

Building Reality

The Social Construction of Knowledge

Understanding the Social Construction of Reality

Laying the Foundation: The Bases of Reality

Building the Walls: Conflict, Power, and Social Institutions

Appreciating Sociological Research

The year was 1897. Eight-year-old Virginia O’Hanlon became upset when her friends told her that there was no Santa Claus. Her father encouraged her to write a letter to the *New York Sun* to find out the truth. The editor’s reply—which included the now famous phrase “Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus!”—has become a classic piece of American folklore. “Nobody sees Santa Claus,” the editor wrote, “but that is no sign that there is no Santa Claus. The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men [sic] can see” (“Is There a Santa Claus?” 1897).

In his book *Encounters with the Archdruid*, John McPhee (1971) examines the life and ideas of David Brower, who was one of the most successful and energetic environmentalists in the United States. McPhee recalls a lecture in which Brower claimed that the United States has 6% of the world’s population and uses 60% of the world’s resources and that only 1% of Americans use 60% of those resources. Afterward, McPhee asked Brower where he got these interesting statistics:

Brower said the figures had been worked out in the head of a friend of his from data assembled “to the best of his recollection.” . . . [He] assured me that figures in themselves are merely indices. *What matters is that they feel right* [emphasis added]. Brower feels things. (p. 86)

What do these two very different examples have in common? Both reflect the fickle nature of “truth” and “reality.” Young Virginia was encouraged to believe in the reality of something she could and would never perceive with her senses. She certainly learned a different sort of truth about Santa Claus when she got older, but the editor urged the young Virginia to take on faith that Santa Claus, or at least the idea of Santa Claus, exists despite the lack of objective proof. That sort of advice persists. A survey of 200 child psychologists around the United States found that 91% of them advised parents not to tell the truth when their young children asked about the existence of Santa Claus (cited in Stryker, 1997).

Likewise, David Brower is urging people to believe in something that doesn’t need to be seen. What’s important is that the information “feels right,” that it helps one’s cause even if it is not based on hard evidence.

Such precarious uses of truth may appear foolish or deceitful. Yet much of our everyday knowledge is based on accepting as real the existence of things that can't be seen, touched, or proved—"the world taken-for-granted" (P. L. Berger, 1963, p. 147). Like Virginia, we learn to accept the existence of things such as electrons, the ozone layer, black holes, love, and God, even though we cannot see them. And like David Brower, we learn to believe and use facts and figures provided by "experts" as long as they sound right or support our interests.

How do we come to know what we know? How do we learn what is real and what isn't? In this chapter, I examine how sociologists discover truths about human life. But to provide the appropriate context, I must first present a sociological perspective on the nature of reality. How do individuals construct their realities? How do societal forces influence the process?

Understanding the Social Construction of Reality

In the previous chapter, I noted that the elements of society are human creations that provide structure to our everyday lives. They also give us a distinctive lens through which we perceive the world. For example, because of their different statuses and their respective occupational training, an architect, a real estate agent, a police officer, and a firefighter can each look at the same building and see different things: "a beautiful example of Victorian architecture," "a moderately priced fixer-upper," "a target of opportunity for a thief," or "a fire hazard." Mark Twain often wrote about how the Mississippi River—a river he saw every day as a child—changed after he became a riverboat pilot. What he once saw as a place for recreation and relaxation, he later saw for its treacherous currents, eddies, and other potential dangers.

What we know to be true or real is always a product of the culture and historical period in which we exist. It takes an exercise of the sociological imagination, however, to see that what we ourselves "know" to be true today—the laws of nature, the causes and treatments of certain diseases, and so forth—may not be true for everyone everywhere or may be replaced by different truths tomorrow (Babbie, 1986). For example, in some cultures the existence of spirits, witches, and demons is a taken-for-granted part of everyday reality that others might easily dismiss as unrealistic. On the other side of the coin, the Western faith in the curative powers of little pills—without the intervention of spiritual forces—might seem naïve to those who have no knowledge of manufactured drugs.

Ideas about reality also change over time. Early 20th-century child development experts offered parents such advice as "Kissing a baby after it's eaten will likely cause vomiting" or "Never let a baby sit on your lap" (Cohen, 2003). In 1900, a doctor might have told a patient with asthma to go to the local tobacconist for a cigarette. An alcoholic might have been prescribed opium. People with colds may have been told to inhale formaldehyde. Tuberculosis was treated with strychnine; diabetics received a dose of arsenic (Zuger, 1999). In 2003, a government-appointed committee of medical experts changed the definition of what constitutes healthy blood pressure. This sudden redefinition meant that 45 million Americans—who were once normal—now weren't ("Normal" Blood Pressure, 2003). Quite possibly people 100 years from now will look

some features of reality are grounded in physical evidence—fire is hot, sharp things hurt. But other features of reality are often based not on hard evidence but on such forces as culture and language, self-fulfilling prophecies, and faith.

Culture and Language

We live in a symbolic world and interact through symbolic communication—that is, through language. Language makes people, events, and ideas meaningful. In fact, language reflects and often determines our reality (Sapir, 1949; Whorf, 1956). Thus language is a key tool in the construction of society.

Consider, for instance the difference between spit (mouth moisture located outside the mouth) and saliva (mouth moisture located inside the mouth). In terms of their chemical properties, both of these substances are identical. Yet everybody knows we define them and treat them quite differently. We are perfectly willing to swallow our own saliva, and we probably swallow quarts of the stuff during the course of a day. But once it leaves our mouth—even if only for a second or two—it becomes something distasteful, even disgusting to ingest (Brouillette & Turner, 1992). The act of “swallowing saliva” has been socially transformed into the act of “drinking spit.” The constructed reality is that these two substances are socially and linguistically distinct (even though they’re chemically identical), so much so that even the thought of treating one as the other can make us physically sick.

Within a culture, words evolve to reflect the phenomena that have practical significance. The Solomon Islanders have nine distinct words for “coconut,” each specifying an important stage of growth, but they have only one word for all the meals of the day (M. M. Lewis, 1948). The Aleuts of northern Canada have 33 words for “snow” that allow them to distinguish differences in texture, temperature, weight, load-carrying capacity, and the speed at which a sled can run on its surface (E. T. Hiller, 1933). The Hanunóo people of the Philippines have different names for 92 varieties of rice, allowing them to make distinctions all but invisible to English-speakers, who lump all such grains under a single word: *rice* (Thomson, 2000). Yet a traditional Hanunóo coming to this country would be incapable of seeing the distinctions between a *Ford* and a *Toyota* or between a *sedan* and a *station wagon*.

Language is such a powerful filter that it can even influence sensory perception. All human beings with normal eyesight see the same spectrum of colors because all colors exist in the physical world. Color consists of visible wavelengths that blend imperceptibly into one another (Farb, 1983). No sharp breaks in the color spectrum distinguish, say, red from orange. But when Americans look at a rainbow they see six different colors: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple. Not everyone in the world sees those same colors, though. Some people who speak non-European languages have different ways of partitioning the color spectrum. As Exhibit 3.1 shows, the Shona of Zimbabwe divide the spectrum into three colors and the Bassa of Liberia have only two color categories (Gleason, 1961). These basic categories provide convenient labels from which people of these cultures can describe variants of color that matter in their lives. When a Shona says *citema*, others know immediately that she is referring to a color we would consider either green or blue. For the Bassa, purple, blue, and green are different shades of *ziza*, just as pink is a shade of red in English.

Exhibit 3.1 Cross-Cultural Differences in Color Terms

<i>English</i>	red	orange	yellow	green	blue	purple
<i>Shona</i>	cipsuka		cicena	citema	cipsuka	
<i>Bassa</i>	hui			ziza		

In addition to affecting perceptions of reality, language influences our attitudes toward specific problems and processes (Sapir, 1929). The use of words reinforces prevailing ideas and suppresses conflicting ideas about the world. In a highly specialized market economy such as the United States, for example, the ability to distinguish linguistically between “real” work and “volunteer” work allows us to telegraph our attitudes about a person’s worth to society. In small, agricultural societies, where all people typically work to provide the basic necessities and to ensure the survival of their tight-knit community, labor is not characterized according to its worth in the marketplace. In such societies, work is work whether you’re paid to do it or not.

We’re often expected to respond to language even when its meaning is not particularly clear. In 2003, for instance, we were asked to distinguish between an orange security alert (high risk of terrorist attack) and a yellow security alert (elevated risk of terrorist attack). The lack of clarity about the difference and what it might mean for our everyday activities—should we seal our windows with duct tape? Should we just stay tuned to local newscasts for the latest directives?—contributed to skepticism about the new Department of Homeland Security.

Within a culture, certain professions or interest groups sometimes develop a distinctive language, known as *jargon*, which allows members of the group to communicate with one another clearly and quickly. Surfers and snowboarders have a specialized vocabulary (not understandable to most nonsurfers or nonsnowboarders) through which they can efficiently convey information about ocean or snow conditions to others. At the same time, jargon can sometimes create boundaries and therefore mystify and conceal meaning from outsiders (Farb, 1983). For instance, by using esoteric medical terminology when discussing a case in front of a patient, two physicians define who is and who isn’t a member of their group and reinforce their image as highly trained experts.

The ambiguity of language may also lead to catastrophe. Imagine that a night watchman enters the storage room of a chemical plant one night and notices some gasoline drums in the corner under a sign that says “Empty Barrels.” The guard lights a cigarette and throws the match into one of the empty barrels, resulting in a terrible explosion. The immediate cause of the explosion, of course, was the gasoline fumes that remained in the drum. But, as one anthropologist points out,

It could be argued that a second cause of the explosion was the English language. The barrels were empty of their original contents and so belonged under the empty sign. Yet they were not empty of everything—the fumes were still present. English has no word—no

single term—that can convey such a situation. Containers in English are either empty or they are not. . . . There is no term in the language for . . . “empty of the original contents but with something left over.” There being no word for such an in-between state, it did not occur to the [guard] to think of the explosive fumes. (Thomson, 2000, p. 80)

Language is sometimes used to purposely deceive as well. A *euphemism* is an inoffensive expression substituted for one that might be offensive. On the surface, such terms are used in the interests of politeness and good taste, such as saying “perspiration” instead of “sweat.” However, euphemisms also shape perceptions. Political regimes routinely use them to cover up, distort, or frame their actions in a more positive light. Here are a few examples of euphemisms, followed by their real meanings:

- ◆ *Reconditioned*—used
- ◆ *Collateral damage*—civilian deaths during military combat
- ◆ *Ethnic cleansing*—deportation and massacre of the people of one culture by those of another culture
- ◆ *Tactical redeployment*—retreat during battle
- ◆ *Death by friendly fire*—accidental military casualties due to the firing of fellow soldiers, not the enemy
- ◆ *Economically nonaffluent*—poor
- ◆ *Social expression product*—greeting card
- ◆ *Revenue enhancement*—tax increase
- ◆ *Achieve a deficiency*—flunk a test
- ◆ *Urban camper*—homeless person
- ◆ *Negative patient outcome*—death
- ◆ *Postconsumer waste material*—garbage
- ◆ *Meal replacement*—junk food
- ◆ *Negative pay raise*—pay cut
- ◆ *Deselected, involuntarily separated, downsized, nonretained, given a career change opportunity, vocationally relocated, or dehired*—fired

In sum, words help frame or structure social reality and give it meaning. Language also provides people with a cultural and group identity. If you’ve ever spent a significant amount of time in a foreign country or even moved to a new school, you know you cannot be a fully participating member of a group or a culture until you share its language.

❖ Micro-Macro Connection

The Language of War

We all know what “war” is. It’s when two opposing forces wage battle against one another, either until one side surrenders or both agree to a truce. It contains “troops,” “regiments,” “ammunition,” “artillery,” “innocents and enemies,” “heroes,” “battles,” “casualties,” and so forth. “Wars” usually begin with some sort of declaration. In wartime, there is good and evil, us and them. War creates a fervent willingness to use extreme force to subdue the enemy. And, of course, during wartime people’s lives are subjected to a different set of rules and expectations. War rallies people around their

collective national identity and a common objective, creating obligatory expressions of patriotism and a willingness to fight and make sacrifices (Redstone, 2003).

Once a situation is framed as a “war,” the interpretation of people’s behavior dramatically changes. For example, some characterized the atrocities that occurred during the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the 1990s as the normal consequences of war. However,

Is wide-scale sexual violence, including the rape of women and the forced oral castration of men, neighbors burning down their neighbors’ homes, the murder and targeting for murder of civilians—men and women, children, the elderly, and infirm—”normal” simply because it takes place within the context of something we call “war?” (Wilmer, 2002, p. 60)

Framing an event as a war has been a way of justifying actions that would not be acceptable in another context. In 1985, Philadelphia police dropped a bomb on the headquarters of a radical group called MOVE. At the time, MOVE was engaged in a disruptive verbal feud with its neighbors and city authorities. The blast killed 11 MOVE members and ignited a fire that destroyed 60 other homes and left 250 citizens homeless. To outside observers, it seemed like a heavy-handed response to a local problem. However, by casting its mission against MOVE as one of “warfare,” the city redefined the members of the group as “combatants,” and their home as a “bunker” and a “compound.” And, of course, law enforcement action designed to “protect the peace” became violent military action designed to “destroy the enemy” (Wagner-Pacifici, 1994).

Immediately after the attacks of September 11, 2001, President Bush unofficially declared a “war” on terrorism. But this war isn’t like any war we’d known previously. It is a war with no geographically or nationally identifiable enemy and no possible end. But by invoking the vocabulary of war, the president framed the expansion of government powers and the limitation of civil liberties as steps we need to take to protect freedom, bring evildoers to justice, and avoid another catastrophe. Consider some of the steps taken since September 11 that directly challenge long-standing protections guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution and federal legislation (“It Can’t Happen Here,” 2002; Jackman & Eggen, 2002):

Law enforcement officials now have broader power to use wire tapping and Internet surveillance techniques to gather information about citizens.

Noncitizens can now be detained on minor visa violations.

The FBI can demand access to sensitive business records without demonstration that a crime has been committed.

Law enforcement officials can monitor communications between lawyers and their clients.

The U.S. attorney general can order a secret search of a U.S. citizen’s home and, based on the information discovered, secretly declare him or her an “enemy combatant.” Enemy combatants can be investigated, jailed indefinitely, interrogated without legal representation, tried, punished, or deported by a military tribunal.

The Pentagon now has authority over the U.S. Northern Command, a domestic unit responsible not only for homeland defense but also for providing military assistance to civil law enforcement authorities.

Even though concerns with national security are warranted and fears of attack are very real, when in a wartime mode, the system “by definition sweeps very broadly and ends up harming hundreds if not thousands of people” (quoted in Liptak, 2003, p. A1). A total of 762 people have been detained—some for as long as a year—on immigration charges such as overstaying a visa or entering the country illegally. Most have since been deported; none have been charged as terrorists. As in other times of war, these actions have taken effect largely without debate or opposition, reflecting the power of language in shaping social reality (S. Sontag, 2002).

Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

As you will recall from Chapter 2, we do not respond directly and automatically to objects and situations; instead, as the symbolic interactionist perspective points out, we use language to define and interpret them and then act on the basis of those interpretations. By acting on the basis of our definitions of reality, we often create the very conditions we believe exist. A **self-fulfilling prophecy** is an assumption or prediction that, purely as a result of having been made, causes the expected event to occur and thus confirms its own “accuracy” (Merton, 1948; Watzlawick, 1984).

Every holiday season, we witness the stunning effects of self-fulfilling prophecies on a national scale. It goes something like this: In September or so, the toy industry releases the results of an annual survey of retailers indicating what are predicted to be the top-selling toys at Christmas. Often one toy in particular emerges as the most popular, can’t-do-without, hard-to-get gift of the year. In the 1980s, it was Cabbage Patch Dolls; in the early 1990s, Mighty Morphin Power Rangers and Ninja Turtles claimed the title; more recently, Beanie Babies, Furbies, Pokemon and Harry Potter paraphernalia, and Razor scooters filled the bill. In November or so, we begin to hear the hype about unprecedented demand for the toy and the likelihood of a shortage. Powerful retail store chains—such as Toys ‘R’ Us or Wal-Mart—may announce the possibility that if things get out of hand they may have to start rationing: one toy per family. Fueled by the fear of seeing a disappointed child’s face at Christmas, thousands of panicked parents rush the stores to make sure they’re not left without. Some hoard extras for other parents they know. As a result, the supply of the toy—which wasn’t perilously low in the first place—is severely depleted, thereby bringing about the predicted shortage. The mere belief in some version of reality creates expectations that can actually bring about a reality that never existed.

Self-fulfilling prophecies are particularly powerful when they become an element of social institutions. In schools, teachers can subtly and unconsciously encourage the performance they expect to see in their students. For instance, if they believe their students to be especially intelligent they may spend more time with them or unintentionally show more enthusiasm when working with them. As a result, these students may come to feel more capable and intelligent and actually perform accordingly (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

Self-fulfilling prophecies can often affect people physically. For years, doctors have recognized the power of the placebo effect—the tendency for patients to improve

because they have been led to believe they are receiving some sort of treatment (which they are not). For instance, in one study 42% of balding men taking a placebo drug either maintained or increased the amount of hair on their heads. Doctors in Texas studying knee surgery found similar levels of pain relief in patients whether the surgery was real or faked (cited in Blakeslee, 1998). Researchers estimate that in studies of new drugs between 35% and 75% of patients benefit from taking dummy pills (Talbot, 2000b). In 1999, a major pharmaceutical company halted development of a new antidepressant drug it had been promoting, because studies showed placebo pills were just as effective in treating depression (Talbot, 2000b).

The inverse of the placebo effect is the creation of expectations that make people worse. Anthropologists have documented numerous mysterious and scientifically difficult-to-explain deaths that follow the pronouncement of curses or evil spells (Watzlawick, 1984). Recently, medical researchers have begun to examine this phenomenon, sometimes referred to as the “nocebo” effect. For instance, in Japan, researchers carried out an experiment on 13 people who were extremely allergic to poison ivy. The experimenters rubbed one of their arms with a harmless leaf and told them it was poison ivy; the experimenters rubbed the other arm with poison ivy and told the subjects it was a harmless leaf. All 13 broke out in a rash where the harmless leaf had touched their skin; only 2 reacted to the real poison ivy leaves (cited in Blakeslee, 1998). Another study found that patients with heart disease who expected their condition to worsen had on average 1.6 times as many episodes of the disease and were 1.5 times as likely to die from it as patients who had a more positive outlook (cited in Hilts, 1995). In other words, in many cases when people expected to get worse, they did. Once again, we see how reality is shaped by human beings, as much as reality shapes them.

Faith and Incurable Propositions

David Blaine is a New York street performer who combines sophisticated magic tricks with a hint of comedy. He’s been called “The Michael Jordan of Magic” and “The New Houdini.” In one of his more astounding stunts, he appears to rise up and float several inches off the ground for a few seconds. Suppose you saw him perform such a feat. He looks as if he were levitating, but you “know better.” Even though your eyes tell you he is floating in mid air, you have learned that it’s just not possible. Rather than use this experience to entirely abandon your belief that people can’t float in mid air, you’ll probably come up with a series of “reasonable” explanations: “Maybe it’s an optical illusion, and it just appears like he’s floating.” “Perhaps there are wires holding him up.” To acknowledge the possibility that he is truly floating is to challenge the fundamental reality on which your everyday life is based. It is an article of faith that people aren’t capable of levitating.

Such an unquestionable assumption, called an **incurable proposition**, is a belief that cannot be proved wrong and has become so much a part of common sense that one continues to believe it even in the face of contradictory evidence. By explaining away contradictions with “reasonable” explanations, we strengthen the correctness of the initial premise (Watzlawick, 1976). In the process, we participate in constructing a particular version of reality. For instance, if an incurable proposition for you is that

women are inherently less aggressive than men, seeing an especially violent woman might lead you toward explanations that focus on the peculiar characteristics of *this particular* woman. Maybe *she's* responding to terrible circumstances in her life; maybe *she* has some kind of chemical imbalance or neurological disorder. By concluding she is an exception to the rule, the rule is maintained.

Even belief systems most of us might consider unconventional can be quite resilient and invulnerable to contradiction (Snow & Machalek, 1982). For instance, practitioners of Scientology strive to attain a perfect level of mental functioning called “clear.” Yet there is no evidence any Scientologists have ever achieved such a state. Does this historical failure contradict the group’s claims? No. Instead, individual members focus on their individual deficiencies: They have not yet attained the “appropriate mental level” necessary to reach clear. Note how such an explanation allows practitioners to maintain the belief that such a mental state really exists while at the same time reinforcing the hope that someday they may be able to achieve it.

Sociologists Hugh Mehan and Houston Wood (1975) furthered our understanding of incorrigible propositions by examining the research of the anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1937). Evans-Pritchard described an elaborate ritual practiced by the Azande, a small African society located in southwestern Sudan. When faced with important decisions—where to build a house, whom to marry, and so on—the Azande consulted an oracle, or a powerful spirit. They prepared for the consultation by following a strictly prescribed ceremony. A substance was extracted from the bark of a certain type of tree and prepared in a special way during a seancelike ritual. The Azande believed that a powerful spirit would enter the potion during this ceremony. They then posed a question to the spirit in such a way that it could be answered either yes or no and fed the substance to a chicken. If the chicken lived, they would interpret the answer from the spirit as yes; if the chicken died, the answer was no.

Our Western belief system tells us the tree bark obviously contains some poisonous chemical. Certain chickens are physically able to survive it, others aren't. But the Azande had no knowledge of the bark's poisonous qualities or of chicken physiology. In fact, they didn't believe the tree or the chicken played a part in the ceremony at all. The ritual of gathering bark and feeding it to a chicken transformed the tree into the spirit power. The chicken lived or died not because of a physical reaction to a chemical but because the oracle “hears like a person and settles cases like a king” (Evans-Pritchard, 1937, p. 321).

But what if the oracle was wrong? What if an Azande was told by the oracle to build a house by the river and the river overflowed its banks, washing away the house? Evans-Pritchard observed several cases of Azande making bad decisions based on incorrect advice from the oracle. How could they reconcile these sorts of inconsistencies with a belief in the reality of the oracle?

To us the answer is obvious: There was no spirit, no magic, just the strength of the poison and the health of the chickens. We see these bad decisions as contradictions, because we view them from the reality of Western science. We observe this ritual to determine if in fact there is an oracle, and of course we're predisposed to believe there isn't. We are looking for proof of the existence of something of which we are highly skeptical.

For the Azande, though, the contradictions were not contradictions at all. They *knew* the oracle existed. This was their fundamental premise, their incorrigible proposition, just like our fundamental premise that people can't float in mid air. It was an article of faith that could not be questioned. All that followed for the Azande was experienced from this initial assumption. The Azande had ways of explaining contradictions to their truths, just as we do. When the oracle failed to give them proper advice, they would say, "A taboo must have been breached" or "Sorcerers must have intervened" or "The ceremony wasn't carried out correctly."

Protecting incorrigible propositions is essential for the maintenance of reality systems. By explaining away contradictions we are able to support our basic assumptions and live in a coherent and orderly world.

Building the Walls: Conflict, Power, and Social Institutions

We, as individuals, play an important role in coordinating, reproducing, and giving meaning to society in our daily interactions. But our ability to define social reality is limited. We are certainly not completely free to create whatever version of social reality we want to create. We are, after all, born into a pre-existing society with its norms, values, roles, relationships, groups, organizations, institutions, and so forth. Just as the walls of a building constrain the ability of the inhabitants to move about, directing them through certain predetermined doorways and corridors, these features of society influence our thoughts and deeds and consequently constrain our ability to freely construct our social world (Giddens, 1984). As Karl Marx wrote, "[People] make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past" (Marx, 1869/1963, p. 15).

Like contemporary conflict theorists, Marx was particularly interested in how inequalities of economic conditions shape people's ability to act. Certain people or groups of people are more influential in defining reality than others. Think of all the times you have done something just because someone with more influence, authority, or expertise—a parent, an instructor, a boss, a scientist, or a politician—has decided you should.

As the conflict perspective points out, in any modern society—where classes, ethnic and religious groups, age groups, and political interests struggle for control over resources—there is also a struggle for the power to determine or influence that society's conception of reality (Gans, 1971). Those who emerge successful gain control over information, define values, create myths, manipulate events, and influence what the rest of us take for granted. Conflict theorists therefore argue that reality doesn't simply emerge out of social interaction but is based on the interests and visions of powerful people, groups, organizations, and institutions. People with more power, prestige, status, wealth, and access to high-level policymakers can make their perceptions of the world the entire culture's perception. In other words, "He who has the bigger stick has the better chance of imposing his definitions of reality" (P. L. Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 109). That "bigger stick" can be wielded in several ways. Various social institutions and the people who control them play a significant role in shaping

and sustaining perceptions of reality. If you wish to develop the sociological imagination, you need to understand the role of not only individuals but also these larger forces in shaping private lives.

Moral Entrepreneurs

Certain groups have moral concerns they passionately want translated into law. These **moral entrepreneurs** (H. Becker, 1963) need not be wealthy or influential individuals. Instead, by virtue of their initiative, access to decision makers, skillful use of publicity, and success in neutralizing any opposing viewpoints, they are able to turn their interests into public policy (Hills, 1980). Just as a financial entrepreneur is in the business of selling a product to the public, a moral entrepreneur is in the business of selling a particular version of reality to the public. Groups that seek to outlaw pornography, sexually explicit lyrics in rock music, abortion, gambling, and homosexuality, as well as groups that promote gun control, literacy, awareness of domestic violence, and support for AIDS research, are crusading for the creation of a new public conception of morality. For the moral entrepreneur, the existing “reality” is not satisfactory: “He [*sic*] feels that nothing can be right in the world until rules are made to correct it. . . . Any means is justified to do away with it. The crusader is fervent and righteous, often self-righteous” (H. Becker, 1963, pp. 147–148).

Clearly, moral entrepreneurship is closely linked to certain social institutions. Religion, for example, provides many people with values that dictate what is right and wrong, proper and improper, good and bad (J. H. Turner, 1972). These values are sometimes formally written into a religious code (for example, the Ten Commandments or the Koran) that provides direct guidance for day-to-day life and the rationale that drives attempts to change the beliefs and behaviors of others.

If they have the political savvy to insinuate their belief systems into the legislative process, moral entrepreneurs can often exert significant influence over a society’s definition of reality. In the early 20th century, for instance, the actions of a small group of women, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, led to the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which prohibited the use, possession, and sale of alcoholic beverages (Gusfield, 1963). These women used strong, religiously inspired arguments against the “evils” of alcohol to convince legislators it ought to be outlawed.

However, although religious codes of conduct provided the supportive ideology for the temperance movement in the United States, it was—on closer inspection—a political struggle among various interest groups. The struggle symbolized the conflict between the values of rural, middle-class Protestants and the values of immigrant, urban, lower-class Catholics (Gusfield, 1963). Alcohol consumption was part of the everyday lives of these latter immigrants, and the temperance movement became a symbolic crusade for rural Protestants trying to maintain their position in a rapidly changing society. This interpretation is supported by the fact that temperance advocates were less concerned with the enforcement of Prohibition laws than with their passage, which is why the Eighteenth Amendment was eventually repealed. Through such issues of reform, a group of moral entrepreneurs can defend its perception of reality within the total society (Gusfield, 1963).

The Economics of Reality

Definitions of reality often reflect underlying economic concerns and interests. Ideas that become socially popular often reinforce the interests of wealthy individuals and organizations, allowing them to control the activities of others. The key concerns from the conflict perspective are who benefits economically and who loses from dominant versions of reality.

Take mental illness, for example. The number of problems officially defined by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) as mental diseases and defects increases each year (Caplan, 1995; Kirk & Kutchins, 1992; Szasz, 1990). There are now nearly 400 distinct mental disorders (Horwitz, 2002). In defining what is and is not mental illness, the APA unwittingly reflects the economic organization of U.S. society. In the United States individuals rarely pay the total costs of medical services out of their own pockets. Most of the money for health care services comes from the federal and state governments or from private insurance companies. Only if disorders such as alcoholism, gambling, depression, anorexia, and cocaine addiction are formally defined as illnesses is their treatment eligible for medical insurance coverage.

Economic interests are frequently served by the manner in which language is used to define reality. For example, the 1992 Children's Television Act requires local broadcasters to demonstrate their commitment to the educational needs of children in order to have their licenses renewed (Andrews, 1992). The intent of the law was to improve the quality of children's programming. But instead of adding more educational programs, which are traditionally less lucrative than commercial programs, many stations kept the programs that were already in place and simply redefined "educational" and "informational." One television station, for example, considers *The New Adventures of Winnie the Pooh* educational because it delivers strong messages about honesty, responsibility, persistence, and cooperative effort. Another says *NBA: Inside Stuff* teaches kids about individuals who have overcome obstacles to achieve their goals. Still another network claims that *Sherlock Holmes in the 22nd Century* demonstrates the fundamental principles of gathering, interpreting, and evaluating information (Center for Media Education, 2000). Other stations scheduled their educational programs at unpopular hours, such as 5:30 or 6:00 A.M. Because of such lax compliance, a Federal Communications Commission ruling in 1996 tightened the definition of educational programming and required television stations to air three hours of educational programs a week, between 7 A.M. and 10 P.M. Broadcasters complain it's difficult to make educational programs (as they are now defined) that children want to watch (Kunkel, 1998). With billions of dollars at stake, broadcasters prefer to redefine what an educational program is, to protect their financial interests.

The Politics of Reality

The institution of politics is also linked to societal definitions of reality. To a great extent, politics is concerned with controlling public perceptions of reality so people will do things or think about issues in ways that political leaders want them to. During important political campaigns, we can see such attempts to influence public perception. Mudslinging, euphemistically called "negative campaigning," has become

as common an element of the U.S. electoral process as speeches, debates, baby kissing, and patriotic songs. Most politicians know that if you say something untrue or unproven about an opponent often enough, people will believe it. Ironically, constant public denials by the victim of the charges often reinforce the reality of the charges and keep them in the news. The actual validity of the claims becomes irrelevant as the accusations are transformed into “fact” and become solidified in the minds of the voting public.

However, the relationship between politics and reality goes beyond the dirty campaigns of individual candidates. The social construction of reality itself is a massive political process. Governments, both national and local, live or die by their ability to manipulate public opinion so they can reinforce their claims to legitimacy. Information is selectively released, altered, or withheld in an attempt to gain public approval and support. During the War in Iraq in 2003, Iraqi Minister of Information Mohammed Saeed al-Sahaf, became famous for his blatantly false pronouncements about the war’s progress, such as his declaration after U.S. soldiers had invaded the Iraqi capital that there were “no American infidels in Baghdad.”

No government is immune from such information control. Between September 2001 and March 2003, the Bush administration worked diligently to foster a belief that Iraq and its then-dictator Saddam Hussein played a direct role in the September 11 attacks. They were quite successful. Immediately after the attacks, national opinion polls showed that only 3% of Americans mentioned Iraq or Saddam Hussein when asked who was responsible. By January 2003, 44% of Americans reported that either “most” or “some” of the hijackers were Iraqi citizens. In fact, none were (Feldmann, Marlantes, & Bowers, 2003). Two years after the attacks, 69% of Americans said in a *Washington Post* poll that they thought it at least likely that Hussein was involved in the attacks. even though the link between Iraq and al Qaeda has not been established (Milbank & Deane, 2003). Nevertheless, these beliefs provided the kind of public support necessary to justify the military invasion of Iraq that began in March 2003. Such shaping of reality is accomplished most notably through the media.

The Medium Is the Message

The mass media—television, radio, books, newspapers, magazines, the Internet—are the primary means by which we are entertained and informed about the world around us. But the messages we receive from the media also reflect dominant cultural values (Gitlin, 1979). In television shows and other works of fiction, the way characters are portrayed, the topics dealt with, and the solutions imposed on problems all link entertainment to the prevailing societal tastes in consumption and the economic system.

The media also play a key role in any political system. They are our primary source of information about local, national, and international events and people. News broadcasts and newspapers tell us about things we cannot experience directly, making the most remote events meaningful (Molotch & Lester, 1974). The way we look at the world and define our lives within it is therefore shaped and influenced by what we see on the news, hear on the radio, and read in our daily papers.

Because the news is the means by which political realities are disseminated to the public, it is an essential tool in maintaining social order (Hallin, 1986; Parenti, 1986). In many societies, most news sources don't even try to hide that they are mouthpieces of one faction or another. In repressive societies, the only news sources allowed to operate are those representing the government. In North Korea, for instance, the flow of news information is clearly controlled by the government. People who live in societies with a cultural tradition of press independence, in contrast, assume that news stories are purely factual—an accurate, objective reflection of the “world out there” (Molotch & Lester, 1975). Like everything else, however, news is a constructed reality (Molotch & Lester, 1974).

Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of potentially newsworthy events occur every day. Yet we'll see maybe 10 of them on our favorite evening broadcast. These events exist as news not because of their inherent importance but because of the practical, political, or economic purposes they serve. The old newsroom adage “If it bleeds, it leads,” attests to the fact that events with shocking details—which appeal to the public's fondness for the sensational—are the ones most likely to be chosen. At its most independent, the news is still the product of decisions made by reporters, editors, network executives, and corporation owners, all of whom have their own interests, biases, and values (Molotch & Lester, 1974).

Often complex issues are presented in simplified and sometimes clichéd ways to serve broader political interests. In 1996, a 6-year-old boy in Lexington, North Carolina, was charged by school administrators with sexual harassment for kissing a classmate. News stories focused on the absurdity of such a charge, and the story was used by some social critics to support their contention that “political correctness” had gone too far and that sexual harassment wasn't a serious social problem. What wasn't presented was the information that the boy had been bothering several classmates for a long time, that he had resisted less extreme efforts to discipline him, that the school had been sued previously for not taking action against an older boy who had engaged in similar behavior, and that the boy's parents refused to cooperate in disciplining him (Schwalbe, 1998). Had this information accompanied the story, many people might have drawn very different conclusions about the case.

Although freedom of the press is a core American value, official censorship has been not only tolerated but encouraged in some situations. Take the media coverage of the Persian Gulf War in 1991. This was the first war covered in a live, around-the-clock format. More than 100 countries around the world received reports from CNN, making the war a truly global media event (Barker, 1997). But the most striking feature of the coverage of this war was the reliance on studio-based coverage and stage-managed events. Most of what the viewing public saw consisted of journalist recaps, analyses by consultants and experts, military press conferences, and tapes provided by the military.

Journalists were permitted to cover the war only if they were in organized pools escorted by military personnel (Pratkanis & Aronson, 1991). Reporters were never allowed unsupervised access to the battle lines or to the soldiers. Military escorts had the authority to stop any interview or photograph if they felt it endangered the operation. Any journalist who attempted to operate independently was subject to arrest. Military officials decided which army units could be visited by reporters, which reporters could

make the visits, which soldiers they could talk to, what the television cameras could show, and what could be written (Cummings, 1992). Reporters were completely dependent on official statements and government-issued videotapes. The public was told that such tight restrictions were necessary to ensure the physical safety of the war correspondents, protect the well-being of our soldiers, and promote the war effort.

Not surprisingly, media reports during this war were congratulatory and optimistic: the low number of Allied casualties, the spectacular success of the air campaign and ground attacks, the effectiveness of U.S. high-tech weaponry, the carefully calibrated pressure that kept the Iraqis from unleashing chemical weapons, and so on. Only 1% of the visual images on television were of death and injury (Barker, 1997). Press briefings gave the impression that the Allied forces were trying hard to maintain a high moral ground in the war (Lopez, 1991). Indeed, one of the most enduring images of the war was that of technologically “smart” weapons that were able to hit targets with pinpoint accuracy, minimizing unnecessary destruction and casualties to civilians.

Such tightly controlled reporting served the interests of the TV networks as well as the military. The Persian Gulf War blurred the boundary between military action and media event, creating what one commentator called “twenty-four-hours-a-day, eye-burning, blood-pumping, high-tech, all-channel” entertainment (Engelhardt, 1992, p. 147). It provided the kind of programming that television networks crave.

In contrast to this tightly controlled access to information, press coverage of the early stages of the 2003 War in Iraq was relatively open. This time, the Pentagon decided to allow hundreds of reporters to accompany fighting forces and transmit their stories from the front lines throughout the war. By granting such unprecedented access, Pentagon officials hoped that these “embedded” reporters would convey the “heroism and hard work” of American soldiers to a worldwide audience and also hoped to discredit Iraqi propaganda (Getlin & Wilkinson, 2003). Some media critics, however, were concerned that the reporters still became a tool of the military, especially given their often close attachment to the soldiers with whom they were traveling. For instance, there is some evidence that the famous scene of freed Iraqis toppling a statue of Saddam Hussein and footage of the dramatic rescue of captured U.S. soldier Jessica Lynch from a hospital may have been partially staged. Overall, at the time of this writing it’s still too early to adequately assess the accuracy of the coverage of this war.

❖ **Micro-Macro Connection:** Missing From the News

For everyday news stories, official censorship is usually unnecessary, even in societies that restrict the press. Because of the economic pressures to attract audiences and keep their attention, TV networks and newspapers usually censor themselves (Bagdikian, 1991). Reporters pursue particular stories, particular governmental activities, and particular foreign scenes. Less exciting, more complicated stories end up in the wastebasket or on the cutting-room floor.

Hence, the problem with the daily distillation of information is not so much what is false but what is missing (Bagdikian, 1991). We usually have no way of knowing

which events have *not* been selected for inclusion in the day's news or which plausible alternatives are kept out of the public eye. Each year Project Censored, a media watchdog group, publishes its list of the top news stories that never made the news in the United States and hence never came to the public's attention (Jensen & Project Censored, 1995; Phillips & Project Censored, 1997, 2000; Project Censored, 2003). Here are some stories the mainstream media never covered:

- ◆ The Food and Drug Administration refused to take steps to protect consumers from known carcinogens found in some toothpaste, shampoo, sunscreen, makeup, and other personal care products.
- ◆ The George W. Bush administration halted investigations into terrorist activities related to the bin Laden family prior to September 11, 2001.
- ◆ All around the country, legal ordinances known as TRAP (Targeted Regulation of Abortion Providers) laws restrict all aspects of the physical environment related to an abortion, making it extremely difficult for women to exercise the legal right to choose an abortion.
- ◆ The U.S. Justice Department rejected a study, which it had originally commissioned, that found that the most popular school-based drug prevention program in the country—Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE)—was an extremely expensive failure.

The economic and political motivation for such selectivity becomes apparent when we consider who owns the media. In 1983, 50 companies controlled over half of all U.S. media outlets; by 2000, six companies—General Electric, Viacom, Disney, Time Warner, Bertelsmann, and Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation—controlled over half of all media outlets (Bagdikian, 2000). One company, Clear Channel, owns more than 1,200 radio stations in all 50 states, reaching more than 110 million listeners every week (Clear Channel Communications, 2003). The influence of these companies permeates U.S. society:

ABC is a subsidiary of Disney, which also owns theme parks, an oil and gas company, cable channels, magazines, newspapers, record companies, an insurance company, and even a hockey team. Time Warner owns Turner Broadcasting, parent company of CNN, [TNT, and TBS], as well as sports teams, cable companies, film studios, retail stores, utility companies, and much more. NBC is now owned by General Electric, while CBS [Showtime and MTV] belong to [Viacom]. Fox Television is part of Rupert Murdoch's media empire, which also includes HarperCollins publishing, newspapers, magazines, and television stations. (Iggers, 1997, p. 46)

Despite the existing concentration of media power, in 2003, the Federal Communications Commission moved to relax existing rules that limited corporate ownership of media outlets such as television networks, radio stations, and newspapers. These rules were originally implemented under the belief that diffuse ownership would provide the public with a diversity of viewpoints. Under the new rules, a company could own three television stations in the same market and a single owner of television networks could reach 45% of the nation's viewers. A few months later, the House of Representatives passed legislation temporarily blocking the implementation

of the proposed rules, which would have made it even more likely that control of the media would become more concentrated among a few giant corporations (Glater, 2003).

Many observers also fear that corporation-owned media will twist the news to promote the parent company's narrow economic interests (M. C. Miller, 1996). For instance, in 2001 *NBC Nightly News* aired an enthusiastic story about a "revolutionary" new airplane being manufactured by Boeing called the Sonic Cruiser. The story left out any mention of strong criticisms by aviation experts about the plane's technical flaws or by environmentalists about the plane's poor fuel efficiency. NBC's parent company, General Electric, had invested over \$1 billion in the creation of the proposed jet's engine (Jackson & Hart, 2001).

As the viewing public, our recourse is difficult. To criticize faulty government policies and consider solutions to difficult social problems, we need solid information, which is frequently unavailable or difficult to obtain. The challenge we face is to recognize the processes at work in the social construction of reality and to take them into account as we "consume" the news. A critical dimension of the sociological imagination is the ability to "read silences"—to be attentive to what the mass media *don't* say. Fortunately, one of the purposes of sociology is to scientifically amass a body of knowledge that we can use to assess how our society really works.

STOP HERE

Appreciating Sociological Research

Up to this point, I've been describing how individuals, groups, and various social institutions go about constructing reality. We've seen that these realities sometimes shift with time, place, and individual perception. Faced with this type of fluctuation, sociologists, as well as scholars in other disciplines, seek to identify a more "real" reality through systematic, controlled research. The rules sociologists abide by when conducting research give them confidence that they are identifying more than just a personal version of reality. Instead, they hope to determine a reality as it exists for some group of people at a particular point in time.

Moving beyond the level of individual conclusions about the nature of social reality is crucial if we are to escape the distortions of personal interests and biases. A danger of relying on individual perceptions is that we are likely to conclude that our experiences are what everyone experiences. For example, the famous psychiatrist Sigmund Freud used his own childhood as the ultimate "proof" of the controversial concept the Oedipus conflict (the belief that male children are secretly in love with their mothers and jealous of their fathers). He wrote to a friend in 1897, "I have found, in my own case too, being in love with the mother and jealous of the father, and I now consider it a universal event of early childhood" (quoted in Astbury, 1996, p. 73).

To avoid the risk of such distortions, sociologists focus on what most people believe or how most people behave. But in doing so, sociologists run the risk of simply restating what people already know. Indeed, a criticism of sociology you hear sometimes is that it is just a fancy version of common sense. A lot of the things that we think

https://uk.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/4005_Newman_Text_Chapter_3_Final_Pdf.pdf



Personal Billboards

Liz Grauerholz and Rebecca Smith

Virtually everything we experience in our lives is mediated through language and symbols. At times, we sit back and passively accept the linguistic reality that others create. At other times, through our selective use of language, we actively attempt to construct, or at least influence, others' perceptions of reality. Bumper stickers and T-shirts are powerful forms of this sort of communication, pithy and to the point.

These "personal billboards" communicate messages cheaply and are available to any group or

individual with a vehicle or a wardrobe. They are not reserved solely for powerful people or those whom the media deem worthy of coverage. In fact, personal billboards are some of the most powerful "voices" for underprivileged groups. No matter who uses them or what their messages are, they advertise a reality to others about who we are, what we stand for, and what we consider important.

❖ The messages on T-shirts cover the cultural and political spectrum . . .





❖ ... as do the messages on bumper stickers.



Personal billboards are often used as a means of communicating group pride and identity. They reinforce the reality and vitality of the groups they represent.





Such communicative displays are especially prominent during crises, though different cultures might present very different realities. In the days immediately following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Americans and people living in southern Asia felt a similar need to express solidarity but with very different messages. In the photo below, a Pakistani Muslim cleric displays a T-shirt lauding Osama bin Laden as “Hero of Islam.”



T-shirts and bumper stickers can also provide greater awareness of oppressed groups and their causes. Certain classes, ethnic and religious groups, age groups, sexual minority groups, and political interest groups struggle for control over resources and for the power to determine or influence society's conception of reality.



Oppressed Americans are not unique in displaying messages on their cars or clothing.



❖ In Australia ...



❖ In Vietnam ...



❖ In England ...



Certain groups, referred to as moral entrepreneurs, have social concerns they passionately want translated into law. Often, their personal billboards are designed to dramatize the emotional impact of the underlying message.



Moral entrepreneurs need not be wealthy or influential individuals. If they succeed in turning their interests into public policy, it is by virtue of their access to decision makers, skillful use of publicity, success in neutralizing any opposing viewpoints—and most of all, their initiative in making their desires known. For instance, the citizens of Northern Ireland were a key element in

forcing the political compromise designed to stop decades of sectarian violence between Catholics and Protestants. Ordinary people like the men pictured here, whose voices had long been drowned out by strident and violent radicals on both sides of the conflict, helped to give political leaders the moral authority to move toward peace.

