



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 the Contributions of 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 no doubt 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 urges 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 in the universe, 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 Chapter 2, 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 very 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 waterway he saw every day as a child—looked different 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 fanciful. 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 far-fetched and naïve to people living in cultures where illness and health are assumed to have supernatural causes.

Ideas about reality also change over time. In 1900, a doctor might have told a patient with asthma to go to the local tobacconist for a cigarette; people with colds may have been told to inhale formaldehyde (Zuger, 1999). 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” (P. Cohen, 2003). Doctors encouraged parents to paint “Thum,” a fiery concoction of cayenne pepper, acetone nail polish, and isopropyl alcohol, on their baby’s fingernails to discourage thumb-sucking (Critchell, 2005). In the 1950s, obstetricians encouraged pregnant women to have a martini or glass of wine each night to calm their nerves. In the 1960s, doctors believed that alcohol prevented premature labor; women arriving at the hospital in labor were often handed vodka or even given alcohol intravenously (Hoffman, 2005).

Sometimes realities change almost instantaneously. In 2006, this curious headline caught my eye: “Pluto is no longer a planet, astronomers say” (Kole, 2006). Did that little celestial body orbiting in the far reaches of the solar system unexpectedly shrink or turn into an asteroid? No. A panel of leading astronomers simply reclassified it

based on new criteria for determining what is and isn't a planet. So literally overnight, a reality that we all take for granted suddenly changed. Think of all the schoolbooks that will have to be rewritten to account for this new "truth."

In 2004 federal health officials in the United States lowered the threshold level for harmful cholesterol (Kolata, 2004a). Millions of people went to bed one night with cholesterol levels in the "healthy" range, and woke up the next day with levels suddenly considered "unhealthy" and "risky." According to one researcher, about a third of major medical studies are eventually contradicted by further research (Ioannidis, 2005). Quite possibly, people 100 years from now will look back at the beginning of the 21st century and regard some of our taken-for-granted truths as mistaken, misguided, or downright laughable.

The process through which facts, knowledge, truth, and so on are discovered, made known, reaffirmed, and altered by the members of a society is called the *social construction of reality* (P.L. Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This concept is based on the simple assumption that knowledge is a human creation. Ironically, most of us live our lives assuming that an objective reality exists, independent of us, and is accessible through our senses. We are quite sure trees and tables and trucks don't exist simply in our imaginations. We assume this reality is shared by others and can be taken for granted as reality (Lindesmith, Strauss, & Denzin, 1991).

At times, however, what we define as real seems to have nothing to do with what our senses tell us is real. Picture a 5-year-old child who wakes up in the middle of the night screaming that monsters are under her bed. Her parents comfort her by saying, "There aren't any monsters. You had a nightmare. It's just your imagination." The next day the child comes down with the flu and wants to know why she is sick. The parents respond by saying,

"You've caught a virus, a bug."

"A bug? You mean like an ant or a beetle?"

"No. It's the sort of bug you can't see—but it's there."

Granted, viruses can be seen and verified with the proper equipment, but without access to such equipment the child has to take the parents' word for it that viruses are real. In fact, most of us accept the reality of viruses without ever having seen them for ourselves. The child learns to accept the authoritative claims of her parents that something that was "seen" (the nightmare monster) is not real, although something that was not seen (the virus) is real.

Hence, reality often turns out to be more a matter of agreement than something inherent in the natural world. Sociologists, particularly those working from the conflict perspective and symbolic interactionism, strive to explain the social construction of reality in terms of both its causes and its consequences. Their insights help explain many of the phenomena that influence our daily lives.

Laying the Foundation: The Bases of Reality

Think of society as a building constructed by the people who live and work in it. The building's foundation, its underlying reality, determines its basic shape and dimensions. And the foundation is what makes that building solid and helps it stand up

through time and weather. For students of architecture as well as sociology, the first thing to understand is the way the foundation is prepared.

Symbolic interactionism encourages us to see that people's actions toward one another and interpretations of situations are based on their definitions of reality, which are in turn learned from interactions with those around them. What we know to be real we share with other members of our culture. Imagine how difficult it would be to believe in something no one else around you thought existed. Psychiatrists use such terms as *hallucination* and *delusion* to describe things experienced by people who see, hear, or believe things others don't.

The social construction of reality is a process by which human-created ideas become so firmly accepted that to deny them is to deny common sense. Of course, 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 sensory experiences but on such forces as culture and language, self-fulfilling prophecies, and faith.

Culture and Language

As I mentioned in Chapter 2, we live in a symbolic world and interact chiefly through symbolic communication—that is, through language. Language gives meaning to the people, objects, events, and ideas of our lives. 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, these substances are identical. Yet we define them and treat them quite differently. We are perfectly willing to swallow our own saliva, and we probably swallow gallons of the stuff during the course of a day. But once it leaves our mouths—even if only for a second or two—it becomes something distasteful, even disgusting, to ingest (Brouillette & Turner, 1992). Such a reaction shows that the act of “swallowing saliva” has been socially transformed into the act of “drinking spit.” The socially constructed reality is that these two substances are socially and linguistically distinct (even though they're physically 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 Alaska 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 hard-pressed to see the distinction between the vehicles called *sedans* and *station wagons*.

In addition to affecting perceptions of reality, language reinforces prevailing ideas and suppresses conflicting ideas about the world (Sapir, 1929). 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 perform tasks to provide the basic necessities and to ensure the survival of their tight-knit community, work is work whether you're paid to do it or not.

Language can pack an enormous emotional wallop. Words can make us happy, sad, disgusted, angry, or even incite us to violence. Racial, ethnic, sexual, or religious slurs can be particularly volatile. Among heterosexual adolescents, for example, homophobic name-calling (*queer, fag, dyke*) is one of the most common modes of bullying and coercion in school (Thurlow, 2001). In 2007, a play called "Nigger Wetback Chink" opened in Hollywood. Although it was a comedy, it was an attempt to confront the pain of racial slurs. So volatile was the topic that the play was condemned by both neo-Nazis and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (Waxman, 2007). That same year, popular radio personality Don Imus incited nationwide rage and was forced to resign after he referred to members of the Rutgers University women's basketball team as "nappy-headed hos."

Within a culture, certain professions or groups sometimes develop a distinctive language, known as *jargon*, which allows members of the group to communicate with one another clearly and quickly. Surfers, snowboarders, and techies each have a specialized vocabulary (not understandable to most outsiders) through which they can efficiently convey to others information about wave quality, snow conditions, or the latest innovations in microprocessors. Teenagers must keep up with a constantly evolving vocabulary to avoid falling out of favor with their peers. 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, reinforce their image as highly trained experts, and keep the patient from interfering too much in their decision making. These communication roadblocks have become a cause for concern in the field of medicine. Many books and Web sites now help patients overcome their position of powerlessness by instructing them on how and when to ask physicians the right questions so they can make informed decisions about a course of treatment. For their part, many medical schools now require their students to be trained in how to avoid jargon and how to listen to their patients (D. Franklin, 2006).

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, people use such terms in the interests of politeness and good taste, such as saying "perspiration" instead of "sweat," "bathroom tissue" instead of toilet paper, or "no longer with us" instead of "dead." However, euphemisms also shape perceptions and emotions. 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. Can you think of others?

- ◆ Pre-owned—used
- ◆ Seasoned—old
- ◆ Misinformation—lies
- ◆ Ethnic cleansing—deportation and massacre of the people of one culture by those of another culture
- ◆ Economically nonaffluent—poor
- ◆ Revenue enhancement—taxes
- ◆ Postconsumer waste material—garbage
- ◆ Negative pay raise—pay cut
- ◆ Deselected, involuntary separated, downsized, nonretained, given a career change opportunity, vocationally relocated, streamlined, 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

The governmental or political use of language illustrates how words can determine the course of people's everyday lives both at home and abroad. We all know what the word *war* means. It's when two opposing forces wage battle against one another, either until one side surrenders or both agree to a truce. The vocabulary of war is vast, containing words such as *troops*, *regiments*, *artillery*, *allies*, *enemies*, *heroes*, *casualties*, and so forth. In wartime, there is good and evil, us and them, victory and defeat. The language of war contains euphemisms too, designed to minimize the public's discomfort and increase their support: "collateral damage" (civilian deaths during military combat), "friendly fire" (accidental shooting at fellow soldiers), "pullback" (retreat), "sectarian violence" (civil war), and "insurgency" (deadly attacks by people who resent being occupied by a foreign country).

Once a situation is framed as a "war," 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). The interpretation of people's behavior dramatically changes as well. 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)

Immediately after the attacks of September 11, 2001, President Bush unofficially declared a "war" on terrorism that exists to this day. But the administration later opted for the term "War on Terror" and then "Global War on Terror" rather than "War on Terrorism," evoking both violent actions of terrorists and the fear they're trying to create:

"The war on terror" . . . suggests a campaign aimed not at human adversaries but at a pervasive social plague. At its most abstract, terror comes to seem as persistent and inexplicable as evil itself, without raising any inconvenient theological qualms. And in fact, the White House's use of "evil" has declined by 80 percent over the same period that its use of "terror" has been increasing. (Nunberg, 2004, p. 7)

Whether this is a war on terror or on terrorism, it is—in the traditional sense of the word *war*—linguistically impossible. This war has no geographically or nationally identifiable enemy and no achievable end. Technically, a nation can no more declare war on "terror" or "terrorism" than it can declare a war on guns or bombs or drunk driving. In 2005, the administration shifted its language and began testing a new slogan, "a global

struggle against violent extremism,” in an attempt to convey the impression that the war is as much an ideological battle as it is a military mission (Schmitt & Shanker, 2005).

As one columnist put it recently, “In wartime, words are weapons” (Safire, 2006, p. 16). Whether the enemy is “terror,” “terrorism,” or “violent extremism,” invoking the vocabulary of war has some strategic advantages—among them, justifying actions that would not be acceptable in any other context. By continually using wartime terms and expressions, an administration can frame the expansion of government powers and the limitation of civil liberties as steps we need to take to protect freedom, bring “enemies” and “evildoers” to justice, and avoid another catastrophe.

And, of course, the vocabulary of war became the justification for invading two countries, Afghanistan and Iraq, though we’re technically not “at war” with either country.

Governments must also try to control language during wartime. In the spring of 2004, we all saw the horrible pictures of Iraqi prisoners being mistreated by U.S. soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison. Some were shown being attacked by dogs; others were stripped naked and forced to simulate sexual acts to the laughter of their captors; still others were hooded and attached to electrical wires. The ensuing battle over words was as heated as the battle to determine criminal responsibility for these acts. The International Committee of the Red Cross charged that the treatment of these prisoners, as well as suspected terrorists detained at the U.S. Marine base in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, was “tantamount to torture” (N.A. Lewis, 2004). Liberal journalists and critics of the administration used the term “torture” freely and frequently. A popular conservative radio talk show host, however, encouraged his listeners to see the incidents as no worse than “fraternity pranks.” The administration itself went to great pains to avoid using the word “torture,” opting instead for euphemisms like “aggressive interrogation techniques” and “alternative procedures.” The Secretary of Defense said that they weren’t prisoners of war at all but were “unlawful combatants” and therefore didn’t have any rights to be treated humanely (Sontag, 2004).

In a wartime mode, even though concerns with national security are warranted and fears of attack are very real, the system, according to one prominent law professor, “by definition sweeps very broadly and ends up harming hundreds if not thousands of people” (quoted in Liptak, 2003, p. A1). As in other times of war, otherwise unacceptable actions taken as part of the “War on Terror” occur largely without debate or opposition, reflecting the power of language in shaping the social reality of everyday life.



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 we 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 the prophecy’s own “accuracy” (Merton, 1948; Watzlawick, 1984).

Every holiday season we witness the stunning effects of self-fulfilling prophecies on a national scale. In September or so, the toy industry releases the results of its annual survey of retailers indicating what toys are predicted to be the top sellers at Christmas. Usually one toy in particular emerges as the most popular, hard-to-get gift of the year. In

the 1980s it was Cabbage Patch Dolls. In the early 1990s it was Mighty Morphin Power Rangers and Ninja Turtles. More recently, items such as Beanie Babies, SpongeBob SquarePants toys, Razor scooters, Wii video games, Bratz dolls, TMX Elmo, and toy digital cameras have taken their turn as the “must have” toy of the year. By around November 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 and Wal-Mart, may announce the possibility of rationing: one toy per family. Fueled by the fear of seeing a disappointed child’s face at Christmas, thousands of panicked parents and grandparents rush the stores to make sure they’re not left without. Some hoard extras for other parents they know. As a result, supplies of the toy—which weren’t perilously low in the first place—become severely depleted, thereby bringing about the predicted shortage. The mere belief in some version of the reality creates expectations that can actually make it happen.

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 are 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 better (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 even though they’re 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 (cited in Blakeslee, 1998). Researchers estimate that in studies of new drugs, between 35% and 75% of patients benefit from taking dummy pills. 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, sometimes referred to as the “nocebo” effect. Anthropologists have documented numerous mysterious and scientifically difficult-to-explain deaths that follow the pronouncement of curses or evil spells (Watzlawick, 1984). 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 and 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). In another study, patients with asthma were given a bronchodilator (a drug that widens air passages, making breathing easier) but were told it was a bronchoconstrictor (a drug that narrows air passages, making breathing more difficult). Half of them experienced difficulty breathing after the treatment (cited in Harvard Mental Health Letter, 2005). 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 Incorrigible Propositions

David Blaine is a famous street performer and illusionist who combines sophisticated magic tricks with a hint of comedy. 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 in person. He looks as if he is 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 literally 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 *incorrigible 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 incorrigible 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 that 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.

❖
Hugh Mehan and Houston Wood
The Infallible Oracle

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 *séance*-like 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 (not unlike how consecrated bread and wine *become* the body and blood of Christ in the Roman Catholic Eucharist). 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? 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. It was an article of faith that could not be questioned. All that followed for the Azande was experienced from this initial assumption, and they had ways of explaining contradictions to their truths, just as we do. When the oracle failed to give them proper advice, they would say things like, "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 we are certainly not completely free to create whatever version of social reality we want to create. We are, after all, born into a preexisting society with its norms, values, roles, relationships, groups, organizations, and institutions. 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).

As the conflict perspective points out, certain people or groups of people are more influential in defining reality than others. In any modern society—where socioeconomic 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 people with more power, prestige, status, wealth, and access to high-level policy makers can turn their perceptions of the world into 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. Powerful social institutions and the people who control them play a significant role in shaping and sustaining perceptions of reality for everybody else. But if you wish to develop the sociological imagination, you need to understand the role of not only these larger forces in shaping private lives but also private individuals who struggle to shape public reality.

The Economics of Reality

Definitions of reality frequently reflect underlying economic interests. Consider, for instance, the story of a very successful painter named Marla Olmstead. Marla's paintings have been compared in style and spirit to the work of Jackson Pollock, Pablo Picasso, and Claude Monet and sell for thousands of dollars a piece. One gallery owner thinks they could easily sell for \$50,000 ("Marla Olmstead," 2004, p. 1). Her work has appeared at some of New York's finest art galleries. Many art critics note that her pieces are rhythmic, beautiful, and magical. She has been featured on *The Today Show* and *60 Minutes* as well as in the *New York Times* and *Time* magazine. You can even watch a video of her creating a painting on her Web site.

Marla has garnered all this attention not because of the quality of her work alone but because of who she is. When she first burst onto the artistic scene, Marla was 4 years old—and she'd already been "painting" for two years.

At this young age, Marla used bright acrylic paints, which she splattered and scraped on large 6' × 6' canvases. She sometimes worked on one piece for days at a time, and her parents never knew exactly when she was done. When she decided she'd finished, she gave her paintings titles, printed her name at the bottom, and went on to a more typical interest for a young girl: a TV show, a doll, a swim in the pool.

While some skeptics question whether she is solely responsible for her work, there's no doubt that she is a force in the art world. But is Marla's work the expression of creative, artistic vision, or is it the result of a child playing around with paint? More importantly, who gets to decide if her work is defined as "art" or as "childish doodles"? The investors and collectors who pay thousands of dollars for each of her paintings clearly define it as art. But what if she had never come to their attention and never sold a single piece? For something to be considered art, does it have to have some economic exchange value? And how do you think all the thousands of struggling artists who never sell anything their entire lives feel about Marla's instant and apparently effortless success? Would they be less inclined to define her as an "artist" than the investors who buy her work? These questions are not trivial. They reflect a deeper issue regarding the role of economics in shaping the way social reality is defined.

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 disorders and defects has now reached nearly 400 (Horwitz, 2002). In defining what constitutes a mental disorder, the APA unwittingly reflects the economic organization of U.S. society. In the United States individuals seldom pay the total costs of

health care services out of their own pockets. Most of the money for medical treatment comes from the federal and state governments or from private insurance companies. Only if problems such as gambling, depression, anorexia, and cocaine addiction are formally defined as illnesses is their treatment eligible for medical insurance coverage.

Similar economic considerations affect the general health care system. In 2004, the federal Medicare program abandoned its long-standing policy against defining obesity as a disease, which had allowed it to routinely deny coverage for weight loss therapies (Stein & Connolly, 2004). Such a policy shift has enormous economic consequences. For instance, in Pennsylvania alone, private insurance companies paid 85% of the cost of weight loss surgeries in one year, an amount that exceeded \$205 million (Kolata, 2004b).

Another example of how economics affects the social construction of reality is our society's history of attempts to protect people with disabilities. Approximately 50 million Americans are estimated to have some type of disability (Freedman, Martin, & Schoeni, 2004), which the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines as "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such individual" (U.S. Department of Labor, 2004a, p. 1). Under this law, employers are required to accommodate employees who have a documented disability and are forbidden to fire them simply because of their disability. For instance, a company that has wheelchair-bound employees must have ramps or elevators that give these workers access to all areas of the building. Ironically, the added cost of employing disabled workers may actually work to their disadvantage by making them less attractive to potential hirers in the first place. One study found an 11% drop in the employment rate of people with disabilities after the ADA was enacted (De Leire, 2000). Moreover, highly publicized stories of employees with questionable disabilities seeking accommodations—like an office worker allergic to artificial fragrances demanding that her or his employer install an expensive new air filtration system—give the impression that the ADA is placing an excessive economic burden on companies. Although powerful businesses and industries were not able to prevent this act from being passed in the first place, they have been able to create a reality that still works in their interest.

The Politics of Reality

The institution of politics is also linked to societal definitions of reality. To a great extent, politics is about 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. In fact, while companies that sell consumer products must meet some standard of accuracy in their advertising, we have no federal truth-in-advertising for political campaign ads. Candidates have the legal right to lie (National Public Radio, 2007). Ironically, constant public denials of the charges by the victim often reinforce their reality 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. All governments 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 for their policies. Over the past several years, at least 20 different federal agencies, including the Department of Defense and the Census Bureau, have produced and distributed hundreds of suspect “news” reports to local television networks. The reports look like actual journalistic reports but are in fact prepackaged productions designed not just to inform but to build public support for governmental policy objectives, such as Medicare reform or Social Security reform (Barstow & Stein, 2005). For instance, in 2004, the Department of Health and Human Services distributed fake news (in the form of video news releases in which actors played the parts of reporters) to hundreds of local television stations in support of administration prescription drug policies (Alter, 2005). And in 2005, it was discovered that this department as well as the Department of Education had paid several sympathetic journalists and television commentators between \$10,000 and \$240,000 to present government policies in a favorable light in their columns and broadcasts.

When the lives of thousands of citizens are at stake and public opinion is crucial, such information control becomes particularly tight. Between September 2001 and the invasion of Iraq in 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 and had stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction. 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. But 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 was never established (Milbank & Deane, 2003). Nevertheless, these beliefs provided the kind of public support necessary to justify the military invasion and occupation of Iraq that continues to this day. Such a molding of public perception is accomplished most notably through the media.

The Medium Is the Message

Communication media are the primary means by which we are entertained and informed about the world around us (see Chapter 5). 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 are also 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, news sources don't even try to hide the fact 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.

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).

The manipulation of events for political gain is such an expected part of the cultural landscape that it’s become institutionalized with its own term: *spin*. To put a spin on an event is to give it a particular interpretation, often one that is to the speaker’s advantage. Spin is a valuable political resource. Every U.S. president, whether Republican or Democrat, has staff members who spun the facts to put his policies in the best possible light, often by withholding information from the public, fudging statistics, or exaggerating the progress or benefits of particular actions and policies (Stolberg, 2004).

Spin has become a profession in its own right. Immediately following a televised presidential debate, for instance, a gaggle of trained supporters (the “spin doctors”) for both candidates situate themselves in a specified area—called “spin alley”—where they creatively provide television viewers with a version of the outcome that benefits their candidate. Top aides and party officials are dispatched to cable news programs and local news studios. Teams of researchers send dozens of messages to reporters covering the debate, accusing the other candidate of misstatements or lies.

In a wired world, spin isn’t just practiced by professional media pundits. For each debate during the 2004 presidential campaign, representatives of both candidates called on millions of their supporters to flood online polls, chat rooms, and discussion boards as soon as the debate ended with instant declarations that their candidate had won. What’s interesting is that these instructions went out days *before* the debates actually took place (Rutenberg, 2004). These tactics continue between elections as groups seeking to influence policy making send e-mails to supporters requesting that they sign petitions and contact their legislators. In addition, Web blogs are a continuing source of spin as they mix fact with the blogger’s opinion, much of it selected and phrased to present a clearly one-sided version of reality.

Although “freedom of expression” and “freedom of the press” are core American values, manipulation of information has been not only tolerated but encouraged in some situations. Take the media coverage of the current military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the weeks leading up to the war, evidence disputing the existence of weapons of mass destruction and the link between Saddam Hussein and the attacks of September 11, 2001 went largely unreported by the mainstream media. In the patriotic fervor that overtook society at the time, media independence and skepticism all but disappeared (Moyers, 2007).

During the initial stages of the war, press coverage seemed to be relatively open. The Pentagon allowed hundreds of reporters to accompany fighting forces and transmit their stories from the front lines throughout the war. According to one study, 61% of their reports during the first three days of the war were live and unedited (Project

for Excellence in Journalism, 2005). 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 in the process discredit Iraqi propaganda (Getlin & Wilkinson, 2003).

But even then, some media critics were concerned that the reporters were tools of the military, especially given their often close attachment to the soldiers with whom they were traveling. The Pentagon required embedded journalists to sign a contract giving the military control over the content of their stories (Jamail, 2007). According to one study, 80% of early embedded reports included no commentary at all from soldiers (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2005). In addition, there is evidence that military personnel and news organizations fabricated stories to present the war in a favorable light. For instance, the famous footage of the dramatic rescue of captured U.S. soldier Jessica Lynch from an Iraqi hospital in 2003 was staged for effect. Lynch testified before Congress in 2007 that the whole incident was fabricated. After former NFL player Pat Tillman was killed in Afghanistan, the Army told his family (and the country via the media) that he had died in a heroic struggle with the enemy, when in fact, he’d been killed by “friendly fire.” Yet the Army used his death as an opportunity to create a feel-good media story, going so far as to keep eyewitnesses from talking to the press, cutting off Internet service to the base, and even burning Tillman’s uniform (Alter, 2007).

For everyday news stories, even in societies that restrict the press, official censorship is usually unnecessary. Because of the economic pressures to attract audiences and keep their attention, TV networks and newspapers usually censor themselves (Bagdikian, 1991). Reporters pursue stories that are relatively easy to research and that have immediate interest to audiences. Less exciting, more complicated stories don’t get enough journalistic resources or are cut in the editing process. 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.

The economic and political motivation for such selectivity becomes apparent when we consider who owns the media. For instance, one company, Clear Channel, owns about 1,200 radio stations in all 50 states, reaching more than 110 million listeners every week (Clear Channel Communications, 2003). By comparison, the next top company, Cumulus Broadcasting owns only 303 stations (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2006). Another, the Sinclair Broadcast Group, owns and operates 61 television stations in 38 markets and reaches an estimated 24% of the viewing population (Sinclair Broadcast Group, 2005). 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). The 1996 Telecommunications Act allows one company to own up to six radio stations and two television stations in a single city.

Many media observers fear that the concentration of corporate-owned news outlets twists certain stories to promote particular economic or political interests. In recent years, media owners have refused to run advertisements, stories, or commentaries that supported single-payer health insurance, criticized U.S. military intervention, or opposed certain international trade agreements. Television and print journalists have been fired, forced to resign, or reassigned for presenting stories critical of subsidiaries owned by the parent company (Parenti, 2006).

As the viewing and listening 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 recent growth in popularity of podcasting, Internet-protocol television, microradio stations, and subscription satellite networks may be a sign that some citizens are growing weary of the filtered and sometimes partisan information they receive from traditional news sources.

Nevertheless, the challenge we face in our own private lives 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.

Moral Entrepreneurs

Individual efforts to control the construction of reality are difficult. But we are not consigned to meekly accept the reality presented to us by powerful organizations and institutions. Individuals banding together in interest groups have managed time and again to contribute to the construction of social reality. For instance, they have created new understandings of the rights of ethnoracial minorities, brought environmental degradation to the public’s attention, and changed our attitudes toward particular crimes.

Although economic and political power have been the motivating concerns of many of these groups, certain groups have had moral concerns they passionately want translated into law. Groups that seek to outlaw pornography, sexually explicit song lyrics, 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. 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).

Appreciating the Contributions of Sociological Research

Up to this point, I’ve been describing how individuals, groups, organizations, 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. They hope to determine a reality as it exists for a community 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 solely on individual perceptions is that we are likely to conclude that what we experience is what everyone experiences. For example, the famous psychiatrist Sigmund Freud used his own childhood as the ultimate “proof” of the controversial concept called the Oedipus conflict (the belief that sons 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).

(Text continues on page 76)