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To cite this article: Umut Baysan (16 Jan 2024): Social constructs and how not to ground them, Inquiry, DOI: [10.1080/0020174X.2024.2305390](https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2024.2305390)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2024.2305390>



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Published online: 16 Jan 2024.



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Social constructs and how not to ground them

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ABSTRACT

According to a current trend in social ontology, by articulating claims of social construction in terms of metaphysical grounding, we can shed light on the metaphysics of social construction and understand deep truths about social identities like race and gender. Focusing on two recent accounts, I argue that this move from social construction to grounding has limitations. While there are intelligible grounding claims that can explain certain ideas in social ontology, such grounding claims add nothing to what we have learnt from constructionists about race and gender. Although some applications of this grounding approach attempt to remedy this and offer detailed analyses of how social kinds are grounded, they yield results that are inconsistent with some very plausible views about social construction. Thus, if we want to illuminate the metaphysics of social construction, we must explore other alternatives.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 28 August 2023; Accepted 2 January 2024

KEYWORDS Grounding; social construction; race; gender; emergence

1. Introduction

Constructionists about race and gender argue that race and gender are *socially constructed*.¹ Understood this way, constructionism rejects both biological realism and anti-realism about these categories. While biological realism takes these categories to be biologically real and construes races and genders as biological kinds, anti-realism holds that the kinds in question simply do not exist. Constructionism departs from anti-

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¹Perhaps one can be a constructionist about race without being a constructionist about gender (and vice versa). Or perhaps the correct account of these categories must adopt an 'intersectional' approach in thinking that race, gender, and other categories of human kinds (e.g., social class, sexuality, faith, nationality) mesh with each other in ways that make it difficult, if not outright impossible, to study them in separation. I will not discuss these possibilities and simply take constructionism to be the view that race and gender are socially constructed.

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realism because it holds that races and genders *do* exist. It departs from biological realism because it takes these kinds to be socially, *not* biologically, real.

Anti-realists and constructionists are on the same page when it comes to the claim that there are no biological kinds that our race and gender terms pick out. If biological realism is false – perhaps once we thought that race and gender were biological categories, but now we have come to realize that this is not the case – why should we still think that race and gender are real? This is the anti-realist challenge to constructionism. The standard answer to this challenge is that these kinds are real because they are *causally* and *explanatorily* relevant. After all, a person's race is often causally and explanatorily relevant to how they are treated at an international airport or a local train station, and a person's gender is similarly relevant to how much they are likely to earn or how much childcare they are expected to do. Although one might find this answer satisfactory for the purpose of justifying the claim *that* races and genders exist, there is a further question of *how* these kinds exist, given that they are not natural kinds studied by some natural science, such as biology.

This 'how' question can be understood in two different ways: (i) How did these kinds come into existence? (ii) In virtue of what do these kinds remain in existence? While (i) is a *causal* question because it requests an explanation of how social constructs came into existence, (ii) is a *constitutive* question because it requests a constitutive explanation of what underlies the continued existence of these kinds, i.e. what they ontologically depend on.

Engaging with the causal question is partially a historical/empirical project, but philosophers have engaged with that question in plenty of interesting ways. I take it that when Mills argues that there is a 'Racial Contract' created by European colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade and that this contract created not only racial exploitation, but also 'race *itself* as a group identity' (1997, 63, emphasis added), he is engaging with the causal question, at least for the Black/White racial division that exists in the context in which he is writing. Similarly, when Lugones (2007) suggests that European colonists imposed their worldviews and ideas of social division to colonised communities, which ultimately contributed to the creation of gender kinds that had not previously existed, she is engaging with the causal question regarding gender.

Engaging with the constitutive question is a project in social ontology, as this is a question of what it is that socially constructed kinds ontologically depend on. When Haslanger deems it 'an error to treat the

conditions by virtue of which a social entity exists as *causing* the entity' (2012, 131, emphasis added) and offers her own constructionist analysis of what it is for a person to be a woman (or a man) in terms of that person's social position in a system, she is engaging with the constitutive question. In the case of *being a woman*, Haslanger holds that this consists in being treated as socially subordinate based on real or imagined 'bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction' (2012, 133). It is plausible to read analyses of this sort to support an ontological dependence claim: the relevant social kinds, such as *Woman*, *Man*, *Black*, and *White* depend, for their existence, on the way the society treats some non-social phenomena (e.g. biological sex, bodily features) and puts individuals or groups in positions in social reality based on the relations they bear to such non-social phenomena. If Haslanger is right, while an individual's *being a woman* is constituted by her position in an oppressive society, the social kind *Woman* ontologically depends, partially, on the social system that oppresses those individuals who have, or are imagined having, a female's biological role reproduction.

Reflecting on this ontological dependence claim, it is also possible to ask a further question, and, at last, this takes us to the main question of this paper: *What is the best way to understand the nature of the non-causal dependence relation that constructionists seem to be positing?* A recently popular answer to this question is that the relation that constructionists are positing is that of *metaphysical grounding* (henceforth, simply *grounding*). Some proponents of this answer explicitly endorse the more ambitious claim that a grounding relation whereby the grounds are social patterns is all there is to social construction. I shall call this view *the grounding view of social construction* (henceforth, simply *the grounding view*).

In this paper, focusing on two recent articulations of the grounding view by Jonathan Schaffer (2017; 2019) and Aaron Griffith (2018a; 2018b; 2020), I argue that the view has important drawbacks. The grounding view comes in two versions: a 'primitive' version (due to both Schaffer and Griffith) and a 'non-primitive' one (due to Griffith only). After introducing the grounding view in its primitive version (Section 2), I will present a series of problems it faces (Section 3). I will then consider the non-primitive grounding view as a possible way of solving some of these problems but will argue that it has some implausible commitments (Section 4). I will conclude that if we want to illuminate the metaphysics of social construction, we must explore other alternatives (Section 5).

2. The grounding view of social construction

In a series of articles, Schaffer and Griffith have proposed and defended the grounding view (Griffith 2018a; 2018b; 2020; Schaffer 2017; 2019). Schaffer and Griffith argue that the ontological dependence relation that is appealed to in discussions of social construction is the grounding relation. More interestingly, they come very close to suggesting that grounding is all there is to social construction, at least insofar as constructionism is understood as a constitutive, rather than a causal thesis.

In defending the grounding view, Schaffer says that.

to be socially constructed is to be grounded in distinctive social patterns. This claim clarifies the underlying metaphysics of social construction by integrating it into a general metaphysics of grounding. And it accounts for inferences from being socially constructed to being non-fundamental, and being generated by, dependent upon, and explicable on the basis of social patterns, since the grounded generally is non-fundamental, and is generated by, dependent upon, and explicable on the basis of its grounds. (2017, 2450, emphasis original)

This is an explicit statement of the grounding view, and it includes a somewhat implicit argument for it. (I shall make the argument more explicit shortly.) A similar statement of the view can be found in Griffith:

[U]nderstanding social construction in terms of grounding allows US to articulate dependence structures within social reality in such a way that constructed items are real but also derivative of other aspects of social reality. (2018a, 393, emphasis added)

Evidently, ‘grounding’ in these quotes is used in its technical sense where it refers to some primitive, generic, non-causal dependence or determination relation that is posited to underwrite various ‘in virtue of’ claims.² More generally in metaphysics, proponents of what we might call ‘the grounding framework’ suggest that most, if not all, claims of non-causal dependence (or determination) of one thing on (or by) another thing should ultimately be understood as grounding claims.³ For example, the claim that {Socrates} exists in virtue of the existence of Socrates is understood as the claim that {Socrates} is grounded in Socrates. (Call this singleton grounding.) Similarly, the idea that a

²See Schaffer (2009), Rosen (2010), Bennett (2011), Audi (2012) and Griffith (2014) for discussions of grounding in this generic sense.

³Sometimes grounding is thought to relate *facts* only; sometimes a more liberal approach to the categories of the *relata* of grounding (e.g., *properties, objects*) is adopted. In this paper, I will simply sidestep these issues. For what it is worth, I believe that, in all relevant cases, for any non-fact *relatum* (e.g., a property *P* or an object *o*), a corresponding fact can be construed (e.g., the fact that *P* is instantiated, the fact that *o* exists).

conjunction (P&Q) is true in virtue of the truth of its conjuncts (P and Q) is understood as the claim that a conjunction is grounded in its conjuncts. (Call this conjunction grounding.) Some argue that we should understand physicalism about the mind as the view that the mental is grounded in the physical; and likewise, we might think of naturalism in metaethics as the view that normative facts are grounded in natural facts. (Call these physical grounding and normative grounding).

According to the grounding view, social construction is an instance of grounding in the same way that singleton grounding, conjunction grounding, physical grounding, and normative grounding are. While this is implicit in Schaffer's claim that the grounding view integrates social construction 'into a general metaphysics of grounding' (2017, 2450), it is explicitly stated in Griffith's suggestion that 'what distinguishes social construction from other forms of ... grounding is not the way in which social constructs are grounded, but their grounds' (2018a, 395). So, the relation of socially constructing something is simply the grounding relation where the grounded *relata* are social constructs and the grounding *relata* are whatever it is that constructs them.

As for the implicit argument in the quoted texts above, we see Schaffer's remark that grounded entities are non-fundamental, and Griffith's remark that they are derivative. For the purposes of this paper, we can take these claims to be equivalent. The fact that grounded entities are non-fundamental, or derivative, is a core thesis in the grounding framework, and this is an important observation for reconstructing Schaffer's and Griffith's implicit argument. We may call this *the argument from non-fundamentality*:

- (1) Socially constructed entities are non-fundamental/derivative relative to what they are constructed out of.
- (2) The grounded more generally is non-fundamental/derivative relative to its grounds.
- (3) Thus, we should take social construction to be an instance of grounding.⁴

Before examining the grounding view, let me highlight a distinction between what I shall call 'primitive' and 'non-primitive' grounding (which will play an important role in Section 4.) So far, I have presented

⁴I am presenting this argument as an abductive one. It could easily be turned into a (valid) deductive argument with additional premises the truth of which do not concern me here.

grounding as a primitive – i.e. unanalysed – dependence or determination relation, which is in line with how Schaffer and Griffith explicate their views, as quoted above. But as Wilson (2014) maintains, those who appeal to a primitive grounding relation in articulating substantial metaphysical theses face an explanatory challenge. In Wilson’s terms, ‘big-G Grounding’ claims (where this term refers to primitive grounding) are often not helpful or explanatory, and in any case, they say no more than specific ‘small-g grounding’ claims. As examples of small-g grounding relations, Wilson lists *token-identity*, *realization*, the *determinable/determinate relation*, the *mereological part-whole relation*, and many others, and argues that while we have gained a wealth of insight into metaphysical questions thanks to inquiry into the nature of these relations, the work on big-G Grounding adds nothing to these insights. Schaffer and Griffith are familiar with Wilson’s objections to primitive grounding,⁵ and Griffith goes beyond claims of primitive grounding by offering a non-primitive (small-g) grounding account of social construction as well. I will assess Griffith’s non-primitive grounding view in Section 4. Until then, my focus will be on the primitive grounding view.

3. Problems for primitive grounding

3.1. The distinctiveness qualification (and its problems)

Recall that, according to Schaffer, ‘to be socially constructed is to be grounded in *distinctive* social patterns’ (2017, 2450, emphasis added). Schaffer doesn’t say that to be grounded in a social pattern is sufficient for being socially constructed. Rather, one must be grounded in a *distinctive* social pattern to be socially constructed. The reason behind this distinctiveness qualification becomes clear in the following remarks:

[T]he ‘distinctive’ in [statement of the grounding view] is intended as a placeholder, since not every way of being grounded in society qualifies as being ‘socially constructed’ in the way in which the latter term is usually used. For instance, the set {American society} is presumably grounded in American society, but that hardly looks like a case of social construction as usually understood. (2017, 2454–2455)

Thus, by adding the distinctiveness qualification, Schaffer is attempting to pre-empt objections like the following. Take some social pattern, SP_1 ; take its singleton: $\{SP_1\}$. Given singleton grounding, $\{SP_1\}$ is grounded in some

⁵See Schaffer (2016), Griffith (2018a; 2018b; 2020).

social pattern, namely SP_1 , but $\{SP_1\}$ doesn't look like a social construct. You might think that singletons are social constructs – perhaps you think that set theory is a social construct – but clearly, this is not the sense in which constructionism takes race or gender to be a social construct. Similarly, take two social patterns, SP_1 and SP_2 , and conjoin them: $[SP_1 \ \& \ SP_2]$. Again, given conjunction grounding, $[SP_1 \ \& \ SP_2]$ is grounded in social patterns. But for the same reason $\{SP_1\}$ is not a social construct in the intended sense, $[SP_1 \ \& \ SP_2]$ is not a social construct either. The distinctiveness qualification is meant to solve this problem because although $\{SP_1\}$ and $[SP_1 \ \& \ SP_2]$ are grounded in social patterns, they are not grounded in distinctive social patterns.⁶

Let's grant, for the moment, that the distinctiveness qualification solves this problem. But if this is the case, grounding in this so-called grounding explanation is explanatorily idle. If Schaffer is right, the explanation here seems to be done by whatever the word 'distinctive' is a placeholder for. Therefore, grounding isn't doing the job that it is advertised to do, namely explaining social construction. Rather, something distinctive about social patterns is doing the job of explaining social construction.

I should clarify that I am not suggesting that grounding is not an explanatory relation.⁷ Grounding is presumably explanatory *at least* in the following senses. First, if A grounds B, there is a robust metaphysical explanation of B in terms of A. In fact, if B is fully grounded in A, then there is a robust metaphysical explanation of B that involves nothing other than A.⁸ Second, the fact that A grounds B also offers an explanation of the fact that B is non-fundamental or derivative (relative to A). I do not mean to dispute these. My point about the explanatory idleness of grounding here targets the role of grounding in explaining the fact that some grounded entity is a social construct. If we are merely trying to explain the fact that a given kind K that we are interested in is non-fundamental/derivative and has a metaphysical explanation in terms of some other kind K*, then that K is grounded in K* is a perfect explanation of this. But when we are interested in whether K is socially constructed,

⁶In a recent article, Pagano (2021) makes similar comments and illustrates this point by further examples. Pagano thinks, plausibly in my view, that these points generalise even further. For example, according to Schaffer's formulation of the view, even the fact that [Something exists] turns out to be a social construct if it is grounded in the existence of some social pattern.

⁷Thanks to an anonymous referee for helping me clarify the points in this paragraph.

⁸Grounding is similar to causation in this respect: if A is a cause of B, this entails that there is a causal explanation of B that involves A. In fact, if A is a sufficient cause of B, there is a causal explanation of B that involves nothing other than A.

Schaffer's distinctiveness qualification implies that the explanation of this is due to whatever the word 'distinctive' is a placeholder for.

Moreover, it is not clear to me that the distinctiveness qualification solves the problem we are considering. Looking at how Schaffer is using the word 'distinctive' in these remarks, there are two ways we can read the distinctiveness qualification. On the one hand, 'distinctive' may be read as qualifying social patterns. On the other hand, it may be read as qualifying the way social constructs are grounded. Let's consider both readings.

Suppose the former is the intended reading: distinctiveness is a qualification of the social patterns. We have social construction when we have distinctive social grounds. This should perhaps be the default reading, implied by Schaffer's very statement of the view: to be socially constructed is to be grounded in *distinctive social patterns* (2017, 2450). However, if this is the intended reading, the problem I have illustrated, which is due to the problem cases of singletons and conjunctions, is not solved. To see why, take a distinctive social pattern, DSP_1 , and its singleton, $\{DSP_1\}$. The latter is grounded in the former (hence it is grounded in a distinctive social pattern), but it is not a social construct. Likewise, take two distinctive social patterns: DSP_1 and DSP_2 , and take their conjunction: $[DSP_1 \ \& \ DSP_2]$, which is grounded in its conjuncts (hence is grounded in distinctive social patterns), but is not a social construct.

Suppose the latter reading is the intended one: distinctiveness is a qualification of the way social constructs are grounded. We have social construction when we have a social pattern distinctively grounding something. This reading seems to be supported by Schaffer's remarks that 'not every way of being grounded in society qualifies as being 'socially constructed'' (2017, 2454, emphasis added). I think this is a better interpretation of the distinctiveness qualification as a way of dealing with the problem cases of singletons and conjunctions. However, there are two main problems with this reading. First, this reading reinforces the explanatory idleness objection (i.e. something distinctive about social construction, not something about grounding, is explaining social construction). Second, this way of reading the distinctiveness qualification is inconsistent with the claim that social construction is grounding in the same way that singleton grounding, conjunction grounding, physical grounding, and normative grounding are. After all, according to the grounding view, what is distinctive about

social construction is not the way in which social constructs are grounded; it is what grounds them (Griffith 2018a, 395).⁹

Is this point about explanatory idleness a problem for the grounding view of social construction only, or is it a problem for those who theorise about grounding more generally? After all, the sorts of cases I have presented are not specific to social patterns. Although {Socrates} is grounded in Socrates, there may be other things that are grounded in Socrates. One might think that the fact that Socrates exists, Socrates's haecceity, his figure, his wit, his smile, and many other things are also grounded in Socrates alone. So, being grounded in Socrates is not sufficient for being {Socrates}. Similarly, think about the suggestion that normative facts are grounded in natural facts. Presumably, some natural fact which grounds some normative fact also grounds many other facts, some of which are not normative facts. So, being grounded in a natural fact is not sufficient for being a normative fact.

I don't think that my presentation of the explanatory idleness objection extends to singleton grounding and normative grounding, or the grounding framework more generally.¹⁰ Note that the claim that {Socrates} is grounded in Socrates is not intended as an explanation of *what it is to be a singleton*. If it were, it would have been a very bad explanation. Likewise, even if naturalism in metaethics is true and the corollary claim of normative grounding holds, this is *not* intended as an account of *what it is to be a normative fact*. Otherwise, it would have been a very poor account. But the grounding view that is the focus of this paper is intended as an explanation of *what it is to be a social construct*: to be a social construct is to be grounded in distinctive social patterns.

3.2. The role of non-social entities in social construction

The grounding view takes the grounding *relata* to be social entities. However, in some relevant cases of social construction, social construction involves taking some *non-social* entity and making a social entity out of it. In other words, sometimes, *socially constructed entities are*

⁹Pagano (see note 6 above) is also unsatisfied with Schaffer's pre-emptive reply, but for apparently different reasons. One concern is that the placeholder 'distinctive' requires a 'precisification' that can *explain* why any further putative counterexample is not actually a counterexample. Another problem is that Pagano doesn't think that the placeholder 'distinctive' deals with disjunction and existential generalization cases. Pagano's own treatment of what social construction is beyond the scope of this paper, but see Pagano (2021) for further discussion.

¹⁰Recall that my point is not that grounding is not an explanatory idle relation. When there is a grounding relation, there is a metaphysical explanation (in the same way that when there is a causal relation, there is a causal explanation).

constructed out of non-social entities. If the social construction relation is the same relation as grounding and socially constructed entities are the grounded entities, then we should expect their grounds to be non-social entities, at least in some cases. So, there is reason to think that the grounding view focuses on the wrong kind of *relata* when explaining social construction in terms of grounding.

What do I mean when I say that social construction takes a non-social entity and makes a social one out of it? The idea is that, at least according to some constructionist accounts about race and gender, although race and gender are not biological categories, they are constructed out of biological categories. We have already seen Haslanger-style constructionist view that the property of *being a woman* is something that is constructed out of the property of *being female*, in a social context. In these cases, social construction takes something non-social, i.e. biological sex (real or imagined), and turns it into something social, i.e. gender. Constructionists' remarks on race ring similar bells. Consider Taylor's (2022) constructionist account of race as society's assignment of generic meaning to *human bodies* and *blood lines* (where 'human bodies' is a shorthand for a cluster of observable physical traits, and 'blood lines' refers to ancestral links to geographical locations). Importantly for my argument here, these observable physical traits and ancestral links to geographical locations are natural, non-social properties. Thus, once again, we see the idea that social construction takes something non-social, i.e. human bodies and blood lines (real or imagined), and makes a social entity out of it, i.e. race. Appealing to another constructionist account, namely Ásta's (2018) *conferralism*, we can capture these ideas more generally: these social kind properties are conferred on us, and we become members of the social kinds that these properties correspond to through such conferral. These properties are sometimes conferred on us on the assumption that we have certain biological properties, and these are non-social properties. We can say that while these social properties are conferred on us, those who confer these properties on us are sometimes taking themselves to be 'tracking' non-social properties.¹¹

Of course, proponents of the grounding view can acknowledge these points. They do not deny that non-social entities play important roles in the construction of a social entity. In fact, this is compatible with Griffith's (2018a, 396) diagnosis of the dispute between a biological

¹¹Note that the entities that are tracked may sometimes, or in some accounts, be only *apparently* non-social because it is possible that the base-level entity we take ourselves to be tracking might be a socially constructed entity too.

realist and a constructionist: while the biological realist believes that it is a person's *having female autonomy* that fully grounds that person's *being a woman*, the constructionist thinks that this cannot be true as *having female autonomy* is merely a *proper part* of the ground (though of course, not necessarily an essential part), suggesting that social elements must be the other part of the ground. Although this is a point that proponents of the grounding view can acknowledge, this goes to show that understanding social construction in terms of grounding requires a more careful consideration of what counts as the base-level entity in social construction. This is possible only through a more fine-grained relation than a two-place grounding relation between a social construct (i.e. the grounded *relatum*) and a social pattern (i.e. the grounding *relatum*). As we shall see, Griffith's non-primitive grounding view works towards addressing this worry, though insufficiently in my view. (I reserve my comments on this view for Section 4.)

3.3. *The non-derivativeness of some social constructs*

Another problem for the grounding view is that it fails to acknowledge that some socially constructed kinds may be fundamental, or non-derivative, relative to their bases. There are two ways this problem can be presented: one that builds on my previous point (in Section 3.2) that the grounding view focuses on the wrong kind of *relata*, and one that is independent of this point. Let me present each of these versions.

Suppose I am right in suggesting that socially constructed kinds are sometimes constructed out of non-social entities. That is, some social constructs have non-social entities as their grounds. But if this is the case, then it is not true that social constructs are *derivative* over entities that they are constructed out of. After all, it is a reasonable interpretation of constructionism that gender is something over and above biological sex and race is something over and above skin colour or ancestral links to geographical locations. So, socially constructed kinds are not always derivative over what they are constructed out of. But this directly contradicts a central claim of the grounding view: socially constructed entities are derivative over what they are constructed out of. Recall that this claim is also premise (1) in Schaffer's (and Griffith's) argument from non-fundamentality (see Section 2 above).

I think the same problem regarding the non-derivativeness of some social constructs can be raised even if we take the base-level entities to be social patterns (rather than non-social entities). To make this point, it

will be helpful to use an idea from Hacking (1999) about social construction. This is the idea of ‘looping effects’ of socially constructed human kinds. Certain kinds are described as having interactive looping effects, where an entity’s classification as falling under a kind *K* may affect the way that entity behaves (or is treated), and the resulting behaviour (or treatment) may change our understanding of what it is to be a *K* (hence changing *K* itself). As Hacking puts it, this is applicable to many human kinds: ‘[c]lassification of people and their actions affects the people and their actions, which in turn affects our knowledge about them and classification of them’ (1988, 55).

The phenomenon of looping effects of socially constructed human kinds is relevant to the problem of non-derivativeness in the following way. If this phenomenon occurs, we can take social construction to give us examples of a particularly interesting form of *downward causation*, i.e. the kind of causal relation whereby some higher-level property has some causal influence on entities that belong to lower levels of reality. According to a standard interpretation of emergentism in philosophy of mind, emergentists are committed to a doctrine of downward causation in their explanation of mental-to-physical causation (see McLaughlin 1992), and this phenomenon is sometimes understood to imply that the mental is something ‘over and above’ the physical, which entails that the mental is *not* derivative over the physical (see Wilson 2015). In the context of socially constructed human kinds, a similar claim can be attributed to constructionism. That is, if in other domains (e.g. philosophy of mind), downward causation (in the aforementioned sense) is taken to imply the non-derivativeness of the entity with downwards causal efficacy, it is possible to interpret this phenomenon in social ontology to imply a similar claim about the non-derivativeness of social kinds with downwards causal efficacy. I take it that this is what Barnes has in mind when she says that, on Haslanger’s view, ‘although genders exist in virtue of human thought and behavior, they are something over and above human thought and behavior’ (2016, 2432). She continues this point by explicitly bringing up the concept of *emergence*:

[In Haslanger’s view,] individuals collectively interact to form a complex system. And once that system gets complex enough, properties of that system *emerge* which aren’t explainable simply via reference to the individuals, and which have causal influence on the behavior of those individual. (2016, 2424, emphasis added)¹²

¹²Elsewhere, Barnes (2012) explicitly says that emergent entities are non-derivative entities that depend on other entities.

Thus, the grounding view faces a problem of non-derivativeness regardless of what we should think about my previous point in Section 3.2. The grounding view requires – and its proponents explicitly argue – that social constructs are derivative relative to what they are constructed out of, but a closer inspection reveals that there is room for non-derivative social constructs in a constructionist framework.

4. Griffith's non-primitive grounding view

More recently, Griffith (2018b, 2020) has proposed a non-primitive account of grounding to supplement his (primitive) grounding view of social construction. In his discussions of the non-primitive grounding view, Griffith explicitly addresses Wilson's (2014) critique of (primitive) big-G Grounding and agrees with her that a (non-primitive) small-g grounding account is needed to supplement big-G Grounding claims.¹³ In the context of social construction, Griffith takes the operative small-g grounding relation that can meet Wilson's explanatory challenge to be the *realization* relation. (Recall that realization is one of the relations that Wilson considers to be helpful as a small-g grounding relation.) As Griffith explains, 'for a kind K to be realized by a property P is for the instantiation of P to 'bring about' the instantiation of K by P's being a way of being a K' (2018b, 245; see also Baysan 2015). We are familiar with the realization relation from non-reductive physicalism in philosophy of mind according to which mental properties (e.g. *being in pain*) are not identical to physical properties (e.g. *having C-fibres firing*), but are realized by them. Relatedly, there is the associated *multiple realizability* thesis that mental properties are realized or realizable by different physical properties in different species, organisms, or within the same organism at different points in its lifespan. While there are competing accounts of what it is for a property to realize some other property, Griffith subscribes to what is known as *the subset view* of realization, which happens to be defended by Wilson (among others).¹⁴

According to the subset view, for a property P to realize a property Q, the causal powers that Q confers on its bearers must be a proper subset of the causal powers that P confers on its bearers. So, if *being in pain* is realized by *having C-fibres firing*, then the causal powers of *being in pain* are

¹³That said, he disagrees with Wilson on the uselessness of big-G Grounding. In the context of social construction, he argues that big-G grounding is required to explain the direction of fundamentality: big-G grounded entities are less fundamental than their grounds.

¹⁴See Wilson (1999; 2011; 2015), Baysan (2016), Clapp (2001), Shoemaker (2001, 2007).

among the causal powers of *having C-fibres firing*, but the latter has causal powers other than those of the former. Applied to social kinds/properties, Griffith's version of the subset view implies the following:

Realization-Social Kinds: 'Properties $P_1, \dots, P_n$ realize a social kind K only if the social powers bestowed by K are a (non-empty) proper subset of the powers (social or otherwise) bestowed by $P_1, \dots, P_n$.' (Griffith 2018b, 247)

By 'social powers', Griffith means the kind of dispositions the existence of which depends partially on social structures (Griffith 2018b; see also 2020, 1926). Social powers include causal powers to 'bring about certain effects as by-products of one's social position' (ibid.), such as the power to cause some social change by being a political leader, and 'normative' powers such as rights and obligations, for example the right to vote and the obligation to pay tax.¹⁵ As we shall see shortly, Griffith's particular example of a normative social power is the right to make use of certain affirmative action programmes (2020, 1927).

Applying this general account of realization of social kinds to races, Griffith proposes the following:

Realization-Race: 'Properties $P_1, \dots, P_n$ realize race R only if the social powers bestowed by R are a (non-empty) proper subset of the powers (social or otherwise) bestowed by $P_1, \dots, P_n$.' (Griffith 2020, notation modified).

Griffith illustrates this idea with an example:

[T]he power to make use of certain affirmative action programs in America is a ... social power of *being Black* ... [T]his power is a member of the set of powers bestowed by the realizers for *being Black*. Among these realizers is, suppose, *having skin color c associated with ... African ancestry*. Having this and other properties in certain contexts bestows upon a person the power to make use of the program. (Griffith 2020)

On Griffith's view, since properties like *having skin colour c* are among the realizers of *being Black*, they contribute the social power to make use of certain affirmative action programmes in America to the overall social power profile of the property of *being Black*. Moreover, recall that, on the subset view, the causal powers of a realized property are only a *proper* subset of the causal powers of the realizing property/properties. So, realizer properties confer on their bearers powers that are not included in the power profile of the realized property. Griffith illustrates

¹⁵Although in ordinary language it makes little sense to think of the obligation to pay tax as a 'power', here the term 'power' is used in the inclusive sense, covering all sorts of dispositions.

this point by expanding on the same example: the realizer property *having skin colour c* also.

bestows on its bearer a certain power to protect the skin from the sun's damaging UV rays. Despite being a power bestowed by a realizer of *being Black*, e.g. *having skin color c*, it is not among the powers bestowed by *being Black* itself. After all, a lighter-skinned person who lacks this power may still be Black. (Griffith 2020)

Griffith argues that, in addition to explaining the non-fundamentality/derivativeness of the socially constructed (simply by virtue of being a grounding account), his subset account of realization explains the following features of socially constructed kinds: (1) the multiple realizability of social kinds; (2) the causal relevance of social kinds; (3) the context sensitivity of social kinds. In the remainder of this section, I will assess the merits of these ideas and ultimately conclude that Griffith's non-primitive grounding view lacks plausibility in some key parts.

4.1. Multiple realization

Griffith correctly points out that socially constructed kinds are typically multiply realizable (2020, 1927–1928). For example, there are many ways of *being Black*. No given specific bodily feature, such as a specific skin colour is necessary for being members of this kind. This is a prominent constructionist idea; for example, on Mills' view, *being white* has very little to do with colour: 'in a parallel universe, [Whiteness] could have been Yellowness, Redness, Brownness, or Blackness. ... Whiteness is not really a color at all, but a set of power relations' (1997, 127, emphasis removed). In other words, it is both physically variable and historically contingent which bodily features underlie which racial kinds.

But from the physical variability and the historical contingency of the physical properties that underlie *being Black*, it doesn't follow that it must be *the realization relation* that relates *being Black* to the physical properties that underlie it. Of course, in one sense, it is a truism that if something is multiply *realized*, then it is realized. But this is a truism only if 'realized' in 'multiply realized' is not used in its technical sense. The essence of the multiple realizability thesis (in general) is that *many higher-level kinds are such that there are many diverse ways of bringing about their instances*. For the multiple realizability thesis to hold in this general sense, this bringing-about relation does not have to be the realization relation (or any other

relation whereby the brought-about property is non-fundamental relative to base-level properties). For example, emergent properties, if there are any, are also multiply realizable in this more generic sense even though emergent properties are *not* realized by their emergence bases. This is certainly true if ‘realization’ is understood along the lines of the subset view: while realized properties inherit their causal powers from their realizers, emergent properties have ‘novel’ causal powers relative to the base-level properties they emerge from (see Wilson 2015, 2021). Therefore, although Griffith has interesting things to say about why socially constructed human kinds are not reducible to biological properties that seem to underlie them, his observations fall short of supporting his non-primitive grounding view.

4.2. Causal relevance

As Griffith notes, ‘race is real for the constructionist because it is causally efficacious, it figures in scientific inductions, inferences, predictions, and explanations’ (2020, 1920). Having explained social construction in terms of realization, and furthermore explained realization in terms of a relationship between the causal powers that individuate the realized and realizer properties, Griffith argues that his account can easily accommodate the causal relevance of social constructs.¹⁶

I don’t think that the causal relevance of social constructs supports Griffith’s non-primitive grounding view. Suppose that the grounding view is false because socially constructed human kinds are non-derivate kinds (as suggested above, in Section 3.3). Under this supposition, socially constructed kinds can still be shown to be causally efficacious in ways that are very similar to how Griffith sees these matters. After all, the idea that these kinds have causal efficacy is presupposed in Griffith’s account, as he understands properties like *being Black* to be individuated partially in terms of their powers. From this presupposition alone, we cannot settle if these powers are a *subset* of the powers of the base-level properties in question or, alternatively if they are novel powers that are not had by the base-level properties in question. Considering Barnes’s comments in

¹⁶In several places, Griffith gives the impression that the subset view takes kinds/properties to be ‘individuated’ by their causal powers (Griffith 2018b, 248; 2020, 1929–1930). It is worth noting that this is not exactly true as far as other proponents of the subset view are concerned. Wilson is very explicit that she is not committed to the view that subset-realized properties are individuated by the causal powers that they confer on their bearers (see Wilson 2011, 127; 2015, 348; 2021, 32–33, 45). Even Shoemaker, who actually thinks that properties are individuated by causal powers, thinks that the subset view can be defended independently of this commitment (2007, 142).

her discussion of Haslanger's view (see Section 3.3 above), it is possible to read constructionism as entailing that socially constructed kind properties have causal powers that are *not* inherited from the base-level properties they depend on. On this interpretation, socially constructed properties may still be partially individuated by their causal powers – like Griffith assumes – but have causal powers over and above the causal powers of the base-level properties they depend on – contrary to what Griffith thinks.

Moreover, there is something to be said that the subset claim in the case of *Realization-Race* is implausible. The example that Griffith uses to illustrate *Realization-Race* will be helpful for highlighting this (2020, 1927). Recall that Griffith suggests, for illustrative purposes, that the power to make use of affirmative action programmes is a power of *being Black* in certain contexts. Let's say that *being Black* is realized, on a particular occasion, by the property of *having skin colour c*. Griffith says that the power to make use of affirmative action programmes is a power that is conferred by *having skin colour c*. That is, *being Black* inherits this power from *having skin colour c*. However, as I have argued above, the construction of race, or a racial kind property involves turning a non-social entity (in this case, the property of *having skin colour c*) into a social entity (in this case, *being Black*), and arguably, this requires the social entity (*being Black*) to *acquire* social powers that the non-social entity (*having skin colour c*) lacks. We can borrow an idea from Searle's (1995) seminal work on construction of social reality to explain this phenomenon more generally. As Searle notes:

... humans, through collective intentionality, impose functions on phenomena where the function *cannot be achieved solely in virtue of physics and chemistry* but requires continued human cooperation in the specific forms of recognition, acceptance, and acknowledgment of a new status to which a function is assigned. (Searle 1995, 40, emphasis added)

As Searle notes, 'in general the creation of a status-function is a matter of conferring some *new power*. There would not be much point to imposing the status-function ... if it did not confer some new power' (Searle 1995, 95, emphasis added). Although Searle doesn't discuss race in these remarks, this is an idea that constructionists about race can and should endorse: conferring the property of *being Black* on a person endows that person with powers that 'physics and chemistry' alone cannot do. Thus, the powers of *being Black* must be over and above the powers of the non-social properties that bring about *being Black*, which contradicts Griffith's subset account of social construction.

When suggesting that some socially constructed property confers on its bearers some novel powers, or when saying that (some) social powers of *being Black* are novel powers, I am not committing social constructionism to some mysterious metaphysical claim.¹⁷ Let's consider Griffith's own example again: the power to make use of affirmative action programmes in the US is a social power of *being Black*, let's suppose. My suggestion that this power is a novel power is simply the claim that it is not appropriate to attribute this power to the relevant base-level properties, such as *having skin colour c*. This novelty claim explains how *being Black* is something over and above *having skin colour c*.¹⁸ This is a power that exists only thanks to certain background social conditions, such as certain historical and continued injustices of racism and current initiatives to repair these, which, in my view makes this a power that can only be conferred by a social property. To appreciate this point, simply observe the fact that a world in which there are no initiatives to repair historical injustices would be a world in which the property of *having skin colour c* would be correlated with no such social power. After all, there cannot be a power to make use of affirmative action programmes if there isn't such a thing as an affirmative action programme in the first place.

The fact that properties have their powers often *conditionally* on being co-instantiated with other properties (Shoemaker 1980) may somewhat obscure this last point, so allow me to clarify this further. One might think the power to make use of affirmative action programmes is a power of *having skin colour c*, but only *conditionally* on there being such things as affirmative action programmes (among other things).¹⁹ Now, while this approach would support the claim that this power is indeed a power of *having skin colour c* (because it is a conditional power of *having skin colour c*), it has the undesirable consequence of entailing that it is also a power of pretty much any property a person could instantiate. As it happens, there are no affirmative action

¹⁷Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

¹⁸Jessica Wilson (1999; 2005; 2011), who is one of the main proponents of the subset view, is explicit that the obtaining of a subset relation between powers would ensure that a higher-level property is nothing over and above the base-level property it depends on. Similarly, the possession of novel powers by some higher-level property ensures that it is something over and above the base-level properties it depends on. I would like to thank an anonymous referee for encouraging me to clarify this point.

¹⁹Note that this is not the claim that *exercising* this power is conditional on some facts obtaining, which is a claim that is true of all powers insofar as they are understood as dispositional properties. For example, a fragile glass will not exhibit its fragility unless it is struck or dropped on a hard surface. Likewise, someone who has the power to make use of a certain affirmative action programme will not exercise this power unless they want to (let's assume) or they meet certain requirements.

programmes for people who are six-foot tall. While there *could* have been such programmes, this surely does not imply that the power to make use of affirmative action programmes *actually* is a power of *being six-foot tall*. Only in a metaphysically uninteresting sense of what it is for a property to have a power would this be true. I take the realist aspect of constructionism to make the metaphysically more interesting claim that certain powers actually exist because of how things are socially.

4.3. Contextual sensitivity

As Root suggests: '[s]ome men who are black in New Orleans ... would be white in Brazil today. Socrates had no race in ancient Athens, though he would be a white man in Minnesota' (2000, 631–632). Or, consider the following scenario from Ásta (2018):

[Y]ou work as a coder in San Francisco. You go into your office where you are one of the guys. After work, you tag along with some friends at work to a bar. It is a very heteronormative space, and you are neither a guy nor a gal. You are an other. You walk up the street to another bar where you are a butch and expected to buy drinks for the femmes. Then you head home to your grandmother's eightieth birthday party, where you help out in the kitchen with the other women while the men smoke cigars. (Ásta 2018, 73)

These give us examples of the contextual sensitivity of race, gender, and sexuality. Griffith correctly points out that 'the features in virtue of which one belongs to a certain social kind K in one context may not be sufficient to qualify one as a member of K in another context' (Griffith 2018b, 249). Ideally, a plausible theory of social construction should explain the phenomenon of contextual sensitivity. Having proposed that social construction is realization, Griffith uses some conceptual tools that are developed in discussions of the realization relation to explain the contextual sensitivity of social kinds.

The relevant tools in question are the concepts of *core* and *total* realization (Shoemaker 1981). Suppose that *being in pain* is realized by *having C-fibres firing*. Does it follow from this that, necessarily, if X instantiates *having C-fibres firing*, X thereby instantiates *being in pain*? Shoemaker thinks not, as there can be creatures where the firing of C-fibres brings about 'desire to fly to the moon' (Shoemaker 1981, 266), rather than a painful experience. Considering examples of this kind, Shoemaker offers a distinction between the core realization of a mental property and its total realization. We can see the instantiation of a total realizer as a metaphysically sufficient condition for the instantiation of a realized property

and the instantiation of a core realizer as a weaker condition. This is because a total realizer includes, in addition to the core realizer, some background conditions that specify what kind of a system the core realizer is instantiated as part of, and what things exist in the relevant environment. Going back to the pain example, while *having C-fibres firing* might be seen as a core realizer of *being in pain*, a total realizer for *being in pain* will have to include certain background conditions, including facts about what kind of a system the relevant properties are instantiated by as well as laws of nature (presuming that these laws are contingent).²⁰

Griffith's proposal is to use the distinction between total and core realization to make sense of the context sensitivity of socially constructed kinds. Again, let's consider his example of *being Black*. According to Griffith, *having skin colour c* is among the core realizers of *being Black*, but *having skin colour c* is not metaphysically sufficient for any bearer of this property to instantiate *being Black*. As Griffith notes, 'these properties only realize *being Black* in certain social contexts. We get the total realization of *being Black* by including the operative social structure' (Griffith 2018b, 249).

Although I agree with Griffith here, I don't think this shows that socially constructed kinds are *realized* in the technical sense of the term 'realized'. The total/core distinction can be maintained even if socially constructed kinds are not realized by the base-level properties they depend on. To understand this point, suppose again that socially constructed kinds are emergent properties (hence they are not realized by the base-level properties that serve as their emergence bases). According to a widely held view about emergent properties, if a property Q is emergent from some base-level property P, it does not follow that P is metaphysically sufficient for Q.²¹ In fact, on the standard conception, it is a defining feature of emergence that emergent properties do not metaphysically supervene on their base-level properties, which entails that emergent properties are not metaphysically necessitated by their base-level properties. Instead, emergent properties are supposed to supervene on their base-level properties *and certain background conditions*, where such background conditions must include special laws that explain the emergence of the property in question. In the case of the mind-body problem, emergentists appeal to fundamental psycho-physical laws that are stipulated

²⁰As it happens, Shoemaker doesn't think that such laws are contingent (see Shoemaker 1980), but his account of the distinction between core and total realization stands independently of his views about laws.

²¹See van Cleve (1990), Noordhof (2003), Chalmers (2006).

to explain the correlation of consciousness with certain neural properties.²²

The mere possibility of emergentism about socially constructed kinds is a problem for Griffith's argument here because the contextual sensitivity of race and gender can be explained by this sort of emergentism in exactly the same way it is explained by Griffith. That is, to explain the instantiation of a socially constructed kind property, citing the base-level properties will not be sufficient: certain background conditions, such as 'the relevant economic, political, historical, ideological, etc. features of the context' (Griffith 2018b, 249) will have to be cited as well. But this is to say that the total/core distinction that Griffith proposes is available to those who reject the grounding view, therefore these considerations do not provide any special support for Griffith's non-primitive grounding view.

All in all, although Griffith's non-primitive grounding view is an interesting development over its primitive counterpart, ultimately it is not an overwhelmingly plausible account of social construction. It makes positive progress over the primitive view in offering a detailed analysis of how race and gender are socially constructed, and I think, unlike the original view, it gets the *relata* of the construction relation right. However, when it comes to questions about non-derivativeness, it inherits its primitive counterpart's problematic features: it implies that social constructs must be derivative over the base-level properties that they are constructed out of. What is problematic about this feature becomes especially clear in Griffith's remarks about social powers. In these remarks, we see the suggestion that the powers that we attribute to a social construct turn out to be fully inherited from non-social, base-level properties. On the face of it, this is an implausible result, and at any rate, it is incompatible with certain claims we find in the works of constructionist philosophers.

5. Conclusion

The grounding view of social construction holds that to be socially constructed is to be grounded in parts of social reality. The view comes in two versions: a primitive one and a non-primitive one. While the primitive grounding view (defended by Schaffer and Griffith) takes grounding to be an unanalysed, generic, non-causal dependence or determination

²²See Broad (1925), Chalmers (2006).

relation, the non-primitive grounding view (developed more recently by Griffith) offers a detailed analysis of the kind of grounding relation in question. By considering ideas from some constructionist philosophers that Schaffer and Griffith cite in support of their accounts, I have suggested that grounding – both in generic, primitive sense and in Griffith’s non-primitive sense – is not suitable for this job. While there may be room for certain grounding claims in social ontology, we ought to reject the view that to be socially constructed is to be grounded in social reality.²³

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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²³I am grateful to an anonymous referee of this journal and audiences in Bristol and Oxford for their helpful comments, as well as Jennifer Corns, Alex Roberts, and Jessica Wilson for discussion of related work.

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