

## Social Construction (Continued)

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## SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION (CONTINUED)

*In this Review in June 1993 Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram argued that the social construction of target populations is an important political and policy phenomenon. Robert Lieberman criticizes Schneider and Ingram's "circular" conceptualization of public policy and social construction. He proposes a "historical-institutional" framework for understanding the role of group identities in political change. Lieberman analyzes the dual experience of African-Americans in the American welfare state as an example of political institutions and policy changes' affecting changing group constructions. Ingram and Schneider respond that their purpose is to understand how social constructions shape policy designs, which in turn affect citizen perceptions and participation, and argue that Lieberman's ideas of institutions and history yield no analytic improvement. They provide their own analysis of the case of welfare to illustrate the advantages for future research of their conception of policy targets.*

### COMMENT

In "Social Construction of Target Populations," Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram present a provocative argument about an issue of fundamental importance to the study of policy formation and development, the effect of the nature of target populations on policy outcomes. They suggest that the allocation of policy benefits and burdens depends not only on the relative social power of groups in society but also on the "social construction" of the groups that policies are intended to affect. Notions of identity have transformed contemporary political theory, and the authors deserve great credit for their attempts to apply ideas about group identity to the study of public policy and to forge a link between the critical and positive traditions in social science. Their work is particularly welcome at a moment when issues of racial, gender, and ethnic identity are at the center of vigorous debate in the political and academic worlds and when the tension between rampant individualism and group solidarity has never been greater (Walzer 1992).

But Schneider and Ingram's proposed approach to this important question lacks a clear causal argument. Its central flaw is the conceptual imprecision of the idea of "social construction," which is one of the pillars of their analysis. The very use of the language of "social construction" begs important questions about the origins and political meaning of group identities. Understanding the importance of the nature of target populations for policy and politics requires an account of where group identities come from, how they change, and how social and political institutions adjudicate among contending definitions of group identity in making public policy. Schneider and Ingram offer none of these.

### TARGET POPULATIONS AND POLICYMAKING

The first part of Schneider and Ingram's article sketches a basic claim about the nature of target populations and their impact on policy outcomes. Traditional theories of policymaking account for the allocation of burdens and benefits among social groups on the basis of various measures of social and political power. To this dimension Schneider and Ingram add a second, the social construction of groups. By "social construction," they mean the recognition (by some unspecified subject) that certain shared characteristics define a discrete social group and the attribution to these shared characteristics (again by an unspecified subject) of positive or negative connotations (p. 335). This definition gives rise to a four-cell classification scheme for social groups along two dimensions: power and social construction (Figure 1). Powerful, positively constructed groups are *advantaged*; powerful, negatively constructed groups are *contenders*; weak but positively constructed groups are called *dependents*; and the unfortunate weak and negatively constructed groups are labeled *deviants*.

This classification then explains how policies allocate burdens and benefits among target populations. Advantaged groups, for example, will receive high benefits, low burdens, and control over agendas and policymaking. Deviants, not surprisingly, get low benefits, high burdens, and little control. Assuming that group power and social construction can be safely treated as independent dimensions, this scheme seems reasonable enough. It gives rise to plausible and potentially testable hypotheses about policy outcomes. At the end of this section, the authors offer the merest hint that their model, by taking into account socially constructed differences among groups, outperforms similar classifications of

policy that seek to explain why different kinds of policy produce different styles of policymaking (Lowi 1964, 1972; Wilson 1973, 1980, 1992).

In the second part of the article, however, Schneider and Ingram suggest that the social construction of group identities often depends on policy and on political choices made at an earlier time (see also Ingram and Schneider 1993). In fact, they acknowledge precisely this possibility by citing Lowi's (1964) famous formulation that "policy creates politics." Policies, they conclude, affect "target populations' perceptions of democracy, inclination toward participation, and willingness to comply with policy directives," all of which undoubtedly contribute to the "social construction" of groups in a political context (p. 346). But this possibility appears to undermine the central causal claim of the first part of the article. If group social construction is at least partly a product of policy outcomes and policy outcomes are at least partly a product of group social constructions, then we are left with something of an analytical muddle.

## INSTITUTIONS, HISTORY, AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

The muddle arises from a formulation of "social construction" that is neither institutional nor historical. Neither institutions nor history figures in Schneider and Ingram's account of the social construction of group identity; both are essential to sorting out the causal links among the elements in their argument. Institutions are formal rules or informal patterns that organize political processes and behavior by regulating incentives and opportunities (March and Olsen 1989; North 1990; Orren and Skowronek 1993; Skocpol 1985). The configuration of a society's political institutions influences political outcomes not only by regulating formal and informal access to power but also by shaping the formation and expression of political sentiments. Over time, institutional change dramatically affects political possibilities, opening up certain roads and closing others. The ways in which social groups are defined, perceived, and made politically relevant at particular moments of history—in short, the mechanisms and meaning of social construction—are an integral part of this historical-institutional process.

Two specific shortcomings in Schneider and Ingram's formulation of "social construction" hinder their analysis. First, they take the "social construction" of a group to be a unitary phenomenon. A social group is either positively or negatively constructed—deserving or undeserving—all together and all at once. But the construction of groups in a plural society is always and everywhere a matter of contention and conflict. Some groups are viewed differently by different segments of society. Often, groups cannot even agree among themselves on a definition of their essential characteristics. Contesta-

tion over the construction of group identity is particularly acute for the most disadvantaged groups in society, groups such as African-Americans, Latinos, and women in the United States that are frequently at the center of intense policy debates. Much important politics consists precisely in such clashes over the construction of political and social group identities and perceptions (Norton 1988; Ryan et al. 1992). The shifting status and multiple nature of group identities and constructions poses a serious obstacle to a causal analysis that takes a unitary social construction as a primary explanatory variable.

Schneider and Ingram recognize this problem and wave it away at once: "Social constructions are often conflicting and subject to contention" but "... the actual social constructions of target groups, as well as how widely shared the constructions are, are matters for empirical analysis. Social constructions of target populations are measurable, empirical phenomena" (p. 335). Thus, they imply, we can uncover and verify unique and meaningful social constructions for groups, although they do not explain in any detail how a researcher might go about such a task. Social construction seems to mean some compilation of public attitudes toward a group as revealed in public discourse and survey data, somehow rooted in something called "objective reality" (*ibid.*). Moreover, among the potential sources of data about social construction that Schneider and Ingram cite (fleetingly) are statutes and legislative histories, which are themselves part of the vague dependent variable we call "policy outcomes." Here their argument verges on the tautological.

Identifying a group's "social construction" in this way is a little like identifying "public opinion" as if there were a mythical, unitary "public" with a single opinion on everything. In opinion and voting research, this problem is often modeled by referring to the median voter, who stands in the middle of a one-dimensional distribution and whose position wields enormous influence over outcomes. Are we similarly to imagine a "median constructor," whose view of a target population is controlling? Can we simply take a survey, discover that 51% of the American public thinks that university professors are lazy overpaid leeches, conclude that professors are "negatively constructed," and predict that they will not be treated so well by policymakers as a result? In a plural society there are many ideas about the social meaning of group identities. Which ideas—whose ideas—about a group are likely to find their way into policy debates and be translated into policy?

Without an account of how political institutions mediate between group identities and political outcomes, we cannot even begin to search for a satisfactory politically relevant definition of "social construction." In a given political system not all opinions or group identities are created equal. The matrix of a society's institutions and past policies influences how social groups are defined and how they relate to one another and to the state. "Social construc-

tions" of target populations are deeply embedded in institutional configurations. Often the same group is treated differently by different policies at the same time, suggesting that target populations can be constructed differently in different institutional circumstances.

The second shortcoming of Schneider and Ingram's formulation of "social construction" is their lack of attention to history, that is, to the possibility of change over time. Group identities and social constructions do change, often quite rapidly. Some groups have been viewed quite differently at different points in history. Even assuming that the illustrative group constructions they classify according to their two-dimensional scale are "correct" and empirically verifiable, they are time-bound. "Big unions," for example, which they classify as contenders (strong, negatively constructed), have clearly not always been so. Labor unions were both stronger (in terms of membership and political influence) and more popular among the general public in the 1950s and 1960s than they are today. Both their strength and their image in American politics are products of a long history of policy decisions, institutional change, and chance (Goldfield 1987). Similarly, Schneider and Ingram classify "minorities" as contenders, although placing minorities at the high end of a power scale seems questionable. But it is easy to recall a time when African-Americans, to consider one minority, were arguably dependents (weak, positively constructed), when they were denied basic rights but forged a social and political movement that won the sympathy and respect of the nation and the world.

If the construction of group identities is embedded in institutional configurations, then institutional change has the potential to alter social constructions. As the rules and norms governing social and political interaction change, groups will face different incentives and opportunities. Existing groups will see their relations both with other groups and with the state changing; some may be better off, some worse off. New groups will mobilize to take advantage of new institutional opportunities. As these changes occur, perceptions of group behavior and social standing begin to shift, and the "social constructions" of group identities change. Institutional change, moreover, tends to lock social and political developments onto a particular path as new social arrangements become settled and it becomes increasingly costly to jump to another path (David 1985; North 1990). History matters for group identities; social constructions reflect paths of institutional development, not simply a cultural scorecard of heroes and villains.

The dynamics of institutional change and group identity can have a variety of effects that either reinforce or alter the positions of groups in the political system. In some cases, a new policy may differentiate between members of a previously defined target group, treating some members differently from others. Some part of a generally scorned group, for example, might reap benefits, perhaps

unintended, from a change in policy, leaving the rest of their group behind. Over time, these new beneficiaries might come to be perceived as worthy recipients of government favor despite membership in a negatively constructed group. They might find it in their interest to mobilize to protect their gains, and their new participation might spill over into other policy arenas as well. Ultimately, policy change can lead to the redefinition and reconstruction of group identities, not through the "subtle messages of policy design" (Ingram and Schneider 1993) but through the concrete consequences of historical-institutional change. In the most optimistic scenario along these lines, public policy might be a vehicle for bringing disaffected groups into full participation and "reconnected citizenship" (Valelly 1993).

At the same time, however, policy or institutional change can reinforce the unfortunate position of the rest of the scorned group, sending them down an opposite path toward rejection, frustration, demobilization, and disengagement. Alternatively, the association of a popular policy with an unpopular group can undermine the policy rather than promoting the group's fortunes. In such cases, the developmental perspective suggests that the groups that are likely to be treated badly by public policy are precisely those groups that are powerless and scorned *because they have been treated badly by public policy in the past*. The experience of African-Americans in the American welfare state is an example of just such a dual dynamic, in which institutional change has altered the structural position of a group in the political system.

The point is not that social constructions are unimportant in policymaking but that social constructions are themselves the product of policy and institutional change. Without an account of how history and institutions affect social construction, Schneider and Ingram's scheme cannot hope to explain how social constructions change or why one or another of the outcomes just sketched might occur in any given situation. Their failure clearly to separate cause and effect in their analytical framework seriously compromises their ability to make causal inferences about the role of social construction in policy and political change. In technical terms, their framework suffers from endogeneity: their explanatory variable, social construction, is partly a consequence of their dependent variable, public policy. Endogeneity produces biased estimates of causal effects (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, 185–96).

In fact, the very idea of "social construction" belies the possibility of fixed, static group identities. Schneider and Ingram define it as "the cultural characterizations or popular images of the persons or groups whose behavior and well-being are affected by public policy" (p. 334). The idea that meanings are constructed by popular attitudes or cultural norms inherently contradicts the proposition that things (whether words, ideas, or social categories) mean anything by themselves or have meanings that we can observe scientifically or agree on with any certainty. "Social

construction" has become a fashionable and often ideologically loaded phrase throughout the academy, one that has very little meaning when applied directly and uncritically in a political context. In order to turn it into a fruitful approach to political questions, political scientists will have to specify much more carefully than have Schneider and Ingram what we mean by "social construction" and how contention over social meaning and the politics of identity might shape our politics and affect public policy. It is by now a commonplace in postpluralist political science that group identities are not fixed or "natural" in any sense. We cannot, for instance, take collective action for granted even among a category of people who manifestly have interests in common, but neither can we rule it out entirely (Hardin 1982; Olson 1965). In order to explain the role and behavior of groups in politics we must surely give some account of how group identities are constructed and consider the social and political settings in which groups are formed.

In literary criticism, meaning can be constructed and reconstructed each time we read a text. But in politics, meanings are made concrete when we pass a law or adopt a policy. At that moment, state action can institutionalize certain constructions and inhibit others, sending a social group down a particular historical path. It is undoubtedly true that socially constructed group identities play a role in shaping public policy at such moments. But what political mechanism translates social constructions into policy outcomes? What characteristics of groups and perceptions of groups are liable to change? Most important, how does social construction in a politically relevant sense occur, and who does it?

Schneider and Ingram beg this last question entirely, and their use of the passive voice in discussing social construction is emblematic of this problem: "Social constructions are manipulated and used. . . . When powerful, positively viewed groups become construed negatively, the dynamics of policy change dramatically. Some of the previously disadvantaged groups are displaced into a negatively constructed group that will not be able to garner as much beneficial policy. . . . When common behaviors of large numbers of ordinary people become subject to negative stereotyping and punishment is threatened, the expected acquiescence is unlikely" (pp. 342-43; emphasis mine). Astonishingly, the passage from which I draw the last quotation attributes civil unrest in American politics in the 1930s and 1960s to such instances of "negative stereotyping." Have Schneider and Ingram not heard of the Great Depression, the Civil Rights movement, or the Vietnam War, events that may have played some small role in producing unrest in those decades? In this case, their assumption of the importance of social construction simply obscures the most obvious historical facts. At the very least, their perspective does not help in adjudicating among competing explanations for important events in American political history.

## POLITICAL CONSTRUCTION AND POLITICAL CHANGE

A more reasonable approach to the construction of group identities would consider what I will call "political construction." Rather than treating social constructions of group identity as though they came from outside the political system, a political-construction approach asks not only how group identities arise in a political setting but also how and why they become politically relevant at particular historical junctures. This approach implies, more realistically than the other, that the situation of groups with respect to society and politics depends on previous political arrangements and decisions, that is, on historically and institutionally grounded developments.

Recent attention to "policy feedbacks" in political science has called attention to this element of political change (Pierson 1992, 1993; Skocpol 1992; Weir and Skocpol 1985). Policy decisions influence groups' orientations toward and expectations of government, their incentives to organize, and their ability to present future demands or defend their gains. These changes can materially alter the "construction" of groups in social, political, and economic terms. This could conceivably happen deliberately, as Schneider and Ingram suggest: "Social constructions are manipulated and used by public officials, the media, and the groups themselves. New target groups are created, and images are developed for them; old groups are reconfigured or new images created" (p. 342). More likely, these are unintended consequences of policies and their implementation.

The characteristics of target populations can make a tremendous difference for public policy outcomes, as Schneider and Ingram argue. But understanding how and why requires attention to the political construction of group identities. The treatment of African-Americans under the Social Security Act of 1935 provides a case in point (Lieberman n.d.). The Social Security Act created welfare state institutions that were shaped in part by the racial composition of the act's target population. These institutional structures then influenced the changing construction of African-Americans in the political system. Among the policies adopted in 1935 were Old-Age Insurance (OAI, which we now call generically Social Security) and Aid to Dependent Children (ADC, now Aid to Families with Dependent Children, which we call generically "welfare"). Concentrated in the South, where they were politically powerless, economically oppressed, legally segregated, and socially scorned, African-Americans were generally excluded from the target populations for benefits under the Social Security Act. But because of institutional and political differences among the act's various policies, the consequences of exclusion both for African-Americans and for the policies themselves have been quite varied.

The target population for OAI benefits excluded over half the African-American workers in the coun-

try by excluding agricultural and domestic workers from coverage. As a result of these race-laden exclusions, however, OAI was established as (and remains) a centralized, national program under which the federal government pays benefits directly to citizens. Although it was racially exclusionary on its face, the administrative institutions of OAI incorporated African-Americans fairly from the beginning (Lieberman 1993a). The popularity of OAI and the public perception that benefits were "earned" generated political support for the program's expansion. Within 20 years, most excluded workers were brought into the OAI system, overcoming the negative racial construction that was built into the program at its creation. It has ironically become perhaps the closest thing to a race-blind social program that the United States has known. As long as African-Americans participate in the labor force, they are on the same footing as other recipients and are not deemed any less worthy than whites; yet OAI remains the most popular part of the American welfare state.

Aid to Dependent Children, on the other hand, had the potential to benefit large numbers of African-Americans, who were more likely to be poor and live in single-parent families. Because poor African-Americans were to be largely relegated to ADC, it was created with a parochial institutional structure that gave state and local officials most of the power to set eligibility rules and benefit levels, leaving the program open to racial discrimination and political manipulation. As African-Americans became more prominent on the ADC rolls, especially in northern cities, where they migrated in large numbers after World War II, the negative construction of African-Americans as undeserving welfare recipients became ever more pervasive. Rather than generating political support to overcome racial bias, ADC has been increasingly racially divisive and increasingly unpopular because of its association with race (Lieberman 1993a).

The fortunes of African-Americans in the American welfare system suggest that a simple story of "social construction" is inadequate to explain the changing relationship between racial groups and the state. The "social construction" of African-Americans in American politics is part of a complex set of structural relationships among groups (legal, political, and economic, as well as social) framed against a background of political institutions and public policies (Lieberman 1993b). The position of African-Americans in state, society, and economy in the 1930s—concrete factors such as voting restrictions, labor-repressive agriculture, and violent repression—both made it possible and provided incentives for white politicians to structure social policies in ways that constructed black citizens as unworthy beneficiaries of federal social policy. But in the 1950s, the place of African-Americans in these two social policies took dramatically opposing turns. Just when OAI accepted African-Americans as full beneficiaries, ADC increasingly began to impose burdens on black beneficiaries

through a series of crackdowns and retrenchment that still continues. Clearly, a singular change in the "social construction" of African-Americans cannot account for both of these policy changes. Rather, the institutional structure of the policies themselves changed the *political* construction of African-Americans in particular ways, lifting OAI to the political stratosphere and dragging ADC into the mire of racial politics.

The changing place of African-Americans in the American welfare state suggests that a more dynamic, political-construction approach will better explain the relationship between target populations and public policy than Schneider and Ingram's static, social-construction approach. Public policies do not merely reflect the character of their target populations; policies also transform target groups by transforming the political, social, economic, and legal settings in which groups exist. The constant redefinition of group identities in the political arena is an effect of politics and policy as much as a cause. In an era of increasing racial and ethnic polarization, it is imperative that we, as political scientists, adopt a perspective and pursue a research agenda that can help us understand how political institutions both reflect and shape identities so that, as a society, we can pursue both pluralism and justice.

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## RESPONSE

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Misreading and misinterpretation underlie many of the criticisms Robert Lieberman levies against our June 1993 article. Most importantly, we believe he attributes to our work a purpose different from the one we were pursuing. We are unsettled that our critic paraphrases one of the central ideas in our work claiming it as an independent insight without acknowledging it as part of our argument. Robert Lieberman comes at our subject from a very different perspective, however, and one that gives far less emphasis to public policy as a factor that influences attitudes and perceptions of target groups. This difference is worth discussing, especially in light of the fact that his example of welfare policy amply illustrates the importance of public policy and the applicability of our work.

We will dispense with the lesser issues first by providing a few examples of misreading. Next, we will reiterate the central intent of our work. We then turn to consider three areas of real difference between our work and the approach advocated by Lieberman. Finally, we will describe how the case study he uses makes our case for us.