

Q&A: HASLANGER ON RACE AND GENDER

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Conceptual vs. Descriptive vs. Analytical Methodology

“Work in the biological sciences has informed us that our practices of racial categorization don’t map neatly onto any useful biological classification; but that doesn’t settle much, if anything.” So, even though the ideas of “gender” or “race” are used very commonly in everyday life as if those are obvious, people do not have clear definitions or accepted objective meanings of the terms. But does it mean, those are political terms? —Chateldon

I think the answer to your question is to pay careful attention to Haslanger’s distinction between conceptual, descriptive, and analytical projects. (On which see the next question.) There is definitely something inherently political about any analytical project that seeks to define a concept for broader political purposes, which is what Haslanger is doing.

I want to know if I understand this right. The conceptual inquiry explores all the things we mean by race or gender when using these words in everyday conversations. The descriptive method defines the social kinds all those meanings talk about, so in a way, this method attempts to find what they really are in the world. Is then the analytical the investigation of how these concepts came to be + what do they do for us + what can they do for us? —Loreta

Yes this is basically right. Let me give you some analogies:

First, imagine that a lexicographer is writing a dictionary and is trying to come up with a definition of the word “sofa”. They propose a definition, but then they find some evidence that this definition does not capture something about how people ordinarily apply the word. For example, they find that something that often gets referred to as a sofa doesn’t count as a sofa by their definition. Since their goal is to articulate the understanding of what a sofa is that is actually out there in language-users minds, this means that they need to revise their definition. This is an example of what Haslanger calls “conceptual” inquiry. The lexicographer is trying to spell out the concepts that most people associate with a given word.

Second, imagine that a chemist is trying to figure out what gold is. The concept that most people have for gold is something like “a shiny yellowish metal that’s worth a lot of money”. But once they do some chemistry, they figure out that this definition is grouping some things that aren’t gold (like pyrite) in with the real gold. Since the chemist wants to distinguish the genuine natural kinds, they give a definition of gold that makes this distinction: gold is the element with atomic number 79. This is an example of the descriptive method: it aims to uncover things’ true nature, even when our ordinary concepts don’t do a good job of that.

Third, imagine a political philosopher who is trying to figure out what justice is. On one hand, most people either don’t even have a clear definition in their minds, or their definitions aren’t very good. (Read the Republic to see some examples of this.) On the other hand, if they try to identify which social kinds are actually out there in the society under the guise of “justice” (such as the way that

the legal system actually operates, and was designed to operate), they find something dysfunctional and far less than ideal. So what they need is a new concept of justice that neither matches up with people's concepts or with any natural or social kind that they find in the world. In particular, their definition of justice needs to be one that can help us to say what a good, just society would be like, if we created it. This is an analytical inquiry.

Also, from p48. could you explain what you think she means by this: "it is possible to view our gender and race vocabulary as, in effect, providing terminological place-holders marking space for the collective negotiation of our social identities"? - is it like saying the vocab itself makes space for the experiences of social group members to change, as attached to the identifier? — Loreta

I think her point is that sometimes we use words without any clear definition as a way of negotiating over which definition we want to use. Here's an analogy: you and I are looking at a person, and I say "now *he* is bald". You reply, "no, he is not bald, that *other* guy is bald". We're looking at the same people, and let's suppose that we can both see how many hairs they have on their head. What we're disagreeing about here is not the properties of the people we're talking about, but rather how we should use the word "bald". Philosophers usually call this "metalinguistic negotiation". Haslanger is suggesting, I think, that we sometimes have conversations like this using race and gender terms as well.

Gender vs. Sex

Haslanger gave a great argument of the criteria of what constitutes as race and gender however, with respect to gender, I thought it was very little conversation about the distinction-- if any, to what it means to be a woman and what it means to be a female. Is there a difference? She clarified what it means to be a woman, but she did not discuss if there are any fundamental differences with being a woman and being a female or being a man and being male. She also did not elaborate on the function of reproduction and its capacity to establish femaleness or womanhood, although she did include reproductive organs to establish sex. The strange irony is that the social positions within genders such as man and woman can be viewed as oppressed or oppressor, In some cultures, the mother can be seen as the dominant domestic figure, still oppressed but still holding a position of power. How does this help the argument of the oppression of women in social roles? With regards to race, I thought more emphasis should have been placed on the concept of ethnicity. Although race and ethnicity are closely related and briefly mentioned, she did not address if there were any social implications to the notion of ethnicity and if either race or ethnicity can be altered if it is based on social ideologies. Both gender and race have properties that seem to be transmutable, i.e transgender individuals or individuals that seek to change their race (Rachel Dolezal). If gender and race are socially rooted, and one could alter their sex or race to one that is viewed as superior, how does this effect how we see both? —Sheana

There's a lot going on in your question! Let me just say a few things in response:

First, I think Haslanger pretty clearly commits herself to the sex/gender distinction, and says that she is trying to elucidate the oft-quoted slogan that gender is the social meaning of sex. But Haslanger does not make many commitments about the nature of sex. She says she is open to Fausto-Sterling's position, but does not endorse it. Her focus is on gender, and her project assumes that there is a distinction between sex and gender without trying to argue for one.

Second, I think you might be right that it's an oversimplification to think that gender oppression only goes in one direction, or that one gender is always and in every way the oppressed one and the other is always and in every way the privileged one. Another reason to think carefully about this is given to us by Goldstein: part of the point of gender norms is to socialize and coerce men to be willing to commit acts of violence and potentially sacrifice their lives in war. That sounds like a form of systematic oppression to me! But that's just to say that the very same gender norms could oppress both men and women in different ways. (This is compatible with saying that the oppression of women is more severe in most contexts.)

Third, we will talk about the metaphysical implications of transgender people in Tuesday's reading. Some people have tried to draw an analogy to transracial people. For example, the philosopher Rebecca Tuvel published a paper called "In Defense of Transracialism" in 2017 ([here is a link](#)), in which she used the case of Rachel Dolezal as her main example. This turned out to be one of the most controversial philosophy papers published in the last couple of decades, with a large group of philosophers calling for the paper to be retracted and an ensuing major online war between lots of different philosophers. [The wikipedia page on this controversy](#) will give you a sense of how intense it all got. So it would be an understatement to say that this is a topic that is unsettled and controversial.

Overgeneralization?

One thing that I found unsatisfying about the reading was the level of generalization. Haslanger acknowledges that different cultures treat genders differently (I am skipping races, because among different cultures race is more difficult to compare), and tries to make her definitions general enough to encompass those differences, but in that move, I think meaning is lost. Say we were to encounter a series of alien peoples. In each their is a difference between males and females, and a cultural difference to go with it. In some the males are privileged and the females are subordinate, in others the females are privileged and the females are subordinate, and among these there is a huge variance ranging from the subordinates being universally enslaved to the subordinates being required to have two forms of identification when appearing for jury duty. Haslanger would presumably call the oppressed females women, and the privileged males men, and say that we need new gender hierarchal words for the privileged females and oppressed males. But what would be the point? The experiences of all these females are completely different. She might even argue that some of the more lightly oppressed ones shouldn't be considered women at all. There is no underlying theme that can be applied to all. I think her definitions can work only in a moment in time. Due to globalization we can see or imagine a uniformity of experience that we can speak to, but that is only in the here and now. —
Miriam

I think that this is an excellent point, and that it could be turned into a very interesting critique of Haslanger.

How might she respond? I don't know for sure, but here's an idea. She would try to point out that she is developing her theory of gender for a very specific purpose, which is to play a role in the project of relieving the oppression of women here on earth. And there are some very striking, perhaps even universal patterns of oppression of women in the history of humanity dating back at least to the invention of agriculture. (Goldstein gives us lots of examples and a possible explanation for why these patterns exist in his book.) So, Haslanger would say that because her goal is to relieve the oppression of women in all of the human societies where it exists, and not just in some, that her concept is useful for that purpose. I don't think that this is a decisive response, but I think it's worth taking seriously.

One case she talks about are unoppressed females, (nonwomens), which she hopes to one day be all females. But a worry I have about her definition, is that it can backfire. Since the common definition is to consider all those who appear female-like to be women, someone might say "you look like a female, so you are a woman, and according to Haslanger all women are oppressed, therefore I must oppress you". Haslanger's definitions are not malleable. While she talks about new definitions after the revolution, I don't know what the scheme will be during the revolution, and insisting on a scheme that defines gender by privilege could run counter to her goals. —
Miriam

Someone could say this, but they would be badly misunderstanding Haslanger. After all, she says that it is part of her goal to abolish women. So the fact that her definition of women makes women oppressed by definition can't be part of a justification for oppressing women. This would be a bit like saying to someone who has been wrongly imprisoned, "you are a prisoner, so by definition you are in prison. Therefore I should not let you out!" Just as a prisoner may not belong in prison, Haslanger would say that nobody deserves to be a women by her definition.

Disanalogies between race and gender?

Haslanger argues that both race and gender are social constructs. She also mentions that race and gender have some interesting similarities. I understand how race can be categorized as a social construct because what it means to be black in the U.S can mean something else entirely in Latin America. Similarly, Italians, Germans, and Irish were considered as racialized minorities in the U.S but now they are not, as Haslanger mentions. However, what it means to be a woman and what it means to be a man has remained relatively stable across different regions of the world and different time periods. Consequentially, I don't know how far the argument that gender is a social construct and very similar to race can possibly go. After all, across all regions of the world and all time periods, people are identified as male or female based on their biological construct or anatomy. Even in countries, like the U.S, where people can biologically and legally change their sex given at birth, gender is still defined as biological construct in most scenarios. —Aanisah

Two responses to this on behalf of Haslanger:

1. Haslanger says that by gender she means “the social meaning of sex”. But the social meaning of sex definitely does change a lot between times and places. Different cultures have enormously different norms about how men and women ought to behave, what they are allowed to do, etc. This is true even if we consider just the 20th-century United States.
2. Even the basic gender categories that we have and who counts in each category is quite fluid. We have been witnessing a palpable example of this in our society recently, as transgender and non-binary people have become more accepted. But that sort of change is not new or unique to contemporary western culture. [This website summarizes some examples](#), and includes links to the sources of research on which they’re drawing.

Race and gender as positive social identities?

While this is certainly touched on in the final segment of the paper it does seem that definitions of race and gender that depend so heavily on hierarchy and oppression make identifying with these categories seem undesirable and wholly negative. If it were possible to escape identifying with or being identified with such labels that would be best. It seems to preclude positive aspects and associations. Would people that take pride in identity with their race and gender have to jettison their attachments to move us forward to a world free from racial and gendered discrimination? Do we have to give up the good to get rid of the bad? —Matt

I think that Haslanger would want to know a lot more about what you take to be the good aspects or sources of pride that come along with gender and race. Some might not really be about gender or race at all (see my answer to the next question). For the ones that are (for example, if I take pride in the historical accomplishments of “the white race”), I think she might argue that although it’s possible to take pleasure from such things, that doesn’t make them good, since they ultimately contribute to large-scale oppression. So, for example, if a Ku Klux Klan member tells you that they don’t want to stop going to meetings because they really like the people who they get to meet there and they enjoy belonging to a club with a long history, you should probably say that although those aren’t exactly the bad things about the organization, the organization itself is bad enough that even the good things about it are ultimately playing into the forces of evil.

Haslanger says that we should reject what seemed to be “positive social identities” because it emphasizes the broader context of “Injustice.” We should undermine those forces that make being a man, a woman, or a member of a racialized group possible. (48) We may try to think about ourselves positively. When I am proud that I am a mother, wife, or daughter, simultaneously, I must mention that I belong to subordinate gender. This is a negative thought. How can we be optimistic? (Who can deliver babies?) —Misa

I don’t think that Haslanger would say that you shouldn’t be proud to be a mother or a daughter. And she would deny that being these things means that you are necessarily a member of a subordinate gender. In an ideal world, she thinks, there would still be females, mothers, and daughters, and people would still bear children. But there wouldn’t be any women (by her definition), because there wouldn’t be any people who are oppressed by virtue of their gender.