

NEITHER FATE NOR FICTION

FINDING SOCIAL GROUPS IN NETWORKS OF RELATIONS

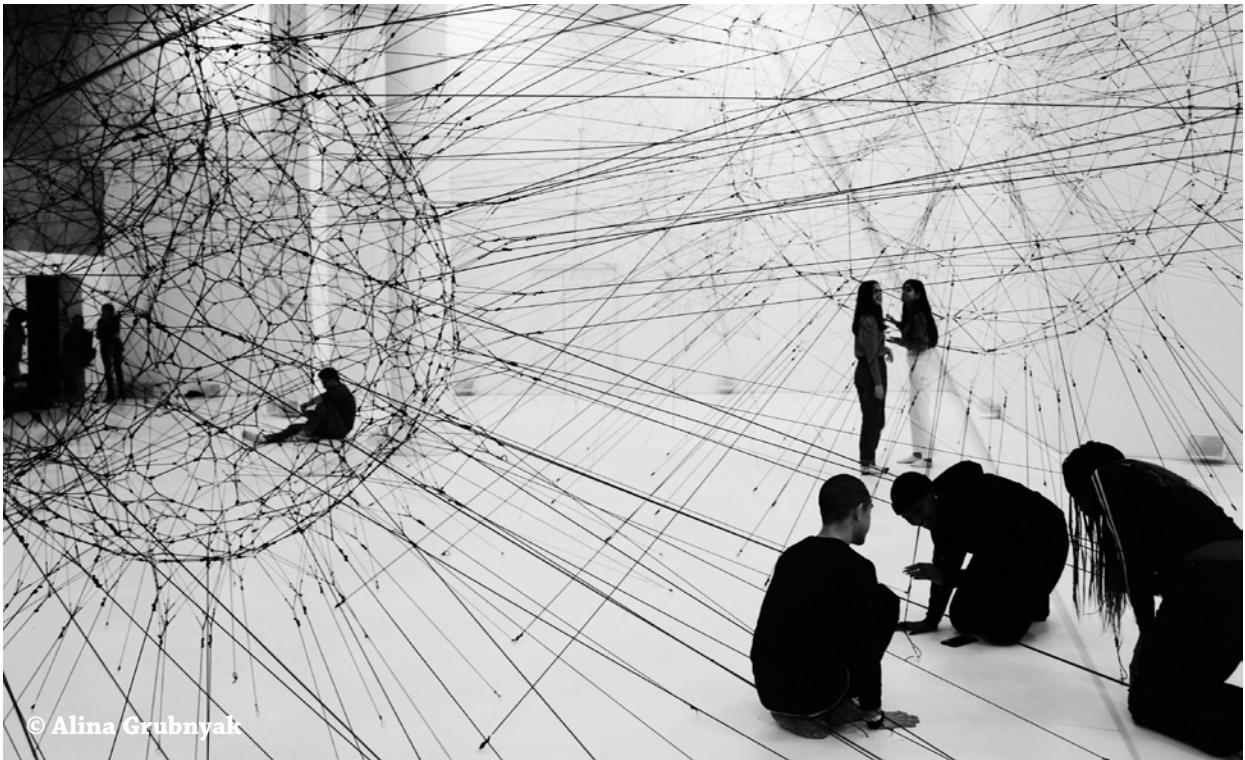
by **Katherine Ritchie**
CUNY Graduate Centre

Identities and identity politics are steeped in controversy. Politicians and pundits are criticizing students and those on the left for an allegedly exaggerated and exclusionary focus on gender, race, and sexuality. White supremacists espouse views that centre racial identity. Nationalist and separatist movements are continuing to gain momentum in Brazil, Hungary, the United Kingdom, France, and the United States. One thing which is uncontroversial is that identity groups are front-and-centre in social-political discussions today. While identity groups are prominent in debates across the political spectrum, there is no consensus about what identities are or whether there truly *are* any such groups.

Inquiry into identity groups falls within the purview of social metaphysics – the branch of philosophy concerned with the existence and nature of social entities. It is common to argue that membership in a social identity group is not determined by genetics or biology. There is, the argument goes, no biological feature or genetic material which all people in an identity group share and which sets them apart from all other people. For instance, there is not a way to define what it is to be a woman, Latinx, Black, or bisexual in terms of genetics or shared ancestry. To be Cameroonian or American or Chinese is not to have a shared genetic essence. It has been argued that race was invented in the modern era, but clearly human biology and genetic inheritance were around far earlier. Identity groups are, to use a turn of phrase, socially constructed. What does it mean to be socially constructed? Are there socially constructed entities? And, if there are, what are socially constructed entities like?

“That’s just a social construction!” someone derides. The scoffing social constructionist claims that like goblins, mermaids, and dragons, racial identities, nations, and money are fictional. Others use the same label to argue that race and gender are socially constructed but also among the most explanatory things in contemporary society. If *social construction* means unreal or nonexistent, there are no identity groups to band around in social justice or nationalist projects. If social groups figure in true explanations, they exist and are important in understanding our world and working to make it a more just place. These meanings are

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opposed, but both views are often classified as social constructionist.

The two ways *social construction* is used offer answers to two sorts of questions that arise in metaphysics – questions of existence (i.e., ontological questions) and questions about the nature of things (i.e., more general metaphysical questions). Read as an answer to an ontological question, the label *social constructionist* is to be interpreted as involving a negative answer to questions like “Are there races?” In contrast, when a social constructionist view is offered as an answer to a question about the nature of an entity, it is to be read as saying that the entity in question depends on social practices, beliefs, norms, and so on, but *it* very much exists. To inquire into the nature of a thing is to presuppose that it exists.

Suppose that I ask you, “Have you stopped running marathons?” The question presupposes that you have run marathons. If you have never run a marathon, it would be strange for you to answer *yes* or *no*. Instead you need to reject the question and show that it relies on a false presupposition. Similarly, if we ask, what

are identity groups like? Are they defined in ways that depend on norms? Or on ways people act? Or on genetics? Each of these presupposes that there are identity groups.

In his book *The Lies that Bind*, Kwame Anthony Appiah argues against the view that identities involve something that is internal and shared. He states that “essentialism about identities is usually wrong: in general, there isn’t some inner essence that explains why people of a certain social identity are the way they are.” Appiah argues that there are no identity groups. They are constructed in the sense that a lie or a fiction is.

Much of contemporary social metaphysics takes social construction to be a way of answering a nature question. When many social metaphysicians say that race, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, and so on are socially constructed they are making claims that these identities are dependent in particular ways on social factors – material conditions, norms, or patterns of interaction – so that if these did not exist, the social identities or groups would not either. These philosophers and critical theorists agree with Appiah

that there is not an internal biological nature that determines race. Nevertheless, they take there to be shared social identities that are robust and play an important role in social explanations. But what could it mean for an identity group to have a social nature?

Picture a network of neurons connected by trillions of synapses or the connections between people on a social media site linked by friendships and follows, likes and retweets. Networks of social relations can help us to understand philosophical aspects of the social world too.

After the 2016 United States presidential election, several maps showing how information was shared among people in different social groups were circulated around the internet. These maps provided a vivid illustration of the paucity of connections between those on the left and those on the right. They represented what C. Thi Nguyen has called epistemic bubbles and echo chambers, groupings that further divide us, the information we are exposed to, and the credence we put on the testimony of others. This example illustrates the importance of social relations for epistemology. Social relations are also integral to understanding the metaphysics of the social world.

What might members of a socio-economic class, a racial group or a gender group have in common? Appiah stressed that we will not find a shared inner essence. There might, however, be commonalities that do not require a shared biological essence. Social groups, I argue, involve commonalities in how people are socially positioned. Instead of synaptic connections or retweets, the relations that define social groups might involve privilege and subordination, social norms, and access to spaces and other resources. What sorts of relations might these be? Could intersectional identities be understood in relational terms?

Hierarchies position people in terms of privilege, power, subordination, and oppression. Some hierarchical relationships are part of overt social institutions. Prime ministers and presidents have powers that ordinary citizens do not. Other powers are not related to institutionalized roles, like having a particular job or holding a specific elected office, but to identities. For instance, in *Resisting Reality* Sally Haslanger argues

for a view of gender and racial groups that involves hierarchical relations. On her view women are, by definition, socially subordinated given perceived or imagined features taken to relate to a female's role in biological reproduction. What it is to be a man is to be socially privileged based on perceived or imagined properties related to a male's role in reproduction. The sorts of privilege and subordination might involve access to spaces and resources (e.g., housing), power to vote, and so on. On Haslanger's view some social identity groups are defined in terms of power relations.

In *Categories We Live By* Ásta argues that identities like (dis)ability, sexuality, and gender are conferred on us by other people. She argues that the identities consist in constraints and enablements that affect how we move through the world. For instance, one might have access to reserved parking spots (an enablement) or one might be assumed to have lower credibility when speaking (a constraint).

In addition to power relations focused on by Haslanger and Ásta, social identities can involve normative relations. Norms are rules for how one ought to act, look, and think. For instance, employees are expected to defer to their boss when in the workplace. We have expectations about how much one ought to speak during a meeting, how much space a person should occupy in a crowded subway car, and who has the power to make decisions. As in the case of hierarchical relations, some norms are tied to roles involving job types like managers and professors. Identities also involve norms. For instance there are norms about how women ought to dress, what they should want in life, and how they ought to behave in various social settings.

OPPRESSION RELATED TO GENDER, RACE, CLASS, SEXUAL ORIENTATION, AND OTHER IDENTITIES INTERSECT IN WAYS THAT ARE NOT ADDITIVE

Power relations and social norms do not bind all people in the same way. For example, the norms that a white trans

woman and a Black cis woman are expected to follow are not perfectly coextensive. Social relations vary according to many aspects of a person's identity. Intersectionality is the concept that there is not a single dimension or axis of power or oppression. As Kimberlé Crenshaw argues, oppression related to gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and other identities intersect in ways that are not additive: a working class Black woman cannot isolate her "woman experience" from her "working class experience" from her "Black experience." There is no essence to each of these experiences that can be added together like blocks stacked in a tower. The hierarchical and accessibility relations and norms that shape social identity groups are plenitudinous and multifaceted.

Return to the image of a brain with its interconnected neurons or the web of interactions between people on a social networking site. In these examples what things are being connected? In the first case, it is neurons and in the second, people. More precisely, in both cases particular entities are connected. There are some particular neurons that are connected to other particular neurons. Particular people – you, your childhood best friend, your favorite aunt – are connected through social networking sites. When thinking of identity groups in relational terms we need to move up a level. The particularity of individual experience is still vital, but identity groups also involve commonalities in social positionality. Networks of relations link various social identity groups. A position in a network now represents not just one person or a single neuron, but a group. For instance, consider socio-economic classes. People in the middle class are related to other socio-economic classes. Those in the middle class have more buying power than those in the working class and less than those in the upper class. The middle class also involves relations to material resources (e.g., bank accounts) and spaces (e.g., suburban neighbourhoods). Norms binding those in the middle class place constraints on how a middle class person is expected to behave (e.g., they ought to attend university) and what they ought to value (e.g., eating organic produce).

Intersectional identity groups are positions in more complex networks of power relations and social norms. Individuals with a shared gender identity, but who differ in their racial identities will be members of different intersectional identity groups. The networks of relations that intersectional groups are found

in include both more general relations and norms (e.g., women in general regardless of race or class are expected to engage in emotional labour) and norms that are specific to intersectional identity groups (e.g., Latinx women are expected to be employed as domestic workers). The complexity of the networks of social relations brings intersectional social groups closer to particular lived experiences of individuals, while also revealing commonalities between intersectional identity group members.

TO UNDERSTAND IDENTITY, OUR OPTIONS ARE NOT THAT GROUPS ARE FICTIONS OR THAT THEY ARE BIOLOGICALLY DEFINED CATEGORIES

In seeking to understand identity, our options are not that identity groups are fictions or that they are biologically defined categories. Social identity groups exist. They are non-fictional entities rooted in complex networks of social relations. These involve power, social norms, and access to material resources. Identity groups are socially constructed because their natures are social. They involve shared positioning in networks of social relations.

A relational view of identity groups does not eliminate controversy surrounding how or whether identity ought to be appealed to in politics. It does, however, show that a social constructionist can avoid positing a shared inner essence, while retaining the view that identities are central to understanding ourselves and our social-political environment. The view allows for social identity to be both a domain for and a tool in political struggle. But, from a metaphysical perspective, many questions about how social identity groups should be appealed to in social-political discussions are left open.

Katherine Ritchie is an assistant professor of philosophy at the CUNY Graduate Centre and at City College of New York. She works primarily in the philosophy of language, ontology, and the nature of social groups.
www.kcritchie.com