# Naturalistic Approaches to Social Construction

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**1. What is Social Construction?**

While constructionist claims often take the passive form of a declaration that “*Y* is socially constructed,” it is more useful to think of social constructionist claims as having the form of a two-part relation:

*X* socially constructs *Y*.

We can then think of different accounts of social construction as differing in their accounts either of the relation itself, or of one or both relata.

**1.1 What Constructs?**

While philosophers have carefully engaged various constructionist claims over the last several decades, much of the attention has been paid to various objects of construction (e.g., ideas? knowledge? facts? human nature?). In contrast, comparatively little attention has been paid to distinguishing different sorts of agents of construction. Many of the agents in social constructionist claims can be neatly divided into two groups: those that view the agents as primarily *impersonal* agents, and those that view the agents as *personal* agents (i.e., persons or groups).

Work in the first group emphasizes a causal role for impersonal causes like cultures, conventions, or institutions in producing some phenomenon. For example, the claim that what we perceive is determined by our background theories emphasizes an impersonal causal agent—culture—in determining some phenomena. Perhaps the most influential version of this claim came in Thomas Kuhn’s suggestion that, “what a man sees depends both upon what he looks at and also upon what his previous visual-conceptual experience has taught him to see” (1962/1970, 113), a suggestion with some foundation in “New Look ” psychology (e.g. Briner, Postman, and Rodrigues 1951). This view was subsequently taken up by a range of other authors across disciplines. For example, the historian Thomas Laqueur writes that, “powerful prior notions of difference or sameness determine what one sees and reports about the body” (1990, 21).[[1](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/social-construction-naturalistic/notes.html" \l "note-1)]Provocative claims like Kuhn’s and Laqueur’s suggest that perception is so dependent upon the background theories that the observational data becomes compromised as an independent constraint on empirical inquiry. Impersonal cultural accounts of construction are also found in explanations of nonrepresentational phenomena, for example, of sex-differentiated behavior. Here a core claim might admit that there is sex difference, but claim that the cause of difference is rooted in different conceptions of sex (and the practices caused by those conceptions) rather than biological facts (see [Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-gender/)).

A second group of constructionist claims emphasizes *personal* social agents that construct through their choices. For example, Andrew Pickering’s (1984) influential work *Constructing Quarks* emphasizes the role of scientists’ judgments in a variety of roles in scientific process including, e.g., theory selection, experiment evaluation, assessments of research fecundity, and so forth, and such an emphasis on apparently highly contingent choices by researchers and scientific institutions is a mainstay of the social studies of knowledge literature. In emphasizing personal choices, some constructionist work (including some of Pickering’s) seems primarily aimed at emphasizing the contingency of the scientific theory that we come to accept (cf. Hacking 1999).[[2](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/social-construction-naturalistic/notes.html" \l "note-2)] Other constructionists—those we might call *critical* constructionists—emphasize personal choices not just to establish the contingency of the acceptance of some representation as to emphasize the role of an agent’s interests or power relations in determining the content of an accepted representation. For example, Charles Mills suggests that the borders of American racial categories were determined in such a way as to “establish and maintain the privileges of different groups. So, for example, the motivation for using the one-drop rule to determine black racial membership is to maintain the subordination of the products of ‘miscegenation’” (1998, 48). And a range of constructionist research, especially research on human classifications like “race” and “gender,” documents shifts in human classification in response to shifts of interests or power.

**1.2 What is Constructed?**

Social constructionist claims are made about so many different objects that it is perhaps not surprising to find that such claims have different implications depending upon the different objects at which they are directed. Most uses of “construction”-talk (and related talk to the effect that that objects are, surprisingly, “invented” or “made up”) are directed at three very different sorts of entities: representations (e.g. ideas, theories, concepts, accounts, taxonomies, and so forth), (non-representational) facts quite generally, and a special sort of non-representational fact: facts about human traits.

Most philosophical discussion of social constructionism has been concerned with the so-called “science wars” which means that they have been concerned with evaluating the inference from the numerous and complex social influences operating in the production of scientific theories to the social construction of the facts those theories purport to represent, or to the failure of accounts of scientific rationality, or scientific realism, or scientific process (e.g. Laudan 1981, Nelson 1994, Fine 1996, Kukla 2000).

But “construction” talk has a more or less independent, but equally contentious life in the “human nature wars” where it labels the position that human traits (for example the emotions) or human kinds (which we can think of categories whose members share traits or clusters of traits, including, especially, dispositions to think and behave) are produced by culture rather than by biology or nature.

This *kind* constructionist view contrasts with the view that human kinds or traits are to be explained in terms of non-cultural mechanisms – especially internal, biological or natural states of the organism. The most pronounced disputes are prima facie concerned with whether the clustering of traits in, for example, sex difference, emotional behavior, or mental illness, are caused by a cultural practice of differentiating persons or are instead caused by natural processes operating in relative independence from culture.

But this kind constructionist view has also (especially in the philosophy of race) come to contrast with the skeptical view that a kind does not exist. In the context of race, constructionism amounts to the positive assertion that race is real even though it is not constituted by, or grounded in, biological facts such as genetic difference. (See, e.g., Haslanger 2012, Taylor 2013, Sundstrom 2002, Outlaw 1995, and the section “Race: Do Races Exist? Contemporary Philosophical Debates” in the entry on [race](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/race/index.html#DoRacExiConPhiDeb).)

We consider naturalistic approaches to the construction of representations and human traits in more detail below, but it is useful to first distinguish *global* constructionist claims that hold that *every* fact is a social construction, from *local* constructionist claims that hold that only particular facts are.[[3](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/social-construction-naturalistic/notes.html" \l "note-3)] Because of their provocative nature, many philosophers associate the term “social construction” with a global thesis, and a standard argument against global constructionism concerns whether such a program is sustainable in the face of the regress such a global thesis engenders regarding the thesis of constructionism itself (e.g. Boghossian 2006, Kukla 2000). Philosophers may have focused on these more radical claims in part because of the recognition that, relying on something like the general idea of construction sketched above, claims that are relatively global in scope are quite provocative and surprising while claims that would count as locally socially constructionist are quite familiar in many areas of philosophy, perhaps most importantly in meta-ethics, aesthetics, and social ontology. The domain of social ontology is especially interesting because here many facts are widely recognized as social constructions: for example, facts about *being a U.S. Senator* or a *licensed dog* are social constructions.[[4](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/social-construction-naturalistic/notes.html" \l "note-4)] Call such constructions *overt* constructions.[[5](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/social-construction-naturalistic/notes.html#note-5)]

But even local constructionist claims can be interesting to the extent that they try to show some object may be produced by unacknowledged social practices—when they are *covert*constructions. This is the role that they play in the philosophy of psychiatry (Hacking 1995a, Scheff 1984, Showalter 1996, cf. Murphy 2006), the philosophy of the emotions (Averill 1980a, 1980b, Armon-Jones 1986, Harré 1986, cf. Griffiths 1997), the philosophy of race (e.g. Outlaw 1990, 1995; Mills 1998; Taylor 2013), and the philosophy of gender (see [Feminist Theories of Sex and Gender: Gender as Socially Constructed](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-gender/#GenSocCon)). Here the local claim that some kind (for example *mental illness*, *emotion*, *race*, or *gender*) is explained by received culture or practice retains its interest because it offers a metaphysical alternative to other explanations (biological, religious, etc.) of the differential features of the kind members as well as an alternative to skepticism about the reality of the kind.[[6](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/social-construction-naturalistic/notes.html#note-6)]

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Ron Mallon <[*rmallon@wustl.edu*](mailto:rmallon%40wustl%2eedu)>

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