

Philosophy 285
Seminar on Special Topics
Race and Social Construction
Fall 2024

TH 1:00-3:50 RWAC 472

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Office Hours: T 12:30-1:30 & by appt.
RWAC 492

The subject. Race unquestionably poses a fundamental problem in contemporary society, but what is race and do races exist? These are two central questions in the **philosophy of race**, more specifically the **metaphysics of race**. Contemporary metaphysicians of race start from a rejection of **biological essentialism about race (“ogre naturalism”)**—the idea that there are “essentialist” biological races in human beings. **Social constructionism** maintains that race in human beings is in some sense a “social construction” (e.g., a social kind or socially conferred status) and holds that, being a social construction, race is socially real. As a form of realism, social constructionism is opposed to **anti-realism about race**—the view that human races simply do not exist. Most social constructionists reject the view that race in human beings is biological in any respect. They hold that race is not biological, that there are no biological races in human beings. The unorthodox form of social constructionism I endorse is compatible with and complemented by **deflationary biological realism about race**—the idea that there are “deflationary” non-essentialist biological races in human beings. The **aim of this seminar** is to explore some varieties of social constructionism currently on offer with the aim of determining the most compelling form of this view.

The players. The **social constructionists** we will examine are: Sally Haslanger (a sociopolitical constructionist), Chike Jeffers (a cultural constructionist), Esa Diaz-Leon (a historical constructionist, Ron Mallon (a defender of naturalistic constructionism), Phila Msimang (an advocate of “minimalist social constructionism”), and Michael Hardimon. The specific form of social constructionism I will defend in this seminar is a version of sociopolitical constructionism. Social constructionists about race also include Linda Martín Alcoff, Charles Mills, and Paul Taylor. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Naomi Zack were early exponents of **anti-realism** about race. Adam Hochman is the most stalwart current defender of racial anti-realism. Michael Hardimon and Quayshawn Spencer are advocates of **deflationary biological realism**. Throughout we will be considering social constructionism from the angle of this form of bio-realism.

Texts (to purchase)

Ásta. Categories We Live By: The Construction of Sex, Gender, Race, & Other Social Categories (Oxford University Press, 2018).

Ian Hacking. *The Social Construction of What?* (Harvard University Press, 1999).

Michael Hardimon. *Rethinking Race: The Case for Deflationary Realism* (Harvard University Press, 2017).

Readings not listed in here will be available on Canvas.

Class Schedule

September 26 Introductory Meeting

October 3 **The refutation of biological essentialism**

Appiah, "Race, Culture, Identity"
Hardimon, *Rethinking Race*, Chapter 1
Lewontin, "The Apportionment of Human Diversity"
Rosenberg et al, "Genetic Structure of Human Populations"

October 10 **Deflationary biological realism**

Hardimon, *Rethinking Race*, Chapter 2
Hardimon, "Phenotypically Marked Ancestry Groups and the Biological Phenomenon of Race"
Hardimon, "What Does it Mean to Say that Race is Biological"?

October 17 **The idea of social construction**

Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?*
Haslanger, "Social Construction: the Debunking Project"

October 24 **Sociopolitical constructionism**

Haslanger, "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be?"
Haslanger, "Future Genders, Future Races"
Haslanger, "Tracing the Sociopolitical Reality of Race"
Hardimon, *Rethinking Race*, Chapter 7

October 31 **Cultural constructionism**

Dubois, "The Conservation of Races"
Jeffers, "The Cultural Theory of Race: Yet Another Look at Du Bois
"The Conservation of Races"

Jeffers, "Cultural Constructionism"
Hardimon, "Is Culture Essential to Race?"

November 7 Historical constructionism

Appiah, *In My Father's House*, Chapter 2
Glasgow, "The End of Historical Constructionism: Circularity, Redundancy, Indeterminacy."
Diaz-Leon, "In Defense of Historical Constructionism about Races"

November 14 Conferralist Constructionism

Ásta. *Categories We Live By* Chapters 1,2,3 and 5

November 21 Naturalist Constructionism

Mallon, "Naturalistic Approaches to Social Construction"
Mallon, "Constructing Race: Racialization, Causal Effects, or Both"

November 28 No Class Meeting

Thanksgiving

December 5 Minimalist Social Constructionism (Final Class)

Hochman, "Replacing Race: Interactive Constructionism about Racialized Groups"
Msimang, "Racializing Races: The Racialized Groups of Interactive Constructionism Do Not Undermine Social Theories of Race"

Course requirements

(1) Attendance and participation. (2) 10-12 page final paper, due Friday, December 13. (3) Final paper proposal, due Friday November 29. (4) Weekly assignment: one paragraph per reading posted to discussion board on Canvas, due each Wednesday at 5:00 pm.

Philosophy distribution requirements

This course can be used to fulfill either the ethics or metaphysics requirement in Philosophy.