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


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)