Social Construction of Reality/
The Nature of Social Research

Sept. 10, 2004

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)
Self-fulfilling prophecies

- Self-fulfilling prophecies: assumption or prediction that in itself causes the expected event to occur, thus seeming to confirm the prophecy’s accuracy (p. 53)
- A self-fulfilling prophecy is a socially constructed situation whose meaning tells us what is going to happen
- Examples from our educational system (meanings attached to students):
  - Test taking: meanings attached to the race or sex of test takers affect the results (video clip)
  - Teaching-expectancy effect (positive meanings attached to students): In the “Pygmalion in Classroom” study, students labeled “Spurters” showed more improvement than other students because teachers expected improvement and treated them differently
  - Tracking: Students get placed into “tracks” that determine treatment and outcomes; factors such as class, race, gender, appearance, room size, teaching preferences, etc. affect track assignment
- Chapter 7 discusses labeling theory, which focuses on negative meanings (“juvenile delinquent”) given to people and the effects of these labels

Tracking according to Groening

3rd Grade

The class has been divided into three reading groups. The Gold group and the Silver group will stay here. The Brown group will go to a special room in the basement.

The nature of social research

- There are many ways of knowing about the world
- Personal experience and common sense knowledge enable us to get things done in everyday life
- Personal experience and common sense knowledge cannot be reliably generalized
- Social research is empirical & probabilistic
  - Empirical research: research that operates from the ideological position that questions about human behavior can be answered only through controlled, systematic observations of the real world (p. 72)
  - Probabilistic: capable of identifying only those forces that have a high likelihood, but not a certainty, of influencing human action (p. 72)