

# Individualistic and Structural Explanations in Ásta's *Categories We Live By*

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## Abstract

Ásta's *Categories We Live By* is a superb addition to the literature on social metaphysics. In it she offers a powerful framework for understanding the creation and maintenance of social categories. In this commentary piece, I want to draw attention to Ásta's reliance on explanatory individualism—the view that the social world is best explained by the actions and attitudes of individuals. I argue that this reliance makes it difficult for Ásta to explain how many social categories are maintained and why certain categories are reliably available to us and so resistant to change. These explanatory deficiencies could be overcome, I argue, by eschewing explanatory individualism and positing social structures to figure in structural explanations of the maintenance and availability of social categories.

## 1. Introduction

*Categories We Live By* (2018) is a compelling and ambitious book aimed at providing a metaphysics of social categories, especially those of gender, sex, race, disability, and religion. Ásta's "conferralist" framework is simple and powerful as it purports to elucidate both the systematic and contextually dependent features of the social categories that shape our lives. I'll provide a brief overview of the relevant parts of Ásta's framework before delving into features of the framework I think are explanatorily inadequate.

According to Ásta, social categories are produced by the action of 'conferral.' Individuals confer upon each other social properties that are social statuses. Conferred properties come in two general kinds: institutional and communal. Social statuses are defined in terms of 'constraints and enablements' placed on the behavior of the subjects of conferral (2018: 18-20). When a social status is conferred upon an individual in a particular context by others, the conferrers are attempting to track (consciously or unconsciously) certain physical features—"base" properties—of the individual which, in that context, have social significance. Importantly, it is not the actual presence of these base properties that Ásta thinks is necessary for conferral to occur. Rather it is the mere *perception* that the individual has the salient base property that is required for the conferral.

The conferral of social properties is often something done to us. We find ourselves in different contexts with the social statuses conferred upon us. Ásta also provides a model for understanding subjective social identity. On her view, we bring (consciously or unconsciously) 'social maps' to all our social contexts. A social map is a "cognitive map that sets conditions for intelligibility for behavior in the context and sets the parameters for admissible behavior...The map is the representation of our social landscape" (2018: 122). Our social identity has an objective side, viz. the location on the social map that we stably occupy whether or not we identify with that location. The subjective side of our social identity is the location on the social map that we do in fact identify with. To identify with a location on the map is to take the norms, constraints, and enablements associated with the social location as applying to ourselves (2018: 122).

Ásta summarizes her view like this:

What is a social category? What is its nature? How is it created and sustained? My answer is that individual agents create and maintain social categories by the conferral actions of classifying and placing people in the contexts they travel...And when people come to each new encounter with the social maps that have operated in their prior contexts, we can get a

picture of the systematicity of certain sorts of differential treatment in a way that still preserves the dynamic nature of human interactions and does not posit structures or structural agency. The creators and maintainers of our institutions and practices are individual human agents.” (2018: 127-128; cf. 5; 28; 33; 48)

What I want to focus on in this piece is Ásta’s commitment to the creation and maintenance of social categories as being fully explained by the beliefs and actions of individuals. Her framework relies on a kind of explanatory individualism. Epstein describes this thesis as follows: “It is the claim that social facts are best explained in terms of individuals and their interactions” (2015: 21).<sup>1</sup> For Ásta, the creation and maintenance of social categories and social maps are entirely accounted for by the actions and attitudes of individuals, such as the tracking of base properties, the actions of conferral, the enforcement of constraints and enablements, and the negotiation of which social map is operative in a context. What I’ll argue is that Ásta’s reliance on explanatory individualism is problematic when it comes to explaining (i) how social categories are sustained and (ii) why certain social categories and maps are so consistently available to us and others not. I conclude by suggesting that Ásta’s conferralist framework would benefit from being paired with an account of social structure that would provide structural rather than merely individualistic explanations of social categories and maps.

## 2. Sustaining Social Categories

Suppose that Ásta is right that social categories are created by the actions and attitudes of individuals. But are such categories also sustained or maintained by the actions and attitudes of individuals? For Ásta, to sustain a social category, is to keep in existence a social status with its constitutive constraints and enablements. Presumably this is done by continued acts of conferral in a context in which certain (perceived) base properties have social salience. This requires the continued recognition and enforcement of the constraints and enablements characteristic of those social statuses. Ásta’s framework, it seems to me, is not up to the task of explaining how certain social categories are sustained.

Take, for example, the communal property of *being black* that’s operative in most major cities in the United States. The constraints and enablements that come with this social status include the ability to move (un)hindered in certain parts of the city, the likelihood of having certain kinds of interactions with police, being subject to certain stereotypes, and the likelihood of having (or not having) access to certain public resources, among many others. On Ásta’s view, these constraints and enablements, and therefore the category itself, are sustained entirely by individual attitudes and actions of conferral and enforcement. But that doesn’t appear to be correct. Many who work on the construction race have recognized that social space and resources play a significant role in the enforcement of these constraints and enablements.<sup>2</sup> Sundstrom, for example, argues “social space is not merely the consequent of the social; it is constitutive of the social. Space is an integral aspect of the production of human categories and identities. Moreover, to transform the social, space must be transformed” (2003: 83). Similarly, Mallon (2018) argues that what keeps race in existence is not our conceptual practices regarding race, but rather the causal consequences of these practices.

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<sup>1</sup> See Epstein (2015) for a sustained argument against methodological and ontological individualism. Ontological individualism is the thesis that the social world is exhaustively determined by facts about individuals and their interactions. It’s not clear to me whether Ásta is committed to ontological individualism.

<sup>2</sup> See, among many others, Alexander (2010), Anderson (2010), Elder-Vass (2010), Haslanger (2012: 415-17), Mallon (2016a: 86ff., 176ff.), Sundstrom (2003: 91), Rothstein (2017), and Taylor (2013).

The material organization of cities into downtowns, suburbs, and ‘ghettos’ appears to have a much greater role in explaining how constraints and enablements are enforced than individual actions or attitudes.<sup>3</sup> For instance, consider the enforcement of constraints like the stereotype of black criminality or the likelihood that one will only have access to poor performing schools or the likelihood of living near sources of environmental pollution. What explains how these constraints are enforced is not (only) the thoughts of individuals. Rather it is the placement of highways that divide a city, the material infrastructure of neighborhoods, residential patterns, and proximity to environmental pollution that play a primary role in the enforcement of these constraints. Once these material conditions are in place, individuals in the society need not have any particular beliefs about or interactions with each other in order for these constraints to bind.

So it is not clear that Ásta’s individualistic conferralist framework can fully explain the maintenance of contemporary communal race categories. This worry is not limited to racial categories. Gender, class, and disability categories also appear to be sustained by material social arrangements and not merely individual attitudes and actions.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps Ásta would argue that the construction of social space is of a different kind than the construction involving conferral, i.e., “social construction as social significance.” In chapter 2 she discusses a variety of forms of construction. One of them is a kind of causal construction, which she calls “social construction as social consequences” (39). This form of construction takes place when the social environment has certain consequences for individuals. The example of the communal race category discussed above does involve the social environment having consequences for certain individuals. However, if the constraints and enablements constitutive of such categories are enforced not by individual acts involved in conferral but by social material factors, then conferralism is not the whole story of the maintenance of social categories, pace what Ásta says.

### 3. Availability of Social Categories and Maps

According to Ásta, in any social context we “bring a map of the available categories and criteria for membership in each” (122). Social interaction involves negotiating where on the map we locate ourselves and others, i.e., what roles we/they play in the context. We find ourselves (or unconsciously operate) with these categories and maps at our disposal. Ásta’s account is primed to answer questions like ‘why, in this particular context, does this particular person belong to this particular social category?’ Prima facie, this question can be answered in terms of the attitudes and actions of the individuals involved in the particular situation.

But it is less clear how Ásta will answer these interrelated questions: ‘why do we find these categories/maps available to us as opposed to others?’; ‘why do we find the regularity and systematicity we do in the social categories/maps operative in our contexts?’ ‘what explains the persistence of certain categories/maps, why they are so resistant to change? Can these questions be answered in terms of the attitudes and actions of individuals, as Ásta’s explanatory individualism demands?

There is reason to think not. The patterns of thought and behavior we see repeated might be constituted by the attitudes and actions of individuals across time and context. But this observation only specifies what these patterns consist in rather than specifying why we see these very patterns or why they replicate themselves again and again. Individual psychologies may be able to explain why

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<sup>3</sup> See especially Anderson (2010) and Sundstrom (2003) for discussion of ‘ghettos’.

<sup>4</sup> This point is made by Sunstrom (2003: 93). The point is also made forcefully with regard to disability by Andler and Barnes in their (2019) review of *Categories We Live By*. Their discussion of the material constraints that sustain one’s status as disabled could be used to make the same point being made here.

people act the way they do on a particular occasion. But they cannot explain why certain categories/maps are reliably available to us or why it's hard to deviate from living by these categories/maps.

Perhaps the consistent (perceived) presence of certain base properties across contexts plays a role in explaining the persistent availability of certain social categories/maps (cf. Ásta 2018: 128). But base properties themselves don't determine what social significance they have. So their consistent (perceived) presence does not itself explain why the categories generated from them are so reliably available and resistant to change.

What individualistic explanations lack is an account why we are systematically constrained by and pressured into these categories/maps. Individualistic explanations of this constraint reduce it to the internalization of norms and expectations. On this view, such norms and expectations constrain us by merely being causal antecedents to thoughts and actions.<sup>5</sup> But social constraints, as Haslanger has argued, also “set limits, organize thought and communication, create a choice architecture; in short, they structure the possibility space for agency” (2016: 127). According to Haslanger, patterns of shared concepts, beliefs, perception, and behavior in relation to resources (physical or otherwise) put constraints on what is socially possible for us to think and do (see her 2016: 126 and 2012: 415). These sorts of social shaping forces look like better explanations for the consistent availability and stubbornness of our social categories/maps than merely the individual thoughts, perceptions, and actions involved in the contextual conferral of a social category.

#### 4. Structures and Structural Explanations

I've been arguing that Ásta's conferralist framework, with its commitment to explanatory individualism, faces problems explaining (a) the maintenance of social categories and (b) why we regularly find ourselves constrained to move through the world with certain social categories and maps. If that's right, it leads to two corresponding explanatory deficiencies: (c) Ásta has no place for material space and resources in her framework and (d) no place for the sort of social constraints that operate to make certain categories/maps consistently available to us in her framework.

It seems to me that explanatory individualism is a dispensable part of the otherwise helpful conferralist framework. My recommendation is that Ásta's framework would benefit from positing social structures, despite what she says on page 128:

we can get a picture of the systematicity of certain sorts of differential treatment in a way that still preserves the dynamic nature of human interactions and does not posit structures or structural agency.

Positing social structures would allow her to explain the maintenance of social categories and the role that material spaces and resources play in this. It would also allow her to explain the regular availability of certain categories/maps in a way that does justice to how these categories/maps actually constrain us.

So, what is social structure? And how would it help explain the above features of social categories? There are different views about what social structure is.<sup>6</sup> But Haslanger's conception is well suited to do the explanatory work Ásta needs. According to Haslanger (2012; 2016) social

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<sup>5</sup> See Jackson and Pettit (1992) and Haslanger (2016) who discuss but reject this way of thinking about how social structure constrains us.

<sup>6</sup> For a sample, see Archer (2003), Elder-Vass (2010), Giddens (1984), Haslanger (2016; 2012: 413-18), Porpora (1989), and Ritchie (forthcoming).

structures are networks of social relations. Individuals stand in these relations to other individuals and also to resources, e.g., artifacts, goods, social spaces, etc. These relations consist in a complex interplay between schemas and resources. Schemas, she holds,

Are intersubjective patterns of perception, thought, and behavior...Schemas encode knowledge and also provide scripts for interacting with each other and our environment. (2012: 415)

Consist in clusters of culturally shared concepts, beliefs, and other attitudes that enable us to interpret and organize information and coordinate action, thought, and affect. Schemas are public...but are also internalized and guide behavior. (2016: 126).

Schemas function to constrain and enable how we relate to each other and to resources. For instance, “the schema of two sex categories is manifested in the design and labeling of toilet facilities” (2012: 415). According to Haslanger, schemas and resources together set social constraints on us by “making certain kinds of things available (or not)...by providing templates of interaction that favor (or discourage) certain forms of coordination with respect to a resource...and by canalizing our attitudes accordingly” (2016: 128).

This conception of social structure looks to fill the explanatory deficiencies of Ásta’s individualism on both counts. It can explain how material social spaces function to enforce constraints and enablements of social categories. Social categories like race are embodied in the architecture and design of cities and provide us with ways and incentives for interacting not only with other people but also with our material social environments and resources. These environments and resources may have been created/distributed by individuals with the intention to enforce the constraints and enablements of such categories. But, again, once they are established, they continue to enforce these constraints and enablements without occurrent attitudes and actions of individuals.

Second, schemas that help constitute social structure allow us to explain the sorts of social constraints that delineate our social possibilities and that makes so many of our social categories stubborn and resistant to change. In describing Haslanger’s view, Elizabeth Barnes says,

Mere social patterns...are relatively fluid and change easily over time. Once a structure is created, however, certain aspects of social interaction are more regimented. It then becomes difficult to change the underlying patterns of interaction and behavior because the structure itself constrains which such patterns are seen as acceptable. (2017: 2423)

Social structure not only causally impacts subjects within those structures (see Elder-Vass 2010), but also makes certain interactions pragmatically possible or impossible.

This conception of social structure would also help Ásta explain how individuals without any standing in a context might still enforce the constraints and enablements associated with communal categories (see 2018: 18-20). If there is a social structure operative in a context, then it is constraining individuals by setting up “possibility space for agency” (Haslanger 2016: 127). Individuals in that context need not themselves have any standing or power to enforce the relevant constraints and enablements. But their awareness of what behaviors are acceptable according to the social structure allows them to “cite” or “echo” those structures, channeling or bringing to bear the (un/justified) authority of the structure to enforce the constraints and enablements in that specific

context. Ásta doesn't say much about how individuals gain or make use of standing to confer communal categories. Positing social structure could help fill that lacuna.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, Haslanger's schemas seem to include what Ásta calls social maps. Schemas are intersubjective representations of our social environments and include, exactly as Ásta's maps do, prescriptions, permissions, and prohibitions about how we relate to others. Like schemas, social maps set conditions for intelligible and admissible social behavior. Given that Ásta is already committed to shared social maps, it would not burden her account much more to embrace the wider notion of a schema, which involves our relations to resources. With both these elements, commitment to social structure is right around the corner. Appeal to social structure provides a fuller explanation of the creation and maintenance of social categories that individual perception, judgment, and action in a context.

Would a commitment to Haslangerian social structures undermine Ásta's conferralism? It would certainly call for a methodological shift on Ásta's part. No longer would the creation and maintenance of social categories be explained by individual actions and attitudes alone, but rather by the force exerted by social structures. But an appeal to social structure would not undermine the need to explain how a particular person in a particular context comes to occupy a position in a social structure. Conferralism can still be understood as a metaphysical account of how individuals come to be members of social categories. Social structures figure in an account of how such conferralism is possible. That is, social structure provides something like enablers or 'anchors' for the successful conferral of a social category.<sup>8</sup> Social structure enables conferral by making certain categories/maps reliably available to us, by setting conditions on category membership, and by shaping our social material world so as to enforce certain constraints and enablements. So, conferralist explanations and social structural explanations need not compete with each other, but actually complement each other.

My argument has been that Ásta's conferralist framework combined with a commitment to explanatory individualism fails two central explanatory demands of an adequate account of social categories. Fortunately, for Ásta, individualistic explanations can be supplemented by structural explanations to solve this problem with no great loss to her ingenious conferralist model.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ásta does say that individuals can exercise authority or standing by proxy. Curiously, she goes on to say that "Some [social properties] are conferred by persons who have standing, others by citing *power structures* that lack normative support" (2018: 21, my emphasis). So, there is some recognition on her part that structures beyond individuals play an important role in making conferral possible.

<sup>8</sup> Haslanger (2016: 120-1) sees this role for social structure in distinguishing triggering from structuring causes. Epstein (2015) draws a distinction between grounds—that in virtue of which a social fact obtains—and anchors—that in virtue of which one kind of social fact is grounded in other kinds.

<sup>9</sup> Special thanks to Åsa Burman for her helpful comments and conversation on this paper.

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