread racial inequality, demonstrates one mechanism by which race is socially constructed on the definition defended here, and retains compatibility with racial identities’ being defined in ancestral or populationist terms.

## 5 Conclusion

In Glasgow et al. (2019), Haslanger and Jeffers’ social constructionism is set up as an alternative to Spencer’s biological realism and Glasgow’s antirealism. While much of the discussion is insightful and those interested in the metaphysics of race have a great deal to learn from the book, the framing of social constructionism as an alternative to the other accounts is misleading.

In fact, social constructionism should be understood to account for the salience of racial properties and kinds. All but the most extreme adherents to racialism should accept that, insofar as racial kinds are salient to scien-

tific explanations, social structures are significantly responsible for that.

While, for example, Spencer (2019) suggests that some health outcomes are also biologically constructed, and thus there is minor disagreement on that issue, it's a mistake to view any of the authors in that volume as seriously questioning social constructionism as I define it. The focus of disagreement is in fact about which defining properties correspond to racial kinds.

Once the social construction of race has been established, however, this does not mean there are no more questions to ask. Firstly, one may focus on which defining properties correspond to racial properties. More importantly, the question of precisely which social structures are responsible for the salience of race is a crucial question, especially as it is only by understanding those structures in detail, and their degree of responsibility for racial kinds' salience, that it will be clear how to achieve racial equality.

As such, establishing social constructionism about race is the first rather than the last step in coming to understand race, or any other socially constructed kind: to say that something is socially constructed is only to begin a philosophical and scientific project – the next and far more involved step is to show how, precisely, social structures are responsible for the salience of the constructed properties.

I have argued that properties and kinds are socially constructed if and only if social structures are responsible for their salience to (especially scientific) explanations. One may, thus, recognise the objections raised by those who think that socially defined race does not refer to the categories used in everyday language – thereby granting the *intuition objection*, while still accepting that there is a meaningful sense in which race is socially constructed. Therefore, the *debunking role* can also be fulfilled. This avoids the problem of those who reject social constructionist accounts of the defining properties of racial kinds being misread as upholding racialism. Once the claims in this paper are accepted the crucially important project remains: which social structures are responsible for the salience of various socially constructed kinds?

A last note (and a subject for future research): this way of thinking about social construction establishes it as a sub-species of inter-level/scale theorising across science. Pick any non-fundamental scientific property, and in many environments and contexts it will fail to be salient to scientific explanations of goings-on in that environment. However, in a different en-

vironment, it will be constructed as salient for various explanations. Mainstream accounts of emergence such as Knox (2016); Franklin and Robertson (2024) focus on the abstractions involved in moving between descriptions at different levels or scales. That's crucial for understanding how properties come to be salient in some domain where those properties aren't useful or relevant otherwise. For example Knox shows how the heat/work distinction is not meaningful or relevant for the more fundamental statistical physics, but is of use in thermodynamics. One might thus think of emergence as corresponding to mechanisms that make otherwise irrelevant underlying properties or distinctions relevant for describing and explaining in a particular context. Thus social construction involves the emergence of underlying properties as relevant for describing a given system in a context, where those properties are irrelevant outside that context. Whether a property or kind is socially constructed or physically emergent may be evaluated on the basis of whether or not we have to change a physical structure or the structure of society to vary that property or kind's salience for various explanations. This account therefore lays the basis for a naturalised account of social construction that renders it unmysterious and undeserving of the suspicion it sometimes faces from realist philosophers of science.

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