

Against the Kind Model of Race: Race as a System of Roles, Statuses, and Positions

DRAFT – Annette Martín – March 2026

Abstract: This paper critically examines what I call the social kind model of race (SKM), and defends an alternative, the Roles-Statuses-and-Positions (RSP) view. On the SKM, race has a particular structure and theoretical function: race takes the form of a set of stable and discrete social kinds (races) that support explanations and predictions about systematic injustice. In contrast, on the RSP view, race takes the form of a system of roles, statuses, and racialized social positions. One’s position determines one’s likelihood of occupying different racial roles; one’s racial status designates the roles one “ought” to occupy. I use cases of racial passing and intersectional racial injustice to argue that the RSP view better fulfills the explanatory purposes that many social constructionists invoke to defend the reality of race. Social constructionists should thus favor the RSP view over the dominant SKM. More broadly, the RSP view opens up under-explored space in the metaphysics of race by raising questions about the form that race takes. In particular, if races are understood as social kinds that play the roles proposed by the SKM, then the RSP view highlights the possibility of adopting a realist, non-eliminativist stance about race while denying the existence of races.

Keywords: race, social kinds, social constructionism, social categories, racism, racial passing, intersectionality

1. Introduction

The metaphysics of race debate primarily concerns the reality and nature of race. Traditional racial naturalists maintain that race is real and biological in nature: races are natural kinds, or biological divisions within the human species. Traditional anti-realists deny the reality of race, arguing that the biological divisions asserted by the racial naturalist do not exist, and thus races do not exist. Traditional social constructionists, in contrast, maintains that race is real, but that it is social rather than biological in nature: races are social divisions produced by social forces, although widely believed to be biological divisions reflecting underlying racial essences.

This paper will largely take for granted the reality of race, and focus primarily on its nature. In contrast to the standard way that the debate has gone, however, my interest is not in whether race is natural or social – I will adopt the broadly social constructionist stance that race is a real, social phenomenon. Rather, my inquiry into the nature of race will focus on an under-explored question in the literature, concerning the *form* or *structure* that race takes.

To draw out what I mean by asking about the form that race takes, notice that the metaphysics of race debate has largely taken place on the ontological ground set by the racial naturalist. That is, the primary picture of race presupposed by this debate is one that sees race as taking the form of a set of *races*, or divisions of humans into *racial kinds*. For instance, giving voice to a traditional social constructionist claim, Taylor contends that “White supremacist societies created the Races they thought they were discovering.”¹ The traditional social constructionist adopts the racial naturalist’s basic ontological picture of race, which maintains that humans are divided into a set of races. Although accepting that race takes the form supposed by the racial naturalist, the social constructionists contends that this is a product of social rather than natural forces.² Likewise, the traditional anti-realist also takes on board the racial naturalist’s picture of race – in this case, not just with respect to the form that race takes, but also with respect to the biological nature of races. The anti-realist argues that there is no such biological division of humans into races and concludes that, as there are no races, race is not real. The debate about the reality of race has thus largely remained faithful to the ontological structure of race posited by the racial naturalist, equating the question “is *race* real?” with “do *races* exist?”

In this paper, I will consider a social constructionist view that takes a different approach to the structure of race. In doing so, I hope to call into question whether the debate has remained too faithful to an ontological model inherited from traditional racial naturalism. I will not argue for this directly, however, and my primary focus will be narrower than this. My more specific focus is on what I call a *scientific kind model* of race. I take the scientific kind model to be a dominant approach in the metaphysics of race. It is a theoretical model characterized both by an ontological structure and a set of theoretical functions that the model takes races to play. I take the general scientific kind model to have two main forms: a *natural kind model*, which is the view of the traditional racial naturalist, and a *social kind model*, which has been a popular paradigm for social constructionists.

My primary goal in this paper will be to develop an alternative to the social kind model, which I will call the Roles-Statuses-and-Positions (RSP) model, and to argue that the RSP model performs better than the social kind model with respect to the theoretical roles that the social scientifically-minded constructionist takes race to play. Attending to the RSP model as a

¹ (Taylor 2013: 179)

² Or a combination of biological and social forces. See (Kitcher 1999; Outlaw 1996).

legitimate alternative to the social kind model opens up under-explored possibilities in the metaphysics of race debate. In particular, it highlights questions about the ontological structure of race, while also bringing into view the possibility of combining realism about race with anti-realism about races.

To preempt possible confusions, I will reiterate that I take the RSP model to be a social constructionist view that maintains the reality and significance of race. The RSP model is not an eliminativist view – it does not commit one to eliminating racial terms or concepts (though it may invite some linguistic and conceptual revision). Likewise, the RSP model does not deny that racial classifications exist, nor that they make a significant difference to how one’s life goes – indeed, that this is the case will be central to the view. Finally, in focusing on the social scientific approach to race, my focus will be on what is sometimes termed objective identity or racial ascription, which focuses on an external assignment of racial categories, rather than subjective identity, which focuses on a psychological or political self-identification.³ There is more to be said about race and subjective identity, including racial political identities, that I do not address in this paper.

The paper will proceed as follows. In Section 2, I will characterize the scientific kind model in more detail, focusing especially on the social kind version of the model (SKM) that is popular among social constructionists. This will also serve to introduce the main theoretical desiderata that I will be assuming for a social constructionist account of race in this paper. In Section 3, I will introduce a toy example intended to help clarify the contrast between the scientific kind model approach to explanation and the RSP approach that I will be proposing in the paper. In Section 4, I will present the RSP model in detail, and in Section 5 I will argue that the RSP view can satisfy the main theoretical desiderata. In Sections 6 and 7 I will present two challenges for the SKM – one centered on cases of passing, and the other centered on intersectional, intra-group differences in experiences – and argue that the RSP model addresses the theoretical insufficiencies of the SKM highlighted by these cases. Section 8 concludes by briefly considering how the RSP view opens up under-explored space in the metaphysics of race literature.

2. The Social Kind Model

³ (Appiah 2006; Bilgrami 2006; Jenkins 2023)

A dominant approach to race has adopted what I will call a *scientific kind model* of race⁴. One characteristic of the scientific kind model is the ontological structure that it posits: on the scientific kind model, race primarily takes the form of a division of humans into a set of stable, discrete, and coherent racial kinds, or races. Another key part of the model is that it takes race to play certain theoretical functions. First, on the scientific kind model, racial kinds, or races, exhibit regularities that make them suitable for explanation, prediction, and induction. Races are real kinds that feature in scientific explanations. Second, membership in a race also plays an alethic, or identity-grounding, function: the truth of what someone really is, racially speaking, is determined by which race they are a member of, which can diverge from how they are perceived by others. In the United States, for example, racial membership tracks ancestry tied to a geographic region, which is strongly correlated with appearance.⁵

There are different versions of the scientific kind model. Two major divisions are natural kind versions, which are accepted by racial naturalists, and social kind versions, which are accepted by social constructionists. For natural kind versions of the model, racial kinds are natural kinds unified by shared biological essences. The biological essence that unifies a given racial kind is what gives rise to the regularities that make it suitable for playing explanatory roles, as well as what grounds membership in the race. Races, on the natural kind model, are integrated into biological science.

For the social kind version of the scientific kind model (I will refer to this as the *social kind model*, or SKM), racial kinds are social kinds rather than natural kinds, and have an important role to play in the social sciences, rather than in biology. This shift in conceiving of races as social kinds rather than natural kinds results in a loosened conception of races as stable, discrete, and coherent. On the SKM, races are *mostly* stable. In particular, it is generally agreed that race is site-specific, or does not “travel” – “Socrates had no race in ancient Athens, though he would be a white man in Minnesota.”⁶ Races are products of particular social milieus, so that whether and how race is constructed in one place may differ from how it may be constructed in another. Thus, races are only stable within macro-contexts like ancient Athens or 21st century

⁴ I take the scientific kind model to encapsulate what Epstein refers to as a “natural kind-like” approach, and what Khalifa and Lauer call “social scientific realism.” (Epstein 2025; Khalifa and Lauer 2021)

⁵ There is some disagreement about the exact role played by these factors. I will assume here that ancestry tied to a geographic region is the definitive membership criterion.

⁶ (Root 2000: S632)

Minnesota, and not across such contexts.⁷ Likewise, while on the natural kind model races are discrete, the SKM can allow for some overlap between races, namely in the case of individuals with parents of different races. Finally, whereas the natural kind model posits a universally shared racial essence that lends maximum coherence to the kind, SKM views often instead take racial kinds to exhibit a lesser degree of coherence. For instance, rather than a universal essence, social forces lead racial kinds to exhibit a cluster of regularly co-occurring properties.⁸ The SKM thus shares the basic ontological structure that helps characterize the scientific kind model, although it relaxes the degree of stability, discreteness, and coherence of racial kinds as compared to natural kind versions of the model.

Races also play the same kinds of theoretical roles on the SKM as they do on the natural kind model, although for different reasons. Again, on the SKM races play an alethic function: there is a truth about one's race that is determined by one's membership in a racial kind. Further, these racial memberships are taken to generally align with the folk view provided by the natural kind model: "[races] really are what we think they are, and really do include the people, more or less, that we think they do (though not for the reasons some of us think)."⁹ Whereas on the natural kind model, one's racial membership is determined by one's racial essence, on the SKM it is instead a matter of how one is classified or treated by society.¹⁰ Closely related to the alethic function of race is the notion of *passing*, which allows that an individual may be taken to be a member of a race that they are not in fact part of. Many have taken passing

⁷ I use "macro-context" here to distinguish it from finer-grained delineations (or "micro-contexts) within these broader contexts.

⁸ (Jenkins 2023; Mallon 2016). Taylor has a similar account, understanding races as populations that, as a result of social forces, share statistical correlations between certain properties. (Taylor 2013)

⁹ (Taylor 2013: 179). Likewise, in his argument against eliminativism, Jeffers also indicates that races have the same extension supposed by the folk view of race: "If, as I have already suggested, the best account of the social construction of races would have us acknowledge the existence of the groups referred to in everyday talk but then provide a different account of their nature, then it is, in fact, a matter of clarifying things to continue to use the same term" (Jeffers 2019: 47). Haslanger, in contrast, takes an ameliorative approach on which some individuals will not have the racial identities that one would commonly suppose. But even then, the extensions of Haslangerian races are meant to match up with the extension of folk races for the most part. See (Haslanger 2000).

¹⁰ There are different variations of how exactly this is fleshed out – for instance, having parallel social experiences, being visually or cognitively identified as an R, inter-subjective agreement as to one's racial classification, or occupying a certain social position. (Ásta 2018; Haslanger 2000; Mallon 2004; Mills 1998; Piper 1992; Taylor 2013)

to be a central feature of race that any social constructionist account should be able to accommodate¹¹.

On the SKM, races also play important social scientific roles. First, races facilitate the identification of patterns of injustice: “If you stop letting yourself notice, statistically, who’s Asian or black or whatever, then you’ll have a hard time noticing patterns that may point you to systemic problems.”¹² Distinguishing between races enables us to recognize that there are significant racial disparities in, for example, health, education, income, employment, and wealth. Second, identifying one’s race offers “a bundle of predictions regarding one’s path through a racialized social terrain... certain kinds of things are more likely to happen to them just on account of how they look.”¹³ More generally, because social mechanisms lead to the regular co-instantiation of certain properties, races also support inductive reasoning, “allow[ing] us to draw successful conclusions about other instances of a kind on the basis of examining instances.”¹⁴ Further, race also plays an important role in explaining systematic injustice. Race is an important factor in explaining why certain groups receive the treatment they do: “Chinese and Japanese immigrants to the USA did not face exclusion because of their ethnicity, but because of their Asianness, their race... black Americans face higher levels of residential segregation in the USA not because of their class status, but because of their race.”¹⁵ Likewise, on an individual level, an individual’s racial identity helps explain why they face racial discrimination (or conversely, why they systematically benefit from racist practices). Races “figure in explanations of the differential impacts on individuals in racially divided settings.”¹⁶ It is *because they are R* that someone receives the racially discriminatory or privileging treatment that they do.

Thus, on the social kind model, races play important social scientific roles by allowing us to identify and explain significant patterns of injustice, as well as supporting inductive reasoning and enabling us to make predictions about individual and population-level outcomes. Because SKM proponents typically have a critical orientation, the SKM also tends to

¹¹ For an illustrative exchange, see, for instance (Gooding-Williams 1998; Mallon 2006; Michaels 1994; Piper 1992).

¹² (Taylor 2013: 220). See also (Haslanger 2019; Mallon 2004, 2016; Root 2000; Sundstrom 2002a, 2002b)

¹³ (Taylor 2013: 222-23).

¹⁴ (Mallon 2016: 91)

¹⁵ (Sundstrom 2002a: 100)

¹⁶ (Mallon 2004: 662)

see race as playing an important political function: different races occupy different positions in a hierarchical political structure.¹⁷ While occupying a shared position in a racial hierarchy does not guarantee that members of the same race will in fact act in solidarity with each other, it does mean that shared racial membership offers a common group interest and an objective basis for organizing collectively in pursuit of that interest.

3. The Parable of the Flooding Desk

The scientific kind model, and the social kind model in particular, takes race to consist in a set of mostly stable, discrete, and coherent races that play important roles in identifying, explaining, and predicting systematic racial injustice, while also, potentially, serving as a basis for political organizing. I next want to provide an alternative model that also takes race to play these important theoretical and political roles, but which does not commit to the same ontological structure as the scientific kind model.

Before presenting the full view that I want to put forward – the RSP model – I will present a toy example that helps to bring out the contrast in these approaches. This toy example will not have all of the features that are relevant to race, nor will my discussion capture everything that is important about the SKM or the RSP views – it is just intended to warm the reader up for thinking about a different way that one might approach the theoretical roles that race plays for the social constructionist.

Now for the toy example – suppose that there is construction in your building. The construction has created a leak in the ceiling above your desk that produces regular, localized flooding. The effects of the flooding are not evenly distributed, however: the items that stay on your desk overnight get wet, whereas those that are in other locations (e.g. on your bookshelf) do not get wet. Some items are virtually always on your desk, some items are virtually never on your desk, and some items shift locations depending on the particular activities of the day, e.g., whether it is a teaching day. Over time, the items that are regularly left on your desk overnight incur significant water damage, unlike other items in your office that remain largely unscathed.

In this flooding situation, there are various regularities that we might want to describe. For instance, we might want to capture the fact that the flooding has differential impacts, and that this is not random, but patterned and systematic. We might also like to explain these differential impacts – why is it that some items are damaged and not others? – and to predict how a particular item is likely to fare in the flooding office.

¹⁷ (Hardimon 2014; Haslanger 2000; Sundstrom 2002b; Taylor 2013)

One approach to fulfilling these theoretical desiderata is to adopt a scientific kind model: we can divide the items in the office into stable and discrete kinds, and explain what is happening in terms of those kinds. In particular, the relevant division seems to be between desk items – the items that are left on the desk overnight – and non-desk items – the items that are not left on the desk overnight. This characterization on its own will not yield stable and discrete kinds (because some items shift between locations), so we can specify that the desk items are those items that are regularly and for the most part left on the desk overnight, and similarly for the non-desk items.¹⁸ We can then use these kinds to do the theoretical work we desire. We can identify the patterns of differential impact made by the flooding: in general, it is desk items that get wet and thereby incur significant damage over time, and non-desk items that, in general, remain dry and safe. Why do certain items get damaged and not others? Well, whether or not an item is a desk item determines whether or not it systematically gets wet and thereby damaged; thus, that this item is a desk item explains why it gets damaged. Finally, we can predict how an item is likely to fare in the flooding office depending on whether it is a desk item (in which case, it is likely to get damaged) or a non-desk item (in which case, it will likely be fine).

The second approach does not start by dividing the items in the office into stable, discrete kinds. Instead it has two main theoretical components: a set of locations, and an allocation scheme. The set of locations identifies different spots in the office where objects can be located at the end of the day. The allocation scheme describes how different objects move between locations; in particular, the allocation scheme captures whether an object will be located on the desk at the end of the day on any given day, and hence also captures how regularly an object ends up on the desk overnight.

Like the kind model, this model enables us to describe and explain patterns of damage, as well as to make predictions about how a particular object is likely to fare in the flooding office. First, we can describe the differential impacts of the flooding by appealing to differences in location: items located on the desk at the end of the day tend to get wet, whereas items not located on the desk tend to stay dry; further, items that are regularly located on the desk overnight tend to incur significant damage over time. Why do certain items get wet and not others? Because items located on the desk overnight tend to get wet, and these items, but not those, were located on the desk overnight. Why do certain items get damaged, and not others?

¹⁸ Cf. (Haslanger 2000)

Because some items, and not others, are regularly located on the desk at the end of the day, and thereby regularly get wet. Finally, we can predict whether an item is likely to get wet or damaged by appealing to the allocation scheme to determine how often the object is likely to be left on the desk overnight.

The kind-based model divides the items in the office into kinds, and does the explanatory work in terms of these kinds. The location-based model divides the office into locations, and does the explanatory work in terms of these locations. Of course, the two models have significant similarities – the kind-based model is drawing on locational information in order to distinguish the kinds – but the entities that the views are committed to differs. Further, the kind-based model offers a more coarse-grained picture than the location-based model. Like the projection of a vector onto an axis, in dividing the items into stable and discrete kinds, the kind-based model projects the locational information onto the more coarse-grained kind distinctions, losing some of the fine-grained detail of the location-based model in the process.

Again, the flooding office provides only a toy example, and the location-based model sketched here is also a toy model, provided with the intention of drawing out some of the contrasts I am interested in. Next, I turn to developing the Roles-Statuses-and-Positions (RSP) model of race, which will take an approach analogous to that of the location-based model.

4. The RSP Approach

The starting point for the RSP model – like other social constructionist accounts – is a background system of social forces, as, for instance, captured by Collins’ matrix of domination, or Haslanger’s account of social practices, structures, and ideology.¹⁹ A matrix of domination – or, more neutrally, a matrix of power – is a system of interconnected institutions, social schemas, resources, and social practices that organizes social relations. These systems are site-specific and relative to a particular social milieu, taking different forms across different times and places, or *macro-contexts*.²⁰

Within a macro-context like 21st century America, the matrix of domination includes a racial ideology that represents humanity as being divided into biologically-distinct racial kinds. The racial ideology includes ideas about what those kinds are, what is required to be a member of those kinds, the “proper” roles of members of those kinds, and how members of those kinds

¹⁹ (Collins 1993, 2000; Haslanger 2016, 2017b, 2017a, 2018)

²⁰ I will later distinguish different micro-contexts within a macro-context.

ought to behave.²¹ The racial schemas that make up this ideology guide individual behavior and help shape the institutions and social practices of the matrix, which also in turn help shape the ideology.

Altogether, the matrix of domination constitutes the three major components of the RSP model: a set of racial *roles*, a set of racial *statuses*, and a space of racialized social *positions*.

First, social roles are nodes in the social practices and institutions of the matrix, characterized by expected behaviors, norms, constraints, and enablements. I intend for a fairly expansive picture of social roles, to include, for instance, a role in a social script, a role in an institution, and materially- or geographically-defined roles, like residing in a food desert. Racial roles are social roles that are explicitly or explanatorily connected to the racial ideology: in the primary case, racial roles are social roles that the ideology directly associates with particular racial categories; and recursively, racial roles are social roles that are causally or normatively connected to other racial roles.²²

Second, the set of racial statuses emerges from the racial kinds envisioned by the racial ideology. The status labels correspond to the names of the ideologically envisioned races (e.g. Black, white, and Asian), and status assignments also track the ideology's core criteria for membership in a race. That is, someone will have the status 'white' in macro-context \mathbb{C} just in case they meet the ideological criteria for being white in \mathbb{C} . For example, in contemporary America, an individual will have the status 'white' if their ancestry is tied to Europe. Racial statuses are characterized by a set of racial roles that are normative for the status. For instance, the status 'white' is associated with a set of racial roles that are taken to be proper for, or properly occupied by, individuals with this status.

On the RSP model, racial roles are the analogs of office locations in the toy model, operating as sites of particular forms of treatment, experience, and interaction. An individual's social location in a micro-context C is specified by the role(s) that they occupy in C .²³ This social location should (ideologically speaking) match the individual's racial status, though in practice, the roles one occupies do not always match the dictates of one's status. Individuals come to occupy particular roles through a variety of mechanisms. Sometimes, for instance, an individual

²¹ (Martín 2024)

²² Racial roles can also be, e.g., race and gender specific, such as roles ideologically envisioned for Black women.

²³ By a micro-context, I mean a finer-grained context within a macro-context. I will denote macro-contexts using ' \mathbb{C} ' and micro-contexts using ' C '.

comes to occupy a particular racial role because someone perceives or imagines them to have features indicative of a particular racial status, and thereby categorizes them as, e.g., white and places them in a white role in the relevant social practice. For example, someone on the phone with Lucy might implicitly categorize her as white based on her accent and interact with her accordingly. Again, such allocations into a racial role do not necessarily track the individual's racial status: despite her accent, Lucy might have ancestry that designates her status as Asian, and not as white. Further, the process of being allocated to a particular racial role need not involve some individual agent implicitly or explicitly ascribing one a racial label. Individuals may also come to occupy a particular role by, for instance, having certain features that are tracked by institutional policies (e.g. as when someone is denied a loan because of a low credit score), making decisions under structural constraints (e.g. as when someone overspends on their credit card in order to pay their bills), or by virtue of the circumstances of their birth (e.g. as when someone becomes the resident of a food desert by being born into a family that resides in a food desert).

While there are a variety of mechanisms by which individuals can come to occupy particular racial roles, broadly, we can say that these mechanisms track different individual features in allocating someone to a role in C. The reference to "features" is also meant to be capacious here. The relevant features can, for instance, be intrinsic or extrinsic; they can be definitive of membership in a racial category according to the ideology (e.g. ancestry tied to a geographical region), they can be merely indicative of category membership (e.g. skin tone, accent, clothing, zip code, or an identity marker printed on a birth certificate), or they can be linked to a category through histories of racism. Precisely which features are relevant will depend on the ideology and practices of the matrix. For instance, institutional policies that require a racial marker to be printed on birth certificates and that create constraints and enablements that track these racial markers constitute these markers as features that are relevant to allocating individuals to racial roles. Likewise, beyond just race, the matrix of domination will also make various features relevant for allocating individuals to gender roles, class roles, and other kinds of social roles, including intersectional roles²⁴.

²⁴ The RSP view allows that there are, e.g., race-and-class specific roles, such as the role of food desert resident. Such roles will count as racial roles (as well as class roles and race-and-class roles).

Considering all of the socially significant features in a macro-context— that is, all of the different kinds of features that play a role in the mechanisms that allocate individuals to social roles— as constituting a multi-dimensional feature-space, individuals will occupy different *social positions* within this space.²⁵ An individual’s social position in \mathbb{C} will be determined by the particular features that they possess from among the array of socially significant features in \mathbb{C} , and reflects how the individual interfaces with the institutions and practices of their social milieu. An individual’s social position is not static, but can shift either as the individual’s features change, or as changes in the practices of the milieu alter the feature space. In macro-contexts where the matrix of domination constitutes racial roles, an individual’s social position will be a *racialized position* (just as it may simultaneously be, e.g., a gendered and classed position). An individual’s racialized position helps to determine which racial roles they come to occupy in and across micro-contexts within \mathbb{C} .

To summarize, the matrix of domination within a macro-context \mathbb{C} constitutes the three major components of the RSP model: a set of racial *roles*, a set of racial *statuses*, and a space of racialized social *positions*. Racial roles are sites of constraint, enablement, action, and interaction. A racial status is normatively connected to a set of racial roles— one’s racial status designed certain racial roles as being appropriate or typical for one. Racialized social positions are causally-explanatorily linked to different racial roles: one’s racialized position shapes which racial roles one is likely to occupy across different micro-contexts. Comparing this to the toy model of the flooding office, racial roles are like the different locations in the office that are directly explanatorily connected to whether items get wet or not. Racialized social positions are like the allocation scheme that describes whether and how items move across locations in the office. The toy model lacks an analog to racial statuses, but we could create one by supposing that there are rules or guidelines as to which items are supposed to remain in certain locations— rules that are often, but not always, adhered to in practice.

I have presented two social constructionist models of race: the SKM model, which is a version of the scientific kind model and has been standard in the metaphysics of race literature, and the RSP model. My aim in this paper is to argue that social constructionists who take race to

²⁵ To be clear, the multi-dimensional picture here is not one where there is one axis corresponding to race, another to gender, another to class, etc., and where the values along each dimension correspond to membership in a particular (e.g. racial) group or kind. It is more complex, with each socially significant kind of feature (skin tone, hair texture, accent, zip code, etc.) representing a different dimension of variation.

play an important social scientific role should prefer the RSP model to the SKM model. I will argue this by first showing that the RSP model can do the theoretical work that social constructionists desire, and then showing that the SKM faces certain theoretical challenges that the RSP model can overcome, particularly as concerns cases of passing and intersectional differences. This, I conclude, shows that the SKM is a better social constructionist model of race than the SKM with respect to the theoretical desiderata outlined by the social scientific approach.

5. Explanation on the RSP Approach

In investigating the theoretical power of RSP model, I first want to note that the RSP model seems at least as powerful as the SKM. This is because descriptions or explanations that the SKM provides in terms of kinds or kind membership can be translated into the RSP model by appealing to statuses. On the other hand, if it turns out that all of the theoretical work is done by statuses on the RSP model, then the RSP model does not add anything meaningful to the SKM.

However, it is not the case that all of the work of the RSP model is done by appealing to racial statuses. Rather, the different components of the RSP model play complementary theoretical functions, and help answer different explanatory questions. One question is why someone has the kind of experience that they do in a particular context – why, for example, they are surveilled and followed while shopping, or why they need to spend hours on a bus to get fresh produce. The RSP model explains this by reference to the roles that individuals occupy in these contexts – like the role of Black shopper, or the role of food desert resident. The constraints, enablements, modes of interaction, or other norms that characterize these roles explain why role occupants have the kinds of experiences that they do. Another question is why someone occupies a particular role – why is it, for example, that Bryan occupies the role of Black shopper at the store? The RSP model appeals to aspects of Bryan’s social position that are salient in the particular context to explain this. In this case, the store employees’ observation of Bryan’s dark skin leads them to cast him into the Black shopper role.²⁶ Another question is why an individual is systematically disadvantaged across micro-contexts. The RSP model appeals to

²⁶ While not all situations will involve an agent who explicitly ascribes a racial label to the individual in the situation, we can suppose that in this situation, the store employee does take Bryan to be Black, and for this reason, places him in the Black shopper role.

the individual's holistic social position to explain and predict their holistic, diachronic experience.

This shows that the RSP model can explain and predict experiences of injustice at the individual level, but what about identifying and explaining collective patterns of injustice? There are multiple ways of doing this on the RSP model. First, we can identify patterns of injustice that attach to particular racial roles or sets of racial roles, and explain them in relation to the constraints and enablements that characterize those roles. For example, we can identify patterns of injustice that correlate with residing in a predominantly poor, Black neighborhood (such as poor educational outcomes or elevated risk of developing chronic diseases like diabetes), and explain these patterns by appealing to the constraints and enablements that are associated with living in an under-resourced neighborhood. Second, we can identify patterns that track particular features, or dimensions of social positioning, and explain them by pointing to the roles that are associated with these features.²⁷ For example, we can identify patterns of injustice that correlate with being dark-skinned, such as getting surveilled at the store, and explain these patterns by reference to the norms, constraints, and enablements of the roles that dark-skinned individuals tend to be cast into in different contexts. At the store, dark-skinned individuals are likely to be cast into the role of Black shopper, whose occupants are regarded with suspicion and seen as apt for surveillance. Third, we can also pursue the strategy that is analogous to that of the SKM by identifying patterns that generally correlate with a particular racial status. We can explain these patterns by, on one hand, pointing to the features that are correlated with a racial status, and then appealing to the set of racial roles that track these features and give rise to the patterns of injustice we are considering. We can also explain these patterns by noting that there are certain roles that individuals with this status are, socially, meant to occupy, and that, generally speaking, they tend to occupy. Thus, the RSP model enables us to identify, predict, and explain systematic injustice, not just synchronically and diachronically, but also individually and collectively.

Finally, the RSP model can also accommodate and make sense of passing. Recall that racial statuses are normatively associated with certain racial roles, in the sense that there are roles that someone with a particular status "properly" occupies within the racist worldview. On

²⁷ This aligns well with a proposal in the social sciences that we understand race as a "bundle of sticks," or a composite of multiple features, in order to study the causal effects of race. (Sen and Wasow 2016)

the RSP view, someone *passes* when the roles that they occupy do not match the roles that their racial status dictates that they “ought” to occupy, or when someone classifies them in a way that does not match their racial status.²⁸

I have argued that the RSP model can do the kind of theoretical work that social constructionists, and particularly those taking a social scientific approach to race, think is important. Next, I will argue that the SKM faces certain explanatory challenges that the RSP model overcomes. First, the SKM model struggles to properly capture cases that involve passing, whether that is synchronic passing (passing in a particular micro-context) or more classic, sustained cases of passing. Second, the SKM also struggles with cases that highlight intra-group differences in experiences, leading to weaknesses when it comes explanation and prediction. In both cases, I will argue, the RSP model improves on the SKM.

6. Challenge 1: Passing

One challenge faced by the SKM involves cases of passing. Recently, Singh and Wodak have used what they call *misperception discrimination* cases to argue that explanations appealing to race do not adequately explain racial discrimination. Misperception discrimination cases involve passing in a particular micro-context; they are intuitively described as cases in which an individual is discriminated against because they are taken to be a member of a group G in C , although they do not in fact belong to G . While Singh and Wodak emphasize that misperception discrimination is a real-world problem,²⁹ their central example is the following pair of hypothetical cases:

Veridical: After seeing Jamal’s stereotypically Black name, an employer rejects Jamal’s application. Jamal is Black.

Misperceived: Exactly as above, but Jamal is white.

Singh and Wodak argue that social constructionists cannot adequately explain why Jamal’s application is rejected, and thus why he is racially discriminated against. Given the dominance of the SKM approach, their argument implicitly assumes this model in arguing against the social constructionist. On the SKM, it is as members of a race, or *because they are R*, that individuals experience racially discriminatory or privileging treatment. The problem, Singh

²⁸ If one thinks of passing as something that an individual intentionally does or aims at, then this can be added as a condition.

²⁹ (Singh and Wodak 2024: 4)

and Wodak argue, is that Jamal-M³⁰ is not Black. Thus, we cannot say that he is racially discriminated against because he is Black; moreover, appealing to the fact that he is white also does not explain why he is racially discriminated against. This leads Singh and Wodak to conclude that we cannot explain racial discrimination by appealing to race.³¹ More precisely, their argument suggests that *being R* (in the sense of being a member of the racial kind *R*), cannot adequately explain why someone is racially discriminated against.

Two common responses to this argument, which Singh and Wodak consider, are (1) to maintain that race is still explanatory because we must appeal to the fact that Jamal was *taken to be* Black in order to explain why he experiences racial discrimination, and (2) to assert that Jamal-M is actually Black. To these we might add: (3) maintaining that race is still explanatory because we need to appeal to race to explain why it seems like something has “gone wrong” in *Misperceived*, in a way that it has not in *Veridical*. I think that each of these responses captures an element of truth about race, and that the RSP view better assimilates these ideas than the SKM.

The first response says that race is explanatory because we must appeal to the fact that Jamal was *taken to be Black* in order to explain why he was racially discriminated against. The problem for the SKM with this response is that this explanation does not actually appeal to races or racial membership. If what does the explanatory work is how one is classified by others, and how one is classified by others is both not identical to and can diverge from one’s racial membership, then, contra the SKM, one’s racial membership is not what explains why one has the kind of experience one does.³² Hence, this first response does not actually seem to help the SKM – even though it does seem to capture something important about the role that race should play in the explanation.

The RSP view, however, can better accommodate this first line of thinking. On the RSP view, *Misperceived* and *Veridical* can each be explained as follows: a racial dimension of Jamal’s social positioning that was salient in this context (viz. his Black-coded name) led to his being classified as Black and thereby placed into the role of Black applicant, which triggered anti-

³⁰ I’ll denote the Jamal of *Veridical* as Jamal-V and the Jamal of *Misperceived* as Jamal-M.

³¹ I am glossing over other relevant parts of their argument. In particular, Singh and Wodak argue that *Veridical* and *Misperceived* are both cases of racial discrimination and that they should be explained in the same way. They thus take the argument about *Misperceived* to show that race is not explanatory in *either* case. (Singh and Wodak 2024)

³² Singh and Wodak make the point slightly differently. They understand being taken to be Black as individuals having certain beliefs and attitudes about one. From there they conclude that it is individuals’ beliefs and attitudes, and not races, that do the explaining.

Black norms that led to his application being rejected. This explanation captures the idea that race plays a role in Jamal's experience by virtue of Jamal's being taken to be Black. On the SKM view, race is not a matter of what you are taken to be; it is a matter of what you are, or what race you belong to. On the RSP view, what you are taken to be *is* part of race, insofar as, for example, being taken to be Black in C corresponds to being allocated to a particular racial role in C.

A second common response to the misperception discrimination argument is to maintain that Jamal-M is Black. This response allows one to say that Jamal-M and Jamal-V were each racially discriminated against because they are Black, and thus that race explains racial discrimination. However, on the SKM view, this response runs into some issues. Saying that Jamal-M is Black allows us to explain Jamal-M's experience in this particular situation, but what about the fact that, by virtue of his light skin, Jamal-M is systematically privileged in other situations? If we say that Jamal-M is Black in order to resolve the *Misperception* issue, then we cannot explain why he is privileged in a host of other contexts. Further, this response seems to give up the notion of passing, which, again, many have taken to be central to a social constructionist account of race.

In response to this, one could opt for a contextualist view of race. For instance, one could say that how one is perceived in a (micro-)context determines one's race in that context. One could then say that, in *Misperceived*, Jamal-M is discriminated against because he is Black in that context, whereas in other contexts, Jamal-M is white and is thereby privileged. Although this view still gives up on passing, it does resolve the explanatory issue. Note, however, that it also departs from the SKM in a significant way: race is no longer a matter of mostly stable and discrete racial kinds. Rather, race now takes the form of racial categories whose extensions shift from moment to moment in accordance with how individuals are perceived across micro-contexts.

Another option is to adopt Haslanger's distinction between functioning as an R in C and being R (where being R is a matter of regularly and for the most part functioning as an R).³³ This introduces a contextual component while still maintaining mostly stable and discrete racial kinds. On this view, although *being R* still does not explain why someone has the kind of experience that they do in a particular context, *functioning as an R* does. The Haslangerian view thus also allows one to capture the thoughts behind responses (1) and (2) – we can understand

³³ (Haslanger 2000)

Jamal's being taken to be Black as his functioning as Black in C. Moreover, the Haslangerian account has the further theoretical virtue of being able to explain why Jamal-M's *holistic* experience is one of racial privilege, whereas Jamal-V's holistic experience is one of racial oppression: it is because Jamal-M is white and Jamal-V is Black that their holistic experiences take the respective shapes that they do. Finally, the account also allows for passing, since one can function as an R without being R.

However, the Haslangerian account cannot capture classic cases of passing that are not isolated to a small share of contexts, but that encompass long stretches of one's life. The (intuitively) Black Americans who successfully passed as white in order to avoid Jim Crow discrimination regularly and for the most part functioned as white and so, on Haslanger's view, *were white*. This reflects the fact that the SKM, even on Haslanger's version, faces an analogue of the misperception discrimination argument at the level of systematic experiences, and not just with respect to synchronic or one-off experiences of discrimination. The sustained passer who successfully evaded a life marked by racial oppression was not oppressed as a Black person (they avoided this fate), nor privileged as a white person (they were not white). Thus, the strategy of maintaining that racial kind membership explains holistic experiences of oppression, even if not synchronic experiences of oppression, is unsatisfactory because it cannot explain classic cases of passing.³⁴

The RSP view, in contrast, similarly combines diachronic and holistic components, while also accommodating classic cases of passing. On the RSP view, occupying an R-role in C is analogous to functioning as an R in C and explains one's experience in C, while one's racialized social position explains the nature of one's holistic experience. Jamal-M, for instance, occupies the role of Black applicant in *Misperceived*, but his social positioning is such that, overall, he will occupy white roles in most contexts, with the result that his overall experience is one of racial privilege. This is in contrast to Jamal-V, whose social positioning is such that, overall, he will occupy Black roles in most contexts, such that his overall experience is one of racial oppression. The classic passer, in turn, is positioned much like Jamal-M, such that they mostly occupy white racial roles throughout their life. The RSP view can still make sense of this as a case of passing, however, by reference to the passer's racial status: the classic passer consistently occupies roles that they are not "supposed" to occupy.

³⁴ Or, one must, again, let go of these cases of passing.

This brings me to the third response one might have to the misperception discrimination argument: that race is still explanatory in misperception cases because we need to appeal to race to explain why it seems like something has “gone wrong” in *Misperceived*, in a way that it has not in *Veridical*. Whereas responses (1) and (2) focus on race as playing a role in *causally* making one a target for certain kinds of treatment, and thus explaining why someone has the kind of experience that they do, response (3) suggests instead that race plays a role in *normatively* making one a target for certain kinds of treatment. These two senses of making someone a target often seem to be run together – presumably, the thought is that people are trying to follow the racial “rules,” such that being a normative target will lead to being an actual target. But although it is true that people are generally trying to follow the racial rules, and that they often succeed in doing so, one’s racial status is not always transparent. Beliefs about someone’s racial status are mediated by perception of all kinds of racial features, which do not perfectly track racial status, and are formed in contexts of imperfect information.³⁵ In separating racial statuses from racial roles and racialized social positions, the RSP recognizes that these things can come apart, even if in many or most cases they coincide. As a result, the RSP view can explain the sense in which something has “gone wrong” in *Misperceived* and in classic cases of passing that has not “gone wrong” in *Veridical*: in the former cases, but not the latter, individuals are occupying roles that they are not, within the worldview of the matrix of domination, “supposed” to occupy.³⁶ Because the SKM has one primary kind of theoretical entity – the racial kind – it struggles to simultaneously (1) explain why someone receives the kind of treatment that they do and (2) adequately capture the kind of treatment that someone “ought to” receive, precisely because these can come apart. The RSP view, in contrast, has different components to accomplish (1) and (2), which are strongly correlated with each other, but can come apart.

Thus, while the SKM struggles with passing cases, the RSP model can accommodate these cases while also better assimilating the insights about race that these cases draw out.

7. Challenge 2: Intersectional, Intra-Group Differences

³⁵ And further, even in cases that do not involve an agent’s beliefs about someone’s racial classification, the practices that allocate someone to a racial role sometimes track features that are merely indicative of or correlated with a racial status.

³⁶ Of course, from the perspective of justice, something has gone wrong in *Veridical* at least as much as in *Misperceived*.

A second challenge faced by the SKM involves intersectional, intra-group differences in experiences of racial privilege and oppression. Suppose, for instance, that Aleisha is a light-skinned Black woman who grew up in an under-resourced, predominantly Black neighborhood with high levels of environmental pollution and limited access to healthy foods or medical care. Suppose, too, that Brittany is a dark-skinned Black woman who grew up in a wealthy neighborhood with ample resources and whose influential parents gave her access to exclusive opportunities.

Part of the theoretical work that race is supposed to do on a social scientific approach is, again, to support inductions and make predictions about how someone's life will go, as well as to explain why individuals have the kinds of experiences that they do. The SKM does this work in terms of racial kinds — one is supposed to be able to draw inferences about other instances of the kind based on observations of some of its members, and to make predictions and explain experiences based on kind membership. Given that Aleisha and Brittany are members of the same racial kind, the SKM suggests that we should make the same kinds of predictions about how Aleisha and Brittany's lives are likely to go with respect to race, and that observations about, e.g., Aleisha's experience of racial injustice can inform inductive inferences about Brittany's experience, and vice versa.

But although Aleisha and Brittany both experience racial oppression, the concrete forms that this oppression takes varies for each of them. Brittany, for instance, is highly likely to be pulled over by the police while driving or to be surveilled while shopping, while Aleisha's light skin makes it much more likely that she is spared these experiences. Conversely, living in a medical and food desert with high levels of exposure to environmental pollution puts Aleisha at high risk of developing chronic illnesses like diabetes that Brittany, by virtue of growing up in a wealthy and well-resourced neighborhood, is much less likely to develop.³⁷ Aleisha is more likely to have her resume thrown out in the first round of application reviews, whereas Brittany's professional pedigree and influential connections give her access to high-powered job opportunities. On the other hand, both of them, in whatever jobs they have, are likely to face higher levels of disrespect than their white co-workers.

Importantly, while there are similarities in Aleisha and Brittany's experiences, their experiences are also different — and not just different, but different in systematic and predictable ways. The SKM allows for mere difference: as Taylor's probabilistic view

³⁷ (Krishnan et al. 2010; Signorello et al. 2007)

emphasizes, the effects of race are not deterministic.³⁸ If members of R have a 20% chance of X, some members of R will experience X and others will not— on the SKM, we can make the same probabilistic predictions for kind members and still allow that things will turn out differently for different people. However, this does not account for the *systematic* differences that we see when comparing Aleisha and Brittany’s experiences. Insofar as the SKM bases its predictions on racial kind membership, and Aleisha and Brittany are members of the same racial kind, this suggests that we should make the same probabilistic predictions for how Aleisha and Brittany’s experiences of racial oppression are likely to go. But this is a mistake— for Aleisha and Brittany, their respective odds of, e.g., being pulled over by the police, developing diabetes, or getting a job interview are not the same. Contrary to what the SKM suggests, the probabilities of experiencing concrete forms of racial injustice are not uniform across a racial kind.

One might respond that the differences in Aleisha and Brittany’s experiences are due to differences along other dimensions, such as class: although Aleisha and Brittany are members of the same race, they are members of different socioeconomic classes, and the systematic differences in their experiences are because of the differences in their class membership.³⁹

However, insofar as this objection separates class and race into two different dimensions, this move also does not work. It is true that the differences in Aleisha and Brittany’s respective odds of developing chronic diseases like diabetes are linked to their class differences. However, the class dimensions of Aleisha’s situation are deeply intertwined with histories of institutional racism, such that her risk of chronic disease is not just a matter of class, but also of race. We thus cannot say that, as members of the same race, they have the same risk of chronic disease, but as members of different classes, their risk differs. One might then suggest that we should not separate race and class, but take both racial and class membership into account when determining an individual’s risk. However, this, too, seems to be insufficient: research suggests that two individuals who are members of the same race and class, but who live in neighborhoods with different levels of poverty, will have different levels of risk.⁴⁰ Again, the kind-based view is too coarse-grained for our theoretical purposes. It is not the coarse-grained facts of kind membership, but rather the finer-grained details of social location, that make the difference.

³⁸ (Taylor 2013)

³⁹ For this kind of move see, for instance, (Cudd 2006; Frye 2008; Haslanger 2004)

⁴⁰ (Gaskin et al. 2014)

Further, the strategy of explaining away the systematic differences between Aleisha and Brittany's experiences by attributing them to differences in kind membership along other social dimensions is even less compelling when we consider other examples, such as Aleisha and Brittany's respective odds of being pulled over by the police. This is not readily explained away by differences in, e.g., class, and is clearly impacted by the difference in their respective skin tones. Thus, it is not that as members of the same race, their odds of being pulled over by the police are the same, and it is only because of differences along other social dimensions that their odds differ. Rather, even as members of the same race, their racialized appearances – or more generally, their racialized social positions – differ such as to produce predictable, systematic differences in their experiences of racial injustice.

The SKM view, I thereby contend, is too coarse-grained for the predictive and explanatory work that we want race to do for us. The RSP view, in contrast, provides more fine-grained tools in the way of racialized social positions and racial roles, even as it also allows for more coarse-grained generalizations in terms of racial statuses when this is better suited to our purposes. In particular, the RSP view can appeal to the differences in their racialized social positions to account for the systematic differences in Aleisha and Brittany's experiences: Aleisha and Brittany have different racial features (e.g. different skin tones and zip codes) that position them differently. On the RSP view, what makes one a causal target for being allocated to particular racial roles are one's racial features, such that differences in those racial features translates to differences in the kinds of racial roles that one is likely to occupy. Hence, on the RSP view, the odds that an individual with racial status R will occupy racial role X will not necessarily be uniform across R , but rather will vary with differences in social positioning. Applying this to Brittany and Aleisha, the RSP view can correctly predict that Brittany's dark skin makes it more likely that she will occupy certain kinds of racial roles (e.g. the role of Black driver) in contexts where one's appearance is visible or known to others, whereas Aleisha's light skin makes this less likely. At the same time, similarities in their racialized positions also means that there are some racial roles that they are both likely to occupy in certain kinds of contexts, such that there are also systematic similarities in their experiences. The RSP view can thus account for both systematic similarities and differences in experiences of racial injustice, and offers tools for more accurate predictions than the SKM.

Moreover, although this has not generally been emphasized as a desideratum in the literature, it is worth highlighting that the RSP view better reflects the intersectional insight that

multiple social dimensions operate simultaneously in shaping one's social experience.⁴¹ On the RSP view, socially relevant features from across different dimensions are integrated in determining one's social position. Further, the RSP view allows that some features – such as one's zip code – are simultaneously, e.g., racial-and-class features. Thus, while social positioning is importantly racialized, it is also simultaneously, e.g., classed and gendered. An intersectional perspective is thus built into the positional component of the RSP view, while the status component is specifically racial.

The SKM, in contrast, separates social dimensions into orthogonal sets of social kinds. Further, attempts to incorporate intersectionality on a social kind approach have tended toward replacing typically-accepted social kinds (e.g. Black and woman) with finer-grained social kinds (e.g. Black woman), generating worries about infinite regresses and the dissolution of traditional social kinds.⁴² By integrating an intersectional picture of social positioning with an account of statuses that preserves traditional category distinctions, the RSP view offers a substantial theoretical benefit that kind-based views have so far struggled to achieve. This is not just an abstract theoretical accomplishment, but as illustrated by the discussion above, allows for concrete predictive and explanatory gains: the RSP view's intersectional picture of social positioning better explains and predicts Aleisha's and Brittany's respective risks of developing chronic diseases like diabetes, because it better captures the ways in which race and class are intertwined in the social determinants that drive these health risks.

Overall, then, the SKM struggles to fulfill the theoretical roles that many social constructionists have claimed we need a realist account of race to perform for us. In particular, I have argued that the SKM struggles to adequately capture passing cases, because it merges the casual and normative aspects of race into one theoretical entity, the racial kind. I have also argued that the SKM is too coarse-grained to adequately capture systematic, intra-group differences. Finally, I have shown that the RSP view can step in to solve these problems, providing better explanations and predictions while also accommodating passing and integrating an intersectional approach that does not abandon or dissolve racial categories. There is thus a significant theoretical argument for abandoning the SKM in favor of the RSP approach.

⁴¹ (Collins 2019; Collins and Bilge 2020; Crenshaw 1989, 1990)

⁴² See, for instance, (Gasdaglis and Madva 2020; Jorba and Rodó-Zárate 2019: 184; Martín 2024; McCall 2005; Young 1994).

8. Conclusion

The scientific kind model sees race as having a particular structure and function: race primarily takes the form of a set of (mostly) stable, discrete, and coherent races, and these races play important theoretical roles in supporting explanation, prediction, and induction, as well as grounding claims about racial identity. The social kind model is a version of the scientific kind model, popular among social constructionists, that understands races as specifically social kinds with roles to play in explaining and predicting systematic injustice. In response to racial skeptics, proponents of the social kind model appeal to the important theoretical work that races do for us in defending the reality of race: races feature in our best social scientific explanations; thus, races are real social kinds. Race is real.

In this paper, I have argued that there is an alternative model that better supports the theoretical work that social scientifically-minded constructionists want race to do for us. I have proposed a view that sees race as comprising three kinds of interconnected entities – racial roles, racial statuses, and racialized social positions – rather than a single set of racial kinds, and argued that the RSP view better explains and predicts racial injustice.

The RSP view is a realist view of race – racial roles, racial statuses, and racialized social positions are real, as are the systems of social practices that ground them. The RSP view is also not an eliminativist view of race – we should continue to use racial concepts and to talk about the profound, unjust effects of race. But the RSP view also suggests that we need not remain so faithful to the racist's picture of the form that race takes. The RSP view does not see race, at its core, as comprising a division of humans into races. Rather, the RSP view sees race, at its core, as creating and systematically allocating individuals into social roles. The difference may seem subtle, particularly because the traditional social constructionist sees races as occupying different social roles. The difference comes out when one recognizes that, on the RSP view, there is not one social role or position per race, which all members of the race occupy.⁴³ Rather, there are many racial roles associated with a racial status. Different individuals, even having the same racial status, have different likelihoods of occupying those racial roles, and individuals do not always occupy the roles they “ought” to occupy. If we understand races as kinds with the properties and functions posited by the scientific kind model, then the RSP view is, in a

⁴³ At least, if one understands social roles or positions as corresponding to differences in experience, and not just in normative status.

significant sense, committed to the reality of race without being committed to the existence of races.

Narrowly, my argument shows that the social constructionist who is interested in using race to explain systematic injustice should let go of the social kind model in favor of the RSP view. But more broadly, it also opens up space in the metaphysics of race debate regarding the structure that race takes, allowing for a position that combines realism about *race* with anti-realism about *races*. This is a position that has been under-investigated, but which merits consideration.

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