The Social Construction of Reality

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Conflict perspective

- Emphasizes how social order arises from dominance and coercion
- Society viewed as struggle between “haves” and “have-nots”
- Marx focused on economic “haves” and “have-nots” (class struggle)
- Current conflict theorists also interested in other sources of conflict (e.g., gender and race)
- Main focus on how society affects people, especially stratification

Karl Marx
Symbolic interactionism

✓ Society viewed as ongoing interaction using symbols
✓ Unlike other perspectives, focus is micro/interactional level, not social structure
✓ Social order is possible because of shared meanings
✓ Shared meanings arise from interaction and interpretation
✓ More than other perspectives, studies how people construct social reality

George H. Mead
Social construction of reality

✓ Social construction of reality (Newman): process through which the members of a society discover, make known, reaffirm, and alter a collective version of facts, knowledge, and “truth” (p. 54)

✓ Social construction of reality (Schweingruber): process through which people attach meanings to things and then act on the basis of those meanings (sometimes forgetting they are the source of those meanings)

✓ We live in two worlds, the physical world and the world of meanings

✓ Three steps in attaching meanings to things:
  • Categorizing: dividing up physical world into parts
  • Naming: Attaching symbols (‘X’) to those parts
  • Typifying: Characterizing what a typical ‘X’ is like

✓ People act toward things based on the meanings attached to them

✓ Conflict theorists focus on how some people have more power to give meanings than others

Cup vs. glass

Age 3: cup, little cup, big cup, coffee cup, paper cup
Age 12: cup, glass, fruit cup, wine glass, juice glass, Dixie cup, measuring cup, mug, beer mug, etc.

Some socially constructed categories

✓ Colors (number of colors in languages varies from 2-12)
✓ Animals: food, pets, endangered, vermin
✓ Time: weeks, linear, cyclical, clock time, time as commodity
✓ Races: white, black, Asian, American Indian, etc.
✓ Sexes: man, woman, etc.
✓ Moral/legal/medical labels: Juvenile delinquent, gifted, felon, sexual predator, mentally ill, sinner, pardoned
✓ Social problems (e.g., domestic violence, stalking, sexual harassment, acquaintance rape)
Cross-cultural differences in color terms

Spectrum

English
red orange yellow green blue purple

Shona
cipsuka cicena citema cipsuka

Bassa
hui zita