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Publication date
2014
Document Version
Final published version
Published in
Krisis
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Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Betti, A. (2014). On Haslanger's Focal Analysis of Race and Gender in *Resisting Reality* as an Interpretive Model. *Krisis*, *2014*(1), 13-18. http://krisis.eu/on-haslangers-focal-analysis-of-race-and-gender-in-resisting-reality-as-an-interpretive-model/

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Download date:18 Nov 2026

Krisis

Journal for contemporary philosophy

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ON HASLANGER'S FOCAL ANALYSIS OF RACE AND GENDER IN *RESISTING REALITY* AS AN INTERPRETIVE MODEL

Krisis 2014, Issue 1
www.krisis.eu

In *Resisting Reality* (Haslanger 2012), and more specifically in Chapter 7, a focal analysis of race and gender as social classes is proposed. A *focal analysis* is an account of:

'a variety of phenomena in terms of their relations to one that is theorized, *for the purposes at hand*, as the focus or core phenomenon. For my purposes, the core phenomenon is the pattern of social relations that constitute men as dominant and women as subordinate, or whites as dominant and people of color as subordinate. An account of how norms, symbols, identities, and such as gendered or raced is then given by reference to the 'core' sense.' (Haslanger 2012: 7; see also 228)[1]

One way to put the point cited above is that the core meaning or sense of 'woman' – a term referring to gender, not to be confused with 'female', a term referring to sex – is adequately though partially captured (for a certain purpose) as 'those who are socially subordinate'. In other words, *social subordination* is the common core (focus or core phenomenon) of both the concept of *woman* and that of *person of color*, though the core of the concept of *woman* contains, next to *those who are socially subordinate*, also other sub-concepts, e.g. (the concept corresponding to the terms) 'due to their perceived or imagined female reproductive capacities', while the concept of *(person of) color(ed)* contains, next to *socially subordinate* the sub-concepts (expressed by) 'due to the interpretation of their physical features as evidence of their ancestral links to a particular geographical region' (9, 234 and ff.). Furthermore, both these concepts, *woman* and *colored*, next to a core, have each a periphery or *margins*: the sub-concept of *weakness* for instance, belongs to the margins of 'woman', since it only enters the concept of woman in certain contexts.

When talking of the *core* and *margins* of a concept as being constituted by sub-concepts, I use a terminology from a recent discussion in a different field: the methodology of the history of ideas (Kuukkanen 2008). This is deliberate. Building upon this terminology, a recent proposal in the methodology of the history of ideas, known as the 'model approach', has been advanced to defend the use of interpretive models as cognitive schemas for a sound and implementable method in the history of ideas (Betti and van den Berg 2014). The methodology of the history of ideas is relevant to Haslanger's focal analysis because Haslanger sees gender and race concepts as carrying structural *continuities* across cross-cultural and transhistorical *discontinuities*: 'Gender varies tremendously cross-culturally and transhistorically, but there are, I argue, important structural similarities across these variations.' (8).

It is precisely on account of the details of this very idea of continuity in discontinuity that the method of (Lovejoy-style) history of ideas has been attacked: what *is* it that stays the same, exactly? And how can something stay the same and yet change? Most importantly, holists like Hintikka and Spitzer ask: isn't every idea, including *gender*, essentially dependent on its context (Hintikka 1975, 26-8, 34; Spitzer 1944; Lovejoy 1944, 206-7)? So much so that, in fact, there is no such thing as the concept of *gender* but only of *gender-in-context-x*? The point had been made for transhistorical considerations, but it can be easily adapted for cross-cultural ones.

Betti and van den Berg's (2014) model approach is a defence of Lovejoy-style history of ideas against critics such as Skinner. In this approach, ideas or concepts are construed as complex relational frameworks (models) that combine both stable parts (continuities) and variable parts (discontinuities). To this date, one of the most fully developed models of this kind is the so-called Classical Model of Science (CMS), which systematizes in seven conditions an ideal of science adopted by various philosophers throughout history (de Jong and Betti 2010). Using this model, historians can detect both continuities and discontinuities when studying how the meaning of the concept of *science* changes in different periods and intellectual contexts, i.e. by pointing out which *parts* of this model remain stable (core, in bold) and which change (margins, italics):

The Classical Model of Science (de Jong & Betti 2010)

A *proper science S* satisfies the following conditions:

(1) All *propositions* and all *concepts* (or *terms*) of *S* concern a specific set of objects or are about a certain domain of being(s).

(2a) There are in S a number of so-called fundamental *concepts* (or *terms*).

(2b) All other *concepts* (or *terms*) occurring in *S* are composed of (or are definable from) these fundamental *concepts* (or terms).

(3a) There are in *S* a number of so-called fundamental *propositions*.

(3b) All other *propositions* of S follow from or are grounded in (or are provable or demonstrable from) these fundamental propositions.

(4) All *propositions* of *S* are true.

(5) All *propositions* of *S* are universal and necessary in some sense or another.

(6) All *propositions* of *S* are known to be true. A non-fundamental proposition is known to be true through its (grounding) proof or demonstration in *S*.

(7) All *concepts* or *terms* of S are adequately known. A non-fundamental concept is adequately known through its composition or definition.

I claim in this paper that the model approach to the history of ideas shares interesting similarities to Haslanger's focal analysis from the methodological point of view, and that attracting attention to these similarities, and thus seeing Haslanger's focal analysis as an interpretive model in the sense of Betti and van den Berg (2014)(or as something that can be *turned* into such a model) seems to me useful in a least four ways. I will briefly discuss all four.

1. Methodological support to Haslanger's focal analysis of gender and race.

The first way in which it is useful to attract attention to the similarity between Haslanger's focal analysis and interpretive models in the sense of Betti and van den Berg (2014) (henceforth: models) is this: if Haslanger's focal analysis is (or can be turned into) a model in Betti and van den Berg's sense, then the arguments used to support the latter can also usefully support Haslanger's focal analysis. This is a salient point, because, as Betti and van den Berg argue, without the use of models to trace concept drift, Lovejoy-style history of ideas or any similar enterprise cannot withstand two important objections, namely holism and Skinner's bias objection.[2] For Skinner objects: since when we use interpretive frameworks such as Betti and van den Berg's we impose our own framework, aren't such models biased (Skinner 2002: 58-9), and don't they only afford arbitrary reconstructions (ibid.: 79-86)? Here is where an important similarity between the model approach and Haslanger's focal analysis comes in handy. According to Betti and van den Berg's model approach, historians of ideas studying concept drift should frame their interpretations on the basis of models, i.e. interpretive frameworks or networks of concepts that are fully *explicit* as well as revisable. Both Betti and van den Berg and Haslanger

systematize or capture *explicitly* something that in the sources interpreted by both enterprises often remains *implicit*; so their interpretive aims are both geared to uncover a certain conceptual framework that normally remains implicit – in the case of Haslanger's focal analysis, implicit in gender discourse. Consider now Skinner's objection: the best possible counter-objection to this is to turn it on its head. Yes, models do represent biases, but turning biases into models is in fact the best we can do since such interpretive filters are indispensable.

As Betti and van den Berg (2014) have argued, models work like *schemas* in cognitive psychology. The notion of schema owes its rationale to the idea that our cognitive processes involve an interaction between sensory input and *prior* (contextual) knowledge, (represented by) a framework or *schema* (Anderson 1977, 417). The idea has also been applied to studies in reading comprehension ('text is gobbledygook unless the reader possesses an interpretative framework to breathe meaning into it'; Anderson 1977, 423), resulting in the suggestion that contextual knowledge is a prerequisite for comprehending a prose passage; on a schema-theoretic view of reading comprehension, contextual knowledge is provided by schemata.[3] Within cognitive psychology the existence of schemas is a matter of course, but the point is that schemas are rarely made *explicit*. Betti and van den Berg exploit the parallel between cognitive schemas and models and say that the best defence against Skinner's biases objection is thus to make such models as interpretive tools *explicit*. If we do so, it is in fact not a danger, but simply sound methodology for shaping our interpretations in the form of models, and apply the models so obtained; for by doing this, our biases or hidden assumptions are there for all to see, and thus open to criticisms. Indeed, models are, crucially, (supposed to be kept) *revisable*.

2. Clarify descriptive/normative ambiguities in the notion of meaning of a concept.

In the gender studies literature, a subtle constant oscillation seems to exist around the very idea of *meaning*. Consider the following claim:

(*p*) the meaning of a gender term e.g. *woman* is 'those who are subordinate due to their perceived or imagined female reproductive capacities'.

Must (p) be understood as a *normative* or a *descriptive* claim? Does it *prescribe* what 'woman' should mean? Or does it simply empirically *record* how the word 'woman' is used or what it is taken to mean in ordinary discourse? I say it is both things at once, but ambiguity on (salient details regarding) this point tends to remain, and that ambiguity is not something we should welcome. As an example, consider this passage:

'Roughly, women are those subordinated in a society due to their perceived or imagined female reproductive capacities. It follows that in those societies where being (or presumed to be) female does not result in subordination along any dimension, *there are no women*.' (8, my emphasis)

Does this passage mean that we should take our dictionaries, look up *woman*, and replace the definition we find there with 'subordinated in a society due to their perceived or imagined female reproductive capacities'? No. (Haslanger herself stresses that we should not; see 12.) But then how should we interpret the claim that this *is* the focal meaning of 'woman'?

The claim that *woman* is to be construed as 'subordinated in a society due to their perceived or imagined female reproductive capacities', I maintain, must be seen as a *descriptive* construal of a felt social *norm* (a norm adopted in certain cultures, periods, by certain people and so on), and the claim must be seen as geared to *purely interpretive aims*: claim (p) is a tool.[4] My proposal is this: *gender* (or *race*) in Haslanger's analysis has to be understood in a way similar to how complex concepts as interpretive models in the sense of Betti and van den Berg's (2014) function. A model such as the Classical Model of Science mentioned above is not a schematic representation of a *normative* claim on what science should be, it is instead the *descriptive* abstract systematization of science as a felt norm *by others*, of what others have thought that science must be. There are two levels here, one descriptive and one normative, and although their interaction is key, the two levels must be clearly kept apart.[5] Failure to distinguish the two levels seems to be behind the concern of theorists such as Butler (Butler 1990: Ch. 1; Haslanger 2012: 228).

3. Support to the model approach as methodology from different fields.

The third way in which it is useful to attract attention to the similarity between Haslanger's focal analysis and interpretive models in the sense of Betti and van den Berg (2014) is this: if Haslanger's focal analysis of gender and race is indeed an example of an interpretive model of the kind advocated in the model approach or can successfully be turned into one, the latter will receive indirect interdisciplinary support. Finding examples in different fields and geared to different aims is important to the model approach as a methodological proposal, because the model approach as a whole has so far relied heavily on one example of interpretive model, the so-called Classical Model of Science (de Jong and Betti 2010), which systematizes the concept of axiomatic science within one field - history and philosophy of science - and has purely historical interpretive aims. If we can show that the interpretive practice of philosophers in a field as diverse as gender studies is also shaped by an interpretive model similar in kind (in this case Haslanger's focal analysis) and, on top of that, that that model is geared (also) to systematic aims, then the model approach receives indirect support.

4. Philosophical foundation of meaning for the computational (distributional semantics) analysis of gender.

There is also a fourth reason why a reflection on the idea of Haslanger's focal analysis from the perspective of the model approach to history of ideas is useful: recent experiments apply tools from distributional semantics – a branch of computational linguistics – to textual material in order to enlarge the evidence base of hypotheses from gender studies (Herbelot, von Redecker, and Müller 2012). The descriptive/normative ambiguity on the notion of meaning described under 2. (above) carries over to these experiments. It is a rather widespread *topos* to associate the very enterprise of distributional semantics to an idea of *meaning as use*: why study the distributions of terms such as *woman* and *black* and *black woman*? Well, because meaning is use, so the empirical analysis of a large number of texts – this is the background idea – reveals something deep about *the* meaning of such terms. But the problem with this is, again, that without a foundational analysis of what meaning is, it is rather unclear what we should take such studies to reveal, exactly. From the point of view of the discussion under 2., we can take these studies first of all to reveal the description of a felt norm. But in the light of the other points I have raised we can go a bit further, and see these studies as serving a broader interdisciplinary purpose. Here is the proposal: we can take these distributional experiments to yield extremely valuable bottom-up suggestions as to how to help set up, refine and enrich interpretive models in the sense of Betti and van den Berg (2014) (i.e. Haslanger's focal analysis turned into such models) as tools for gender studies research – models which, as we have said, have the descriptive aim of fixing in an articulate manner felt gender norms.[6]

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Hein van den Berg for comments on a previous version of this paper.

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[1] Where not otherwise indicated, all references in brackets are to Haslanger 2012.

[2] For a longer exposition of this point as well as an extended rebuttal of objections to Lovejoy-style holists and to Skinner, see Betti and van den Berg 2014.

[3] As an illustration, consider the following passage from a famous experiment by Bransford and Johnson:

'A newspaper is better than a magazine / A seashore is a better place than the street / At first, it is better to run than to walk / You may have to try several times / It takes some skill but it's easy to learn / Even young children can enjoy it / Once successful, complications are minimal / Birds seldom get too close / Rain however, soaks in very fast / Too many people doing the same thing can also cause problems / One needs lots of room / If there are no complications, it can be very peaceful / A rock will serve as an anchor / If things break loose from it, however, you will not get a second chance.' (Bransford and Johnson 1972, 722)

This passage makes sense only when we are supplied with the contextual knowledge that its topic is *making and flying a kite*. Bransford and Johnson's various experiments with these and similar textual fragments indicated that both the comprehension ratings and recall scores of subjects supplied with contextual knowledge before reading the passages were higher than those of subjects who lacked it (Bransford and Johnson 1972, 717; see also the so-called Restaurant Schema, Grow 1996 after Schank and Abelson).

[4] Note that if 'gender' is a *theoretical* term, as Haslanger points out, then it might be that the theory we are talking about is better described as a theory of theories, as general methodology, and *not* as the theory of gender studies. We are a step higher, it seems.

[5] One difference worth mentioning is that the two tend to be applied to different sources, for a model such as the Classical Model of Science is applied mainly to historical-technical professional texts of philosophers, while Haslanger's focal analysis tends to be applied or *also* applied to contemporary textual material produced in a non-technical context – the analysis pertains to society at large, so to speak, it might include newspapers, Wikipedia, twitter, Facebook, what people say in bars, and might or might not be applied to conceptualisations that count as history or to scholarly texts.

[6] Haslanger presents the idea of focal analysis by using diagrams, which might overlap for race and gender, and offers a metaphor in terms of mixing colors to understand the phenomenon of intersectionality, i.e. the fact that *black woman* should not yield only the intersection or combination of *black* and *woman* but a new meaning (see also Herbelot, von Redecker, and Müller 2012, 2.2). How should we put together the mixing color metaphor and intersectionality? Maybe by just stressing that intersectionality works at the intentional level, as meaning does, so that e.g. *black women* have a core doubly qualified as 'subordinated due to their perceived or imagined female reproductive capacities, as well as due to the interpretation of their physical features as evidence of their ancestral links to a particular geographical region.'