

Social Construction of Reality

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the concept of the social construction of reality, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Social Construction of Reality
2. Social Construction and Symbolic-Interaction Theory

1. SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

The **social construction of reality** is a particularly important idea in sociology. This idea states that reality is not hard, fast, and fixed, but is, in fact, malleable and changeable. Reality is negotiated when we get together in groups and collectively come up with shared meanings for things and shared symbols, like language and the way people create meanings for objects (like why a tree is called a tree) which are commonly understood in society. This is also true of categories, as in what it means to be white or black in American society, or what it means to be male or female in American society.

There's nothing 'natural' about why things are the way they are—they are that way because they are products of social interaction. When people get together in groups, they make meaning. This is a core premise of being human: humans are meaning-making machines.



HINT

To fully understand the social construction of reality, you need to see the human as a blank canvas or an empty vessel that's capable of being filled with all kinds of ideas, meanings, and culture. Each society does this for its members. It paints the blank human canvas in a certain way.

When you're born into the society, you learn the meanings, culture, and symbols of that particular society. As mentioned previously, there's no natural way to do things—everything you see around you, every object, every word you say, everything you do except for your basic biological behaviors has been socially created by humans interacting in groups. This is why you see such a startling array of diversity in human society and human cultural artifacts. The diversity underscores the idea of being a blank canvas that gets painted by the culture of your society.

IN CONTEXT

When you learn language, there's no necessary link between an animal like a deer that exists out in

the world, and the meat that is called venison. The actual biological creature has been labeled and understood in different ways, and also has varying meanings in different mythologies, etc.

Native Americans, for instance, interacted with this animal (deer) and developed a way to talk about it in their language and symbolize it. This process is done differently in every culture. The reality of this thing—deer—and what it means in society is constructed by each separate society.

Consider a cow, for example. People eat it—it's one of the most eaten animals in America. In India, however, they don't eat it. The cow is equated with the sacred. There is a completely different constructed meaning of what the cow is in each society.



BIG IDEA

Creating different meanings of the same thing in different cultures implies that reality is not fixed, but is malleable and alterable. It's shaped when people interact with each other and get together in groups, and become the creative agents in the process of reality. This is the social construction of reality.



TERM TO KNOW

Social Construction of Reality

The process whereby people shape and create reality through their interactions.

2. SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND SYMBOLIC-INTERACTION THEORY

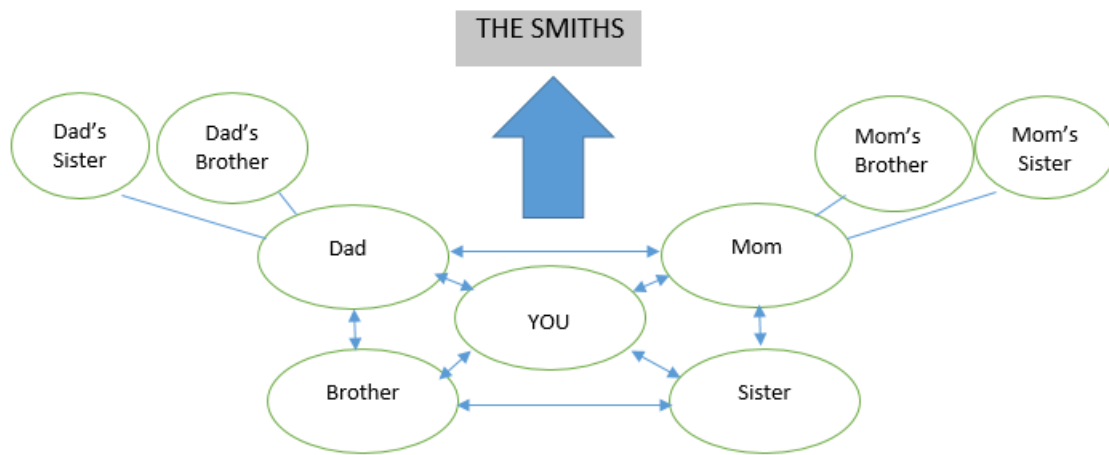
The social construction of reality is a process of interaction. It's a process by which human beings create the meaning of situations, things, people, objects, and even of society, economics, politics, ethics, and morality. Everything-- reality itself-- is constructed through interaction.

Does the social construction of reality sound similar to symbolic interaction and the symbolic interaction theory? Symbolic interaction is the foundation of the social construction of reality. Recall that the **symbolic-interaction theory** also focuses on meaning-making in interaction, and holds that humans live in a world of meaningful objects and symbols that they construct in their day-to-day micro-interactions.

In addition to socially constructing meanings of objects in the environment, like the example of the deer and cow, and developing systems of symbols like language to refer to these things and talk about them in groups, people also construct meaning in complex, abstract ways, like understanding what it means to be a family, what it means to be an American man, or the meaning of capitalism, or the economic system, or politics and ethics, etc.

IN CONTEXT

To illustrate a more complex social construction of reality, consider how the family is constructed.



Suppose you are part of the Smith family. You are in the middle. You're surrounded by your mom, dad, brother, and sister. There is also your dad's sister, dad's brother, mom's brother, and mom's sister. Where do you draw the boundaries of family? How do you decide who connects to whom, etc.? Different societies answer these questions differently.

You may call this diagram an illustration of the immediate family in your society, but other societies have constructed family differently. They might say that your father's brother is also called 'Dad.' The Iroquois system of kinship traces your father's brother as also father to you. So 'Dad,' then, would be included with this part of your family, but your father's sister would not. She'd be called Aunt. The opposite would be true on the other side. Your mother's sister would be called 'Mom' but your mother's brother would be called Uncle. This reflects the construction of family in that society.

In American society, however, it is constructed like the diagram above. Within the family, you interact with your father. As you grow up, your father learns from you and interacts with you. Your father is also interacting with your mother, talking about the kids. You're interacting with your sister, your brother and your sister are interacting, etc. Everyone's interacting with everyone else, through day-to-day exchanges, family vacations, etc., and through the years there develops a family called the Smiths.

When you say to somebody, "I'm Tim Smith" or "I'm Becky Smith--whatever it happens to be--this has meaning to you. The Smiths could be horribly dysfunctional; Dad could be abusive, Mom could be absent, but regardless, all of the interactions that you've had through time with each other as a family, contributes to the meaning. There are roles in the family. Mom has a certain set of roles because females have certain sets of roles that are constructed. Dad has certain sets of roles. There's nothing natural about what it means to be female or male in society--these roles are constructed through interaction.

Sociologists are very interested in the social construction of these categories and many more categories like them. In addition to gender, sociologists are particularly interested in how race is constructed and given meaning--what it means to be white or black in society.

There's no biological difference between black or white humans, yet we socially construct a multitude of meanings for those two skin colors. Furthermore, what it means to be white or black in America is not what it means to be white or black in Australia, necessarily. They have a whole different social construction of those

categories.



BRAINSTORM

Think about other categories that are socially constructed:

- What does it mean to be young or old?
- What does it mean to be gay or straight?
- What does it mean to be in a family?

Can you see that all of these concepts are not fixed? They are socially constructed and can change over time, and they often do. Reality is something both malleable and shaped.



TERM TO KNOW

Symbolic-Interaction Theory

A theoretical framework that holds humans create meaning in their day-to-day, micro-level interactions.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about the **social construction of reality**, which is based upon the foundation of **symbolic-interaction theory**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



TERMS TO KNOW

Social Construction of Reality

The process whereby people shape and create reality through their interactions.

Symbolic-Interaction Theory

A theoretical framework that holds humans create meaning in their day-to-day, micro-level interactions.