Book Symposium

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Précis: *Categories We Live By*

Abstract: The project of *Categories We Live By* is to offer a metaphysics of social categories. The strategy is to give a theory of social properties of individuals. The main components of the theory are a *conferralist* framework for properties; an account of social *meaning*; and an account of social *construction*; accompanying is also an account of social *identity*. This theory can be applies to offer concrete conferralist proposals of categories such as sex, gender, race, disability, religion, and LGBTQ categories. This précis describes the main components (conferralist framework, social meaning, social construction, social identity) briefly, but leaves discussions of applications for another time.

Keywords: Social categories; Conferralism; Social meaning; Social construction; Social identity.

In *Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas* the author Rebecca Solnit and performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña reflect on their experience as they travel through the city of San Francisco. Solnit finds herself as Western in Chinatown, as white in Bayview, as straight and female in the Castro. Gómez-Peña is mistaken for a tourist from Argentina in Chinatown, at the Bollywood Café he is "the wrong kind of brown", in the Castro he is an older gay man, and in the financial district he is nobody.

All of these – Western, white, etc. – are examples of features that define social categories of individuals and although these social categories vary in importance and pervasiveness, they set parameters for the encounters Solnit and Gómez-Peña have with people on their wanderings through the city. They also frame their own understanding of their experiences.

But what exactly is a social category? To answer that is to give a metaphysics of social categories – a theory of the nature of social categories. My strategy is to give a metaphysics of the features that define them. For example, if the category is *women*, then the property is *being a woman*; if the category is *queers*, then the property is *being queer*, and so on.

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1 A Glimpse of *Categories*[1]

Here we have a glimpse of the book:

Project: to offer a metaphysics of social categories.

Strategy: to give a theory of social properties of individuals.

Main components of the theory: a *conferralist* framework for properties; an account of social *meaning*; and an account of social *construction*; accompanying is also an account of social *identity*.

Application of the theory: offer concrete conferralist proposals of categories such as sex, gender, race, disability, religion, and LGBTQ categories.

Let me describe each component of the theory briefly, but leave discussions of applications for another time.

2 Conferralist Account of Social Properties of Individuals

We all have various sorts of features or properties. Some are natural features, others relational, others social. What is it to have a social feature and how does one get it? To answer these questions I make use of what I call a "conferralist" framework that I have developed elsewhere and tweak it for the use on social properties. I say that social properties of individuals are *conferred*.

How does a property get conferred? That depends on which property we are talking about and the conferralist framework is an abstract schema that needs to filled in for each property.

One can use the conferralist framework to argue for a certain sort of subject-dependency of any property. I am, however, chiefly concerned with social properties of individuals in this project. These include being of a certain gender or race, and other features that define protected groups in various jurisdictions, but also any other category defined by a social property.

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1 Ásta, *Categories We Live By. The Construction of Sex, Gender, Race, and Other Social Categories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

The main idea is this: social properties of individuals are statuses that people have in the contexts they travel. These statuses consist in constraints and enablements on their behavior. And these statuses are connected to other properties of individuals in a particular way.

I make a distinction between two sorts of categories, two sorts of contexts, and two sorts of features: institutional and what I call "communal". Institutional contexts are contexts governed by a set of rules or laws, – for example laws governing driving in California. The entities that confer institutional status on a person in those contexts have the requisite institutional authority. For example, in the case of getting a license to drive in California, that status is conferred by an official of the Department of Motor Vehicles upon judging the person to meet the relevant pre-requisites. People have the status as long as they remain in the context and it doesn't get revoked.

The profile of institutional properties is like this:

Conferred property: P

Who: a person or entity or group in authority.

What: their explicit conferral by means of a speech act or other public act.

When: under the appropriate circumstances (in the presence of witnesses, at a particular place, etc).

Base property: the property the authorities are attempting to track in the conferral. The individual need not have the property; they just need to be taken to have it.

I call the conferring of an institutional status on an individual an act of *classifying* that individual. The classification comes with deontic constraints and enablements, that is with rights and privileges and the like.

The other sort of feature is what I call a "communal" one, although institutional and communal conferrals can interact in a variety of ways.

A communal feature is a social status conferred upon a person in a context on the basis of them being taken to have a feature that is socially salient in the context. The status consists in constraints and enablements, just like in the institutional contexts, but these constraints are not deontic. They do not concern rights, privileges, and obligations, but power, sway, and non-deontic restrictions. For example, being tall may be a socially important property in a context, and people taken to be tall deferred to or allowed to speak more than others. The base property for the conferral of a communal property can vary, as in the institutional case.

The profile for a *communal* property is thus the following:

Conferred property: P

Who: a person or entity or group with standing.

What: their conferral, explicit or implicit, by means of a attitudes and behavior.

When: in a particular context.

Base property: the property the conferrers are attempting to track in the conferral, consciously or unconsciously. This property is the property that is the basis for the conferral. The individual need not have the property; they just need to be taken to have it.

So a person gets conferred on them a social status, which consists in constraints and enablements. But then the status comes with associated norms for behavior in the contexts. I think of the relationship between the constraints and enablements and the associated norms as akin to the relationship between the constitutive rules for chess and the norms for playing well. If you flout the constitutive rules, you are not playing at all; if you flout the norms, you are simply playing badly. But the constraints and enablements do not just define what you can do or not do in the context. They also set the intelligibility frame for a person's actions.

The conferral of an institutional status is an act of classifying. Correspondingly, the conferral of a status in the communal case is an act of *placing*. Placings are typically intersectional, although they need not be.

The placing of people on a social map is not always a simple affair that happens without struggle. Often the people in the encounter bring incompatible social maps and some negotiation happens before people settle into their roles. Some contexts are even too short for anyone to settle into any role. There are attempts at placing each other onto social maps, but it is contested from start to finish.

3 Social Meaning

We can now answer the question: what is it for a feature of an individual to have social meaning in a context?

Each of us has a lot of features and only some of them matter socially in a particular context. Examples: I am 168 cm tall and have shoe size 39. I have short hair and am wearing black pants. I speak English with an Icelandic accent. I am

extremely near sighted, have moss green eyes and pale skin. I have breasts and broad shoulders.

Some of these features matter socially in a context, others do not. What is it for a feature of you or me to matter socially in a context?

The answer I give is: *a feature is socially significant in a context in which people taken to have the feature get conferred onto them a social status.*

4 Social Construction

And now we can formulate a conception of social construction that can do the work of accounting for social categories of individuals.

There has been much discussion in various disciplines in the last 30 years about social construction and there are a lot of different things that people want to capture with that notion. The phenomenon I want to capture is when some feature of an individual takes on *social significance*, for instance when exhibiting certain secondary sex characteristics constrains what roles a person can play in the home and in civic and professional life. Or when exhibiting certain morphological features associated with geographical ancestry does so.

Social Construction: A feature of an individual F is socially constructed in a context just in case there is a base feature B and a conferred status F such that F is a status conferred on individuals taken to have the base feature B in the context.

5 Social Identity

Accompanying the account of social categories is an account of social identity which is to be fully intersectional and make sense of cases when a person identifies with a different social location than they are assigned, or when they do not identify with any available location:

Objective social identity: the location on a social map in a context that one occupies stably.

Subjective social identity: the location on a social map in a context that one identifies with.