

**Chapter 31:** Applied Philosophy of Social Science: The Case of the Social Construction of Race

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**Abstract:**

A traditional social scientific divide concerns the centrality of the interpretation of local understandings as opposed to attending to relatively general factors in understanding human individual and group differences. We consider one of the most common social scientific variables, race, and ask how to conceive of its causal power. We suggest that any plausible attempt to model the causal effects of such constructed social roles will involve close interplay between interpretationist and more general elements. Thus, we offer a case study that one cannot offer a comprehensive model of the causal power of racial categories as social constructions without careful attention both to local meanings and more general mechanisms.

**Keywords:** Verstehen, positivism, etic, emic, social construction, race, stereotype threat, implicit bias, folk essentialism

Applied philosophy presses philosophical techniques and insights into the service of understanding real world cases, situations and problems. From its inception to the present day, social science has been a center of applied philosophy. Its practitioners have sought to formulate and apply theory to guide the acquisition and interpretation of empirical knowledge of humans and of various sorts of human practices, associations and institutions. Moreover, this knowledge has practical import insofar as it often has implications for public policy and decision-making.

Since the nineteenth century, one of the fundamental questions about social sciences concerns the extent to which inquiries into human life can follow successful examples from the natural sciences. One manifestation of this debate is a dispute between what we will call *interpretationist* approaches (sometimes called “humanistic”, “hermeneutic”, “emic,” *Verstehende, Geisteswissenschaftliche*) and those we will call *generalist*

approaches (sometimes called “positivist”, “objectivist,” “etic,” or *Naturwissenschaftliche*). Interpretationist approaches seek to understand humans and human social life primarily in terms of the meanings they attach to peoples’ actions and culturally local ways of life, whereas generalist approaches seek to understand humans and human social life by appeal to more general, universal factors that may exist across individuals and groups with different conceptual schemes and ways of life.

The fundamental insight of interpretationist approaches is that the *meanings* of the concepts and beliefs *within a specific culture* shape human behavior and social life *within that culture*. Interpretationists emphasize that it is impossible to understand many complex behaviors and social phenomena without understanding those concepts and beliefs (e.g. Collingwood 1999, MacIntyre 1970, Schütz 1967, and Winch 1964). If you want to understand, for instance, the differences between a wedding dance, a square dance, or a debutante ball, you must understand the particular meanings attached to these events by the communities in which they occur. If you want to understand the social significance of a “civil rights march” or “buying someone a drink” or of “body-surfing at a concert” you again have to appreciate the meanings or concepts that structure these events for the humans that participate in them. This approach sounds a clear note of opposition to the logical positivists, many of whom argued that legitimate scientific explanations must appeal to general laws or regularities. For instance, on Hempel’s (1994) view, even social scientific explanations appeal to general laws, which have application beyond a single society (e.g. laws of social organization).

As Hempel recommends, generalists attempt to follow the example of the natural sciences by seeking more broadly applicable forms of understanding. For instance, they

seek to explain social phenomena in terms of variables that transcend local meanings and that can be, therefore, applied to explain phenomena across various cultural and historical circumstances. Evolutionary psychologists, for instance, insist that they have found a host of cultural universals including mate selection practices, specialized capacities for social exchange and cheater detection, ingrained tendencies to punish antagonists, basic emotions, and many others (e.g. Brown 1991).

While disputes about specific explanations do and will persist, it is now generally accepted that both interpretationist approaches and generalist approaches can and should play a complementary role in understanding social phenomena, and we agree with this consensus. In fact, in this chapter we aim to make and illustrate this old point in a new way: by focusing upon the case of race.

One of the most common variables in all the contemporary social sciences is race. It is correlated with the distribution of wealth and poverty, academic success, crime rates and convictions, unemployment, and even rates of home ownership. However, the most common view of contemporary social scientists is that race is not a biological category; it is rather some sort of “social construct” – a kind produced and sustained by our practices of differentially labeling and treating persons (cf. Chapter 33 Social Constructivism). Thus, it might seem like the popularity of race as a variable in social science is a victory for interpretationist approaches over generalist ones. Race, on this understanding, is created and structured by culturally and historically local concepts that give it causal power rather than more general features.

However, this is too simple. Understanding our practices of differentially labeling and treating persons – the processes by which we construct race to become causally

powerful – itself demands attention to general psychological and environmental traits (Mallon and Kelly 2012). This important case thus illuminates ways that the theoretical division between interpretationist and generalist elements breaks down beyond recognition in practice, highlighting the shortcomings of particular analyses of the social construction of race that focus only upon one or another methodological approach. To understand the social construction of race, we must employ both generalist and interpretationist elements.

### **Denying the Biological Reality of Race**

In many cosmopolitan urban areas, one can witness marked differences in dress, grooming, language use, bodily decoration, and emotional “display rules” that govern how humans live, express themselves, and interact in the world. In some contexts, sets of these differences are correlated with differences in bodies themselves: hair type, skin color, and body morphology. What explains these various differences and their various correlations?

One explanation, widespread among ordinary people but rare in the contemporary social sciences is that these differences can be explained by referring to inner, unobserved racial qualities or "essences." In an influential characterization, K. Anthony Appiah calls this sort of view *racialism*, the view that:

we could divide human beings into a small number of groups, called "races," in such a way that the members of these groups shared certain fundamental, heritable, physical, moral, intellectual, and cultural characteristics with one another that they

did not share with members of any other race. (1996, 54)

In light of the general success of the biological sciences, nowadays it is tempting to assume that these fundamental, heritable properties are biological, perhaps genetic. This is because the most likely candidate for a biological essence would be some set of genetic characteristics that explain racially typical features and also because there are genes that correlate with racial classifications, for example, genes for skin color or for sickle cell anemia. On this view, race is a *biobehavioral kind* – one that connects instantiation of some sort of biological essence with a range of dispositions to think and behave.

However, possession of specific genes does not neatly overlap with contemporary (e.g. American) racial categories (see Templeton 2013, section 5 for discussion and references), so they do not plausibly mark any essential differences between racial groups.

Most who deny the biological reality of race deny racialism on the grounds that there is no biological evidence for racial essences. This corresponds with a more general shift within biology: a shift away from essentialism about biological kinds. The two most common biological arguments against such essences are the *argument from within-group diversity*, and the *argument from independent assortment*.

The former argument notes that genetic variation *within* would-be racial groups is greater than the genetic variation *between* racial groups (Lewontin 1972). One idea is this. If there were essential genetic differences between putative races, then we would expect there to be less genetic variation within racial groups (because they share a common genetic essence) than between them (because different races would have distinct

genetic essences). Another idea is this, if there is greater genetic variation within a race than between two or more races, then genetic differences are unlikely to explain racial differences. This is because there will be few reliable genetic differences between races that do not also exist within a given race. Either way, it seems doubtful that there is any robust genetic essence shared by all and only members of a racial group.

A related argument emphasizes the fact of independent assortment: that genes for different biological traits can be passed on separately and somewhat randomly. So if a mother has brown eyes and brown hair, her child could very well have one of those traits without having the other. Wherever two geographically separate populations A and B interbreed to any significant degree, there would be few genes that would happen to remain exclusively within A or B and few genes that would explain the typical differences between populations A and B. There is no reason to expect that a cluster of genes responsible for the typical traits of A would remain exclusively in population A and likewise for B. And there is strong historical evidence for fairly regular interbreeding between the ancestral populations correlated with contemporary racial classifications (Templeton 2013). This explains why there are not robust clusters of genes possessed exclusively by members of one racial category but not another.

It is important to notice that these points remain regardless of whether there is a single gene or even a set of genes (e.g. for skin color or sickle cell anemia) that *correlate* with racial classifications. Because possession of an essence is an all or nothing affair, genes are unlikely to underwrite the essentialized racial categories people use today.

Most contemporary defenders of biological accounts of race concede these points. While some insist that specific races might still be identified as biological categories – for

instance, as human populations (e.g. Andreasen 1998, Spencer 2014), we ignore such rejoinders here. Our aim here is to see how the interpretationist/generalist divide plays out *given* widespread social constructionism about race. Others have reacted to the widespread sense that race lacks a biological foundation has led many to embrace racial eliminativism: the claims that race does not exist and that the concept *race* should be eliminated (e.g. Zack 1993; Appiah 1996). However, eliminativism about race is a difficult position to sustain. To many members of contemporary American society it just seems false that race doesn't exist. As Lucius Outlaw remarks: "For most of us that there are different races of people is one of the most obvious features of our social worlds" (1990, 58). Put a different way, race is one of the most powerful variables of the social sciences (Root 2000). How could this be if race is not real? Though racial categories may not be biologically real, there is nothing unreal about their social and economic effects. If race is not biological but still exists, then what is it? Many have concluded that it is a social construction.

### **Race as a Social Construction**

What does it mean to say that race is a social construction? While the content of this common view is often unspecified, we suggest that the crucial idea is that race is produced and sustained by our collective practices of distinguishing and differentially treating persons. Insofar as these categories are constructed, the existence of racial categories, their persistence and the effects that follow from them are explained by human culture, social practice, or other activities. If racial categories are explained in this way, then we can begin to see how they have their effects in a given culture.

Consider three concrete examples. First, in a recent editorial, Philip Guo (2014) recounts how, as a novice computer programmer in the United States, he was often given the benefit of the doubt and opportunities for advancement because he "looked the part" by comparison with people who were not from the "majority demographic" of Asian and white males in information technology industries. That is, Guo believes that he was able to achieve greater success in his career because others perceived him as Asian and treated him differently as a result. Relatedly, Jordan Weissmann (2013) notes, women make up a very small percentage of software developers in the U.S., probably because fewer women than men pursue undergraduate studies in computer science. Weissmann attributes this to the "brogrammer effect": "...it seems pretty plain that culture--the way society at large still treats tech as a male bastion...--plays a role." If Guo and Weissmann are correct, then this is a clear case in which culturally transmitted ideas about race and gender influence how people are treated as apparent members of those socially constructed categories. While there are many ways of interpreting the effects of such biases, one way of understanding them is as small slights whose cumulative effects lead to systematic differentiation of category members (Valian 1998; Mallon and Kelly 2012).

Second, consider the example of the changing meaning of one's body in different cultural contexts. Joel Ruiz and Achmed Valdés were close friends in Cuba, where racial classification has been downplayed and discouraged for decades. Once both immigrated to Florida, however, they grew apart as Ruiz came to be classified as black, while his friend Valdés was seen as white:

Here in America, Mr. Ruiz still feels Cuban. But above all he feels black. His world is



a black world, and to live there is to be constantly conscious of race. He works in a black-owned bar, dates black women, goes to an African-American barber. White barbers, he says, "don't understand black hair." He generally avoids white neighborhoods, and when his world and the white world intersect, he feels always watched, and he is always watchful. (Ojito 2001, 24)

Different cultures have different regimes of classifying persons into races and differentially treating them, with cascading consequences for the subsequent shapes of their lives.

For a third example, consider the theory of "acting white". This is a controversial theory that attempts to explain differences in scholastic performance between African Americans and members of other racial groups by appeal to the claim that achievement is stigmatized among black students as "acting white." The evidence for this theory is mixed (e.g. Tyson et al. 2005). Nevertheless, there is evidence that in some school districts, black students with the highest GPAs suffer lower popularity, whereas this trend is not observed in white students (Fryer and Torelli 2010), supporting the idea that high achieving black students may suffer social stigma. Importantly, these are differences in the collective interpretation of racial identity and of academic achievement. Consistent with constructionism, these differences between racial categories are produced by differential practices of labeling.

Together with the arguments of the first section, these examples suggest the following line of thought: Biological differences do not explain different outcomes for different races. Rather, differential treatment of different races seems to explain different outcomes

(as the examples suggest). Moreover, the interpretationist approach provides an obvious way to understand how differential treatment arises: racial categories are constituted by the *local* meanings of the labels and representations with which they are constructed (rather than more *general* biological categories). That is, the effects of these categories result from the processes of classification and self-identification that are shaped by those representations and that guide the way people intentionally act toward (or as) members of a racial group.

So how does this work? How do the meanings attached to racial categories cause people to act differently toward or as members of that racial grouping?

Many interpretationists understand *meaningful* or *intentional action* as the fundamental feature of human social life. One familiar illustration of this idea contrasts two identical movements of one's arm. In one case, the movement of raising one's hand occurs in a classroom setting, and in another case, one raises one's hand while standing near a curb at a busy corner in New York City. Even though the bodily movements in the two cases are essentially identical, these are two very different kinds of actions. In the first case, someone is raising her hand to speak. In the second case, someone is hailing a cab. These two actions are different because the person raising her hand has a different intention in doing so.

For the interpretationist, understanding human life means understanding these meanings and intentions. So, for example, R.G. Collingwood writes that the object of study for the historian “are not the actions, in the widest sense of that word, which are done by animals of the species called human; they are...actions done by reasonable agents in pursuit of ends determined by their reason” (Collingwood 1999, 46). And Peter

Winch writes (quoting McIntyre 1970) that, “An agent's action ‘is identified fundamentally as what it is by the description under which he deems it to fall.’”(Winch 1964, 315) Similarly, Berger and Luckmann (1991) follow Shutz (1967) and argue that certain concepts and roles become institutionalized and thus shape the interactions between members of a society. Crucially, these accounts view social reality as constituted at least largely by intentional actions, where that is understood as behaviors under a description that offers the *reason* for the behavior *as understood by the agent*.

Ian Hacking (1986, 1995) and Anthony Appiah (1996, 2005) have developed versions of the interpretationist approach to understand constructed social categories (following G.E.M. Anscombe’s (1957) influential work on intentional action). As with the interpretationists, they hold that actions are shaped in part by the descriptions under which a person intends to act. Importantly for our purposes, one can only perform these actions if she has certain concepts that would allow her to express her intention if, say, she were asked to explain herself. For instance, one cannot raise one's hand to hail a cab if one does not know what a cab is or how to signal that one wants to hire a cab. Acting in this way requires possession of the concept of a cab (as well as a range of other concepts).

Hacking points out that the idea of acting under a description can explain how socially constructed categories come into existence along with descriptions of these categories (1986, 1995). His suggestion is that if certain concepts are necessary for acting under certain descriptions (e.g. raising one’s hand under the description “hailing a cab”), then new descriptions (e.g. new social labels) will sometime give rise to new ways of acting, which can cause society to organize itself into newly formed categories. Appiah

(2005) extends this account of action to help explain the structure of social identities (e.g. “women, men; blacks, whites; straights, gays”, 67). On his account, social identities have three key elements. First, they require linguistic labels that serve to pick out members of a given group. Moreover, there is some culture-wide agreement about how to apply the label and stereotypes concerning how labeled people will (or should) act. Second, at least some of the people who are labeled come to internalize the label. In other words, they come to *identify as* a man or woman, black or white person, gay or straight person. Third and finally, members of a culture exhibit patterns of behavior toward the labeled group. For Appiah, the linguistic label and the behaviors with which it is associated (via stereotypes) provide descriptions that shape the actions of people who identify with the label and shape actions toward those who are labeled.

Applying this sort of account to race explains two key features of socially constructed categories. First, it explains how culturally local categories could come to be “created” or “invented” as something that differs from preexisting categories. If we think that the category of Asian people is a socially constructed category originating in modern American culture, then we need an explanation for how this category is different from categories that might have been applied to the 17th century (cultural or biological) ancestors of Asian people today. If being Asian is socially constructed, then it needs to be different from being an indigenous subject of early-17<sup>th</sup>-century, Ming Dynasty China. Action under a description helps to differentiate these categories. Since there are concepts and descriptions for people groups - concepts and descriptions that did not exist in the 17th century – people have a different range of description under which to act. For instance, one can choose to identify as an Asian person or others can choose to treat

someone as an Asian person, whereas no one could have acted in these ways in Ming Dynasty China since the relevant descriptions and associations would not have been available to her. A native of Ming Dynasty China could not identify or act as an Asian person any more than she could raise her arm to hail a cab. In neither case would she have access to the concepts and descriptions that one must possess in order to act in these ways.

Second, interpreting construction in terms of the availability of action can also go some way towards explaining the causal differentiation of category members, since the ability to act in different ways is itself a causally important feature of a person. If American black people have significantly different life outcomes than non-blacks, then this *could* be because they act in different ways in accordance with the different descriptions under which they act. Perhaps equivalently, people act differently as a result of having different racial or ethnic identities.

Notice that this account of action fits nicely with the "acting white" theory and provides a general way of understanding how similar phenomena could arise. According to the theory of "acting white", there are different descriptions associated with the racial categories used to distinguish American black and white people and these descriptions are common knowledge. One of these descriptions may associate scholastic achievement with whiteness. If for whatever reasons, people are ostracized for failing to conform to expectations concerning their apparent race, then one might very well choose to act under descriptions that conform to those expectations to avoid such treatment. In this case, this means choosing to act differently from white people, with whom academic achievement is associated.

Notice that focusing too closely upon racial identification and individual behavior under a racial description is inadequate. As Appiah allows, many of the ways in which races are differentiated result not from the “first person” application of a racial label (say, acting “as white” or “as black”), but from the “third person” application of such labels (treating others differentially depending upon the classification under which they apparently fall).

To generalize, acting in accordance with one description rather than another can have different effects, and this may allow us to understand how racial categories have many of their effects. This analysis illustrates how an interpretationist approach to racial categories would focus on historically and culturally local factors to explain the *content* and *effects* of socially constructed categories of race. In the following section we argue that this approach does not explain many features of racial categories.

### **Generalist Elements in the Construction of Race**

The now widely abandoned biological interpretation of racial categories that we considered above illustrates a generalist approach, focusing on general properties (understood as biological essences) that could be instantiated and identified across cultural contexts. However, given the abandonment of biological accounts of race, the consensus that racial categories are socially constructed, and the ease with which an interpretationist approach explains such categories, it seems that racial categorization is an unalloyed success story for interpretationist approaches.

While we join in endorsing the constructionist view, we think this theoretical interpretation is mistaken. First, thinking about race in terms of biological or genetic

essences is not the only way to pursue a generalist approach. Second, mere interpretationist approaches to social construction seem inadequate to understanding all the sources of racial division and discrimination. Thus, we argue that generalist elements are necessary to explain socially constructed categories.

In this section, we highlight three generalist elements: the first two involve appeal to generalist *psychological* mechanisms that mediate racial representation. In earlier work, one of us has argued that such mechanisms are consistent with a constructionist interpretation of racial categories, and offer a pathway to a stronger account of social construction (Mallon and Kelly 2012). While such an account is empirically supported, we suggest here that it demonstrates the limitations of an exclusively interpretationist approach. We then go on to extend this generalist interpretation by appeal to additional “extra-psychological” elements that are instances of what we call “environmental construction.”

### *Species-typical processes influence the content of racial categories*

Recall that a common feature of some racial categories is that they are essentialized: race is determined by inner, defining qualities or “essences” that explain typical or “observed” differences between races. We can understand this *racial essentialism* as part of the descriptive content of racial categories. Many historians have argued that essentialist characterizations of race did not become widespread until colonialists began to use them as justifications for oppression of indigenous peoples (Fredrickson 2002). As plausible as this may sound, there is some psychological evidence that racial essentialism is widely distributed across cultures and probably derives from an underlying form of

essentialist thinking toward which all humans are inclined (Mallon 2013). If so, then we cannot understand racial essentialism only in terms of local, historical and cultural factors. Rather, there are general, species-typical cognitive mechanisms that influence this widely discussed aspect of racial concepts or beliefs.

We reach this conclusion via an influential set of studies of folk biology, studies of the way that people tend to think about biological kinds (e.g. see Gelman 2003 for an overview). These studies seem to support three claims about how humans cognize biological kinds:

1. Kind-hood (e.g. being a cat) is presumed to be determined by possession of underlying properties (i.e. they presume some essence of catness).
2. These underlying properties are presumed to explain the possession of kind-typical properties (e.g. the tendency to purr when petted, the possession of retractable claws).
3. These underlying properties are presumed to be “passed on” from parents to their offspring.

Some psychological evidence suggests that these essentialist presumptions appear early in development and are present across a range of cultures, suggesting that the psychological mechanisms responsible for them may be common in humans.

Now, the description of such essentialist presumptions should sound familiar, because it resembles an ordinary and widespread assumption about race, which we discussed briefly above, that there are essential properties that underlie racial categories, that these properties explain typical properties of racial groups, and that these properties (as well as membership in racial categories) are passed on from parents to their biological children. The similarity raises the question of whether the development of racial essentialist



thinking is determined by the same universal biological mechanisms that produce essentialism in intuitive biological thinking.

There are some compelling studies that suggest it is. In particular, something like racial essentialist thinking has been observed across cultures (e.g. Gil-White 2001, Kanovsky 2007, Jones 2009). This evidence suggests that it is unlikely that essentialist thinking is simply a historically local development in western societies (Mallon 2013). Moreover, it suggests that an exclusively interpretationist approach is not sufficient for understanding the *content* of racial thinking, for this content is constrained in some way by more general features of human psychology.

This is not to deny the importance of an interpretationist approach. There are many reasons to think that local understandings of race play a role in determining whether and how racial essentialism plays out within a given culture. For instance, we suspect race thinking in the US would be very different today if many states had not adopted a "one drop" rule for determining race in cases of mixed ancestry. According to this rule, if someone has one black ancestor, then they are black. Without such a rule, people might have begun to think about racial identity as less clear cut (or categorical) and more as a matter of degree. Thus, the content of local understandings of race probably depends on a universal bias toward essentializing, but local manifestations of racial essentialism (e.g. how race thinking works in the US as opposed to Brazil) depend on local understandings. This is just another way of putting our central thesis: to understand the causal power of racial categories, we need to understand how psychology is shaped by *both* local culture (or social conditions) *and* by human-typical traits.

*Subconscious processes explain some effects of racial categories*

A second problem with a purely interpretationist approach based on action under a description is that the causal power of race may be explained not only by the consciously understood content of racial descriptions, but also the unconscious effects that racial representations have on those who employ them. In fact social psychologists have uncovered a range of evidence for unconscious processes by which racial categories influence peoples' actions, and these mechanisms are likely to be human universals.

One such process is implicit bias. There are many ways to measure implicit bias, but perhaps the most influential is the implicit association test (Greenwald et al. 1998). In studies of this kind, participants are asked to sort words and images that flash onto a screen into one of two categories. One category might be "African American or good", if so, the other category would be "European American or bad". So if the word "ice cream" flashed on the screen, participants would probably put it in the first category because ice cream is good, and if Bill Clinton's face flashed on the screen, they would probably choose the second category because Bill Clinton is European American. Studies using this method usually find that people react more slowly in sorting black faces into a positive category (one into positive words are sorted, e.g. "African American or good") and more quickly when sorting white faces into a positive category (e.g. "European American or good"). The prevailing explanation of these data is that black faces tend to be associated with negative evaluations and that this association makes it slightly more difficult to quickly sort black faces into a positive category.

While there remains debate about whether and how these implicit biases affect actions in real world settings, there are grounds to infer that they have real effects. For

example, studies on "weapon bias" suggest that ambiguous objects are more easily interpreted as guns when they are associated with black faces (Payne 2006). If a black face is flashed on a screen and then a picture of a hand drill is flashed very briefly on the screen right afterwards (followed by a mask that makes it harder to perceive the image), then an observer is more likely to judge that the glimpsed drill is a gun. Studies like this have direct relevance to the very rapid judgments required in some police work. Implicit biases may also play a role in other domains, for example, employment decisions (e.g. Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004).

Crucially, it seems that a person can be implicitly racially biased toward a racial group even in the absence of consciously held negative attitudes toward that group (Hofmann, W. et al. 2005). Thus, the role of such effects in producing differences among category members suggests the need to add to an interpretationist approach an appreciation of the subconscious and unintentional effects of representations on producing racial distinction. This goes against a common assumption of interpretationist approaches to the social sciences, namely that the relevant causal pathway by which local meanings produce category specific difference is via conscious intentional action. Recall that this very assumption is in analyses of constructed human categories by Hacking and Appiah, for each suggests that socially constructed categories can be understood in substantial part as a consequence of the potentially conscious intentions under which category members act actions.

Of course, interpretationists do not deny the existence of human typical psychological traits, nor of automatic processes, but analyses focusing upon intentional action fail to appreciate the role that nonintentional psychological mechanisms may play in producing

category differences as a causal (but not rational) consequence of local understandings of race. The effects of automatic processes are not easily explained in terms of the concepts that people consciously wield to understand (or to verbally report) the meanings of their intentional actions, but they plausibly figure in reproducing racial categories and reinforcing their effects.

Also important for our purposes, it is likely that these psychological processes are tuned by local conditions (e.g. culturally local stereotypes and associations). What this shows is that understanding the structure and causal efficacy of racial categories and concepts requires attention to both general and local features that would be neglected if either approach proceeded in isolation from the other.

We can conclude that an interpretationist approach to social construction is not sufficient for understanding the causal power of racial categories, categories that are shaped by *both* species-typical traits *and* by local cultural or social conditions. The next section focuses upon environmental rather than psychological determinants of racial categories.

### *Constructing the Environment*

So far, we have focused on objective, mechanisms “inside the head” that influence the social construction of race and thus go beyond interpretationist analyses of race.

Nevertheless, if our focus is only on the influence of psychology on actions and behaviors, we will miss important influences on socially constructed categories that come from “outside the head”. The *environment*, across its physical, spatial, and cultural dimensions, stabilizes race in important ways and contributes to the causal efficacy of

racial categories across a wide range of cultures. These features fit the interpretationist picture in that they are shaped in accordance with local understandings of human categories, but they count as generalist variables insofar as they can be identified (and may also have similar effects) across various cultural contexts. In effect, we need aspects of a generalist approach to bring into focus variables with this kind of broad applicability.

Consider briefly some of the environmental effects that racial classifications have had in the US. When it was first established in 1934, the Federal Housing Administration began insuring private mortgages, leading to a drop in interest rates and required down payments and a rise in home ownership rates. Nevertheless, the FHA would not insure houses in neighborhoods that were perceived as unstable. Since judgments of stability tended to be influenced by the number of minorities living in those communities, the effect of the policy was that black people and other minorities had more difficulty securing legitimate home loans and many became victimized by unregulated lending practices. Over time, these policies have led to increased segregation and poverty and decreasing property value in many of the neighborhoods labeled as “unstable”. (For an accessible overview of this history, see Coates (2014).) Moreover, in the US, school districts are funded by property taxes such that the funding a school district receives is determined by the value of the properties in that district. This is plausibly a reason that students in these school districts have less favorable outcomes than other neighborhoods.

Thus understood, racial classification makes an impact on the physical, economic and institutional environment that can differentially influence outcomes for minority racial groups. Moreover, the influence of the environment stabilizes racial categories independently of the psychological mechanisms we discuss above. In the U.S., even if we

could wave a magic wand and erase the psychological mechanisms involved in racial classification, effectively making everyone “colorblind”, racial inequalities would still persist. Many American black people would still live in predominantly black neighborhoods, in which property values are low and in which school districts are underfunded. So even if racial categorization did not lead to differential treatment for the psychological reasons we discuss above, many would still be subject to different educational outcomes due to the structure of the environment. We might even predict that psychological categories would then reassert themselves as differential outcomes were observed and came to influence the processes by which racial concepts, stereotypes and implicit biases are formed.

### **Summary**

We agree with many others that both interpretationist and generalist elements are necessary for understanding human social arrangements, and we add to this consensus two substantive contentions. First, racial categories cannot be understood by either approach in isolation from the other. Rather, to understand the causal power of racial categories, we need to understand how human psychology is shaped by *both* species-typical traits, *and* local cultural or social conditions. The second contention opposes the temptation of interpretationist accounts to over-intellectualize socially constructed categories. Specifically, the emphasis on conscious, intentional actions neglects two key influences on category construction: the influence of unconscious and non-intentional psychological processes (as discussed in sections 3.1 and 3.2) and the influence of non-psychological, environmental influences (as discussed in section 3.3).

In one sense, this discussion has been highly theoretical, with implications for how social scientists ought to think about the theories and theoretical terms that respectively explain and refer to socially constructed categories like race. In another sense, our conclusions are highly practical because they bear on the methodology and practice of social science especially concerning its approach to real world problems like racial inequality. In effect, this is a prelude to deeper explorations that probe the policy implication of and for our developing understandings of socially constructed categories.

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