KINDS (NATURAL KINDS VS. HUMAN KINDS)

Both the natural and the social sciences posit taxonomies or classification schemes that divide their objects of study into various categories. Many philosophers hold that what makes some taxonomic schemes more legitimate than others is that they correspond to actually existing divisions in nature, which they label "natural kinds." In other words, some classification schemes "carve nature at the joints" (to use a phrase inspired by Plato), while others are merely arbitrary or gerrymandered. In the natural world, examples of natural kinds would be *insect* and *metal,* but not *bug* and *rock,* or *insects-born-on-Monday* and *metals-whose-names-start-with-'s,'* which are non-natural or "artificial" kinds.

When it comes to the social sciences, the question is: do some categories correspond to social kinds or human kinds (the two terms are often used interchangeably), just as some categories in the natural sciences correspond to natural kinds? Social scientists posit kinds of human beings (e.g. *consumer, psychopath*), kinds of social institution (e.g. *political party, economic market*), kinds of social process (e.g. *ritual, immigration*), and so on. But is it enough for a social scientist simply to invoke a human or social category to conclude that such a kind really exists and that it ought to be admitted into our ontology?

This entry begins by examining purported differences between natural kinds and human or social kinds. Then, whether or not human kinds are fundamentally different from natural kinds, it will ask how we can distinguish genuine human kinds from spurious ones. Finally, the issue of natural kinds and human kinds will be related to the common claim that certain categories in both the natural and the social sciences are "social constructs."

Differences Between Natural Kinds and Human Kinds

Recent philosophical work has tended to favor an essentialist understanding of what it is for a category to correspond to a natural kind. Although essentialists are not united on the precise features that characterize natural kinds, they tend to posit that each natural kind is characterized by all or some of the following: (1) properties that are necessary and sufficient for membership in the kind, (2) micro-structural properties, (3) intrinsic properties, (4) modally necessary properties, and (5) properties that are discoverable by science. If one understands natural kinds in this essentialist fashion, then it is fairly clear that most, if not all, social categories will fail to qualify as natural kinds. Without going into these features in detail, it would appear that many social categories are not definable in terms of necessary and sufficient properties, are not characterized by an underlying microstructure, are not wholly determined by their intrinsic properties, and do not have their properties as a matter of metaphysical necessity. Moreover, if they are discoverable by science, it will be a social rather than a natural science. Hence, this essentialist account of natural kinds would seem to be a non-starter for the social domain.

But the essentialist account of natural kinds, though currently popular among some philosophers, is not universally held. Without taking the social sciences into account, the essentialist consensus is showing signs of unraveling under the pressure of categories in biology and many of the other "special sciences" (e.g. geology, biochemistry, and so on). Still, even if one does not endorse an essentialist understanding of natural kinds, there may yet be fundamental differences between natural kinds and human or social kinds.

The first obstacle to assimilating human kinds to natural kinds lies in the fact that real entities are often distinguished from artificial ones on the grounds that the latter are mind-dependent or a result of human artifice. But if we adopt that criterion, then we would be led to

judge all human or social kinds to be non-real. Even though they may not be intentionally and consciously produced by human beings, all human or social kinds are influenced in some way by human action and social forces and cannot be regarded as independent of human beings and their minds. This seems to be one obvious way in which human kinds are different from natural kinds.

A second difference between human and natural kinds has been elaborated by Ian Hacking, who argues that human kinds are "interactive" or subject to the "looping effect." Hacking has illustrated this claim with various categories, such as *child abuse, multiple personality disorder, fugue* ("mad traveler" syndrome), and others. Consider the category of *child abuse.* Once this practice is identified and labeled, those who engage in it may alter their behavior, either by refraining from the practice altogether, or by engaging in it more covertly, or in some other way. In these cases, the phenomenon may be altered as a result of human intervention, for instance by becoming less visible. Since the very nature of the phenomenon has changed, it then "loops back" to influence our beliefs about it, which may in turn have further effects on this practice, and so on. Though looping effects undoubtedly influence the nature of social phenomena, it is not clear that such effects are confined to the social realm. For instance, some have suggested that biological species that are a product of artificial selection can be subject to looping effects too, such as the domestic dog (*Canis familiaris*), whose phenotypical traits have been shaped by the beliefs and actions of human beings.

A third difference between natural kinds and human or social kinds has been emphasized by John Searle, who says that what it is for some social kind, x, to be x is simply to be regarded as x. For example, what it is for something to be money is for it to be regarded as money, to be used as money, and to be believed to be money. Hence, social kinds are ontologically subjective, being dependent for their very existence on human attitudes towards them, which distinguishes

them from natural kinds. But critics have observed that Searle's account seems to apply only to the most conventional of social kinds, such as *money* or *government,* which depend for their very existence on human attitudes concerning those very categories. Other social kinds, such as *racism* or *economic recession,* do not seem to depend on our having attitudes towards them at all. They are therefore arguably not ontologically subjective, at least not in the same sense as kinds such as *money.*

Finally, perhaps the most widely cited difference between natural kinds and human kinds pertains to their purported value-ladenness or their alleged normative dimension. Some social scientists and philosophers regard many social categories to be evaluative and consider that their range of application and the properties associated with them are not determined solely by the nature of social phenomena themselves, but at least partly by our moral and ideological attitudes towards those social phenomena. If categories like *race, gender,* and *child abuse* are shaped by our value judgments or ideological stances, then that may set them apart from categories denoting natural kinds. But even those social theorists who insist that the very aims of social science ought to be normative (for example, aiming at human empowerment or emancipation) seem to distinguish between the descriptive and normative dimensions of social theorizing. If so, this leaves room for the possibility that at least some of our social categories can serve a more purely descriptive and explanatory purpose.

Genuine and Spurious Human Kinds

Whether or not there are fundamental differences between natural kinds and human or social kinds, it is possible to maintain that at least some social categories correspond to social or human kinds. The next challenge consists in saying just which categories delineate genuine as opposed

to spurious human kinds, or how to distinguish between real and non-real kinds in the social domain.

One promising route might be to return to one of the original sources of the notion of a natural kind (or "real kind") in the work of the 19th century English philosopher John Stuart Mill. Mill was skeptical as to whether races constituted real kinds of humans that would constitute species or subspecies of human beings. His reasoning depended on the idea that a real or natural kind, whether in the natural or social sciences, ought to be characterized by a multitude of properties that are not simply deducible from one another. These properties ought to be scientifically important in the sense of being explanatory and playing a role in inductive inference. Moreover, he accorded primary responsibility for determining whether this was the case to the investigators in each branch of knowledge, also accepting that there may be different classification schemes deployed by theorists in different scientific disciplines or sub-disciplines. If we follow Mill broadly in this approach, we may consider human kinds to correspond to those categories identified by social scientists and investigators studying the properties of human beings and human society. The categories that they arrive at as a result of their investigations, provided they are genuinely explanatory and feature in inductive inference, would be the ones that correspond to real human kinds, while those that are not can be safely dismissed. Also following Mill, there need be no unique classification of human beings, their institutions, processes, and so on, into a hierarchy of categories. Rather, we may end up classifying humans into many crosscutting systems of kinds (for instance, in terms of both *class* and *ethnicity*) without undermining the reality of those kinds.

Social Kinds and Social Construction

What should we make of ubiquitous claims that at least some social kinds are "social constructions"? There is a sense in which any such claim about a social kind is vacuous, since social processes, institutions, and attitudes are all in some way constructed by human society. But is there a more interesting sense in which such claims are warranted? There would seem to be at least two possibilities. The first is that a socially constructed kind is one that is more deliberately a result of human artifice than might appear at first. (This may occur along the lines of Hacking's looping effect, or in the manner of Searle's conventional social kinds.) In connection with this, social constructionists may provide informative accounts of the way in which the process of construction took place, tracing it back to particular historical eras or identifying it with certain social movements with specific ideologies or interests. A second possibility is that saying that a kind is a social construct is opposed to regarding it as being biological or physiological in nature. Such claims are often made with regard to kinds that are commonly thought to be in the domain of the natural sciences, but should rather be regarded as pertaining to the social sciences, such as *race* and *gender*. In such cases, to claim that a kind is a social construct is to say that the basis of the kind is not biological but can be found in social processes and relations instead.

Conclusion

Categories in the social sciences may be more mind-dependent, interactive, conventional, and normative than those in the natural sciences, but that may not prevent them from corresponding to genuine human or social kinds. Moreover, genuine human kinds may be distinguished from

spurious kinds on the basis of such features as their role in inductive inference and their explanatory value. This may enable us to better address some questions regarding categories that arise in the practice of social science, such as the reality of the category of *race,* or how many *gender* categories there are in the human species.

See also: Essentialism; Metaphysics and Science; Race, Theories of; Searle and the Construction of Social Reality; Social Ontology, Recent Theories of; Social Constructivism; Social Construction of reality; Relativisms and their Ontologies

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