

## Understanding the Social Construction of Reality

### Objectives: Students will be able to...

- Define the “social construction of reality.”
- Assess the impact of social context and social interactions on human behavior and beliefs in a specific example.
- Use the “sociological imagination” to assess how their own experiences have been impacted by the “social construction of reality.”

### ASA Standards: Domain 1: Essential Concepts 1.2.1-1.2.2

**Materials:** computer, projector/video display and speakers to show lesson PowerPoint and video. Copies of the “social construction of reality” reading to distribute to each student.

### Usage Notes:

(SLIDE 1): Begin lesson with slide 1. This does not need any particular introduction. Simply ask students to “watch the funny video and be prepared to talk about the questions that go with it after it is finished. We will connect the video to course concepts later in the lesson.” Then play the video.

Next, ask students to discuss each of the questions about the video on slide 1 with a partner for 3-5 minutes.

Bringing the large group back together, have 2-3 groups share their answers for questions 2-4. For #2, make sure it is clear that the participants' experiences were really *based on the social reactions of those around them*. After discussing questions 3 & 4, make sure that the conversation emphasizes that the participants in the trick were able to have the experience of being invisible even though this did not actually happen in reality. Experiences that *seem very real* to us can often be different or detached from what *actually* happens.

(SLIDE 2) Tell students that today we will study a major idea within sociology called the “social construction of reality.” Show students the objectives on slide 2.

(SLIDE 3) Tell about the social construction of reality. Then illustrate with the watermelon example (see notes at the bottom of the slide). Similar to the previous guided discussion, call on different pairs/groups to share their thoughts for the first question. Make sure it is clear that germs *do objectively exist*, yet only one person’s behavior was impacted by this fact. Instead, each person determined “clean” *based on what they had been taught to think about*. The author had been taught to *think about germs when judging if something was clean*. To the street vendor, *cleanliness was about appearing clean and free of dirt or debris*. If the street vendor had in fact gotten sick from eating the melon, what would he blame it on? Likely random luck or even the foreigner who tried to buy melon from him. Our behavior often has more to do with our own thought world, or what we have been taught to think about, than what is objectively happening. Make sure students understand the meaning of “thought world.”

Have pairs/groups come up with their definitions for social construction of reality. Make sure that they can use their own words, not just read the definition from the reading (although reading the definition is an ok start). Write a few of the good definitions on the board or where the whole class can see the definition worded in a few different ways. Similar to the discussion of the

“melon incident” from the reading, make sure that students understand that our behavior and understanding of the world around us is constantly impacted by:

1. What we have been taught to think about/notice.
2. The behaviors and reactions of those around us.

(SLIDE 4) Ask student pairs/groups to use the words “social construction” or “socially construct” to answer the question on slide 4 in 1-2 sentences. Make sure that answers *explain* “why” or “what” was used to socially construct reality. Answers should be more detailed than just “they experienced a social construction” etc.

(SLIDE 5) Assign students to write about a way that they have had a socially constructed experience using the prompt on slide 5. This will likely be an initially difficult thing for students to think about. Try to let them use the prompts and think on their own for a bit before giving them any specific examples. If a few students need more help. Some good examples to write about are: Santa Claus, the tooth fairy, children meeting mascots or superheroes. In society, some interesting ones for them to consider are: flags vs other pieces of cloth, money vs other paper, lucky/unlucky symbols, etc. There are many more but these are a few fairly common examples to get struggling students started.

**OR**

(SLIDE 6) If time allows, the assignment on slide 6 may be used as an assessment or extended learning instead of slide 5. For this assignment, have students pick one of the three controversial experiments listed on the right of the slide that they will research. To learn about each experiment, they may choose to watch the linked videos and/or do research on their own. After learning about the experiment, students will write or present their answers to each of the 5 questions.

For question #5, students will need some familiarity with basic ethical research principles. If this has not been taught in a previous lesson or mentioned in the course textbook, consider making either of these sources available:

*Open stax (free open license) textbook excerpt on ethical concerns in research:*

<https://openstax.org/books/introduction-sociology-3e/pages/2-3-ethical-concerns>

*American Sociological Association Code of Ethics:*

[https://www.asanet.org/sites/default/files/asa\\_code\\_of\\_ethics-june2018a.pdf](https://www.asanet.org/sites/default/files/asa_code_of_ethics-june2018a.pdf)

**Closure:** Have 3-4 students share what they wrote about for the assignment. Tell students that a primary goal of this course will be to ensure that students are able to use their sociological imagination to understand how the theories and concepts studied are used to socially construct their world around them.