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EC SO4001: Understanding Society

Social Constructionism

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Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education; Transforming Lives



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Social Constructionism

- Social Reality is dependent on how we interact with others

What is social constructionism?

- Social reality is made up through interactions or the actions of individuals
- 'social constructionism argues that our ways of understanding the world do not come from objective reality but from other people, both past and present'

(Burr, 2015, p. 10)

Social Constructionist Contest

- Knowledge is gained through cultural and context interactions. Three assumptions of social constructionists:
 - reality is gained through human interaction
 - knowledge is gained through human interaction
 - learning as a social activity

(Burr, 2015)

Social Constructionism and interaction

- Socially and culturally constructed
- Our behavior is shaped by external forces through interaction
- This learning can only take place when individuals are engaged in activities with others

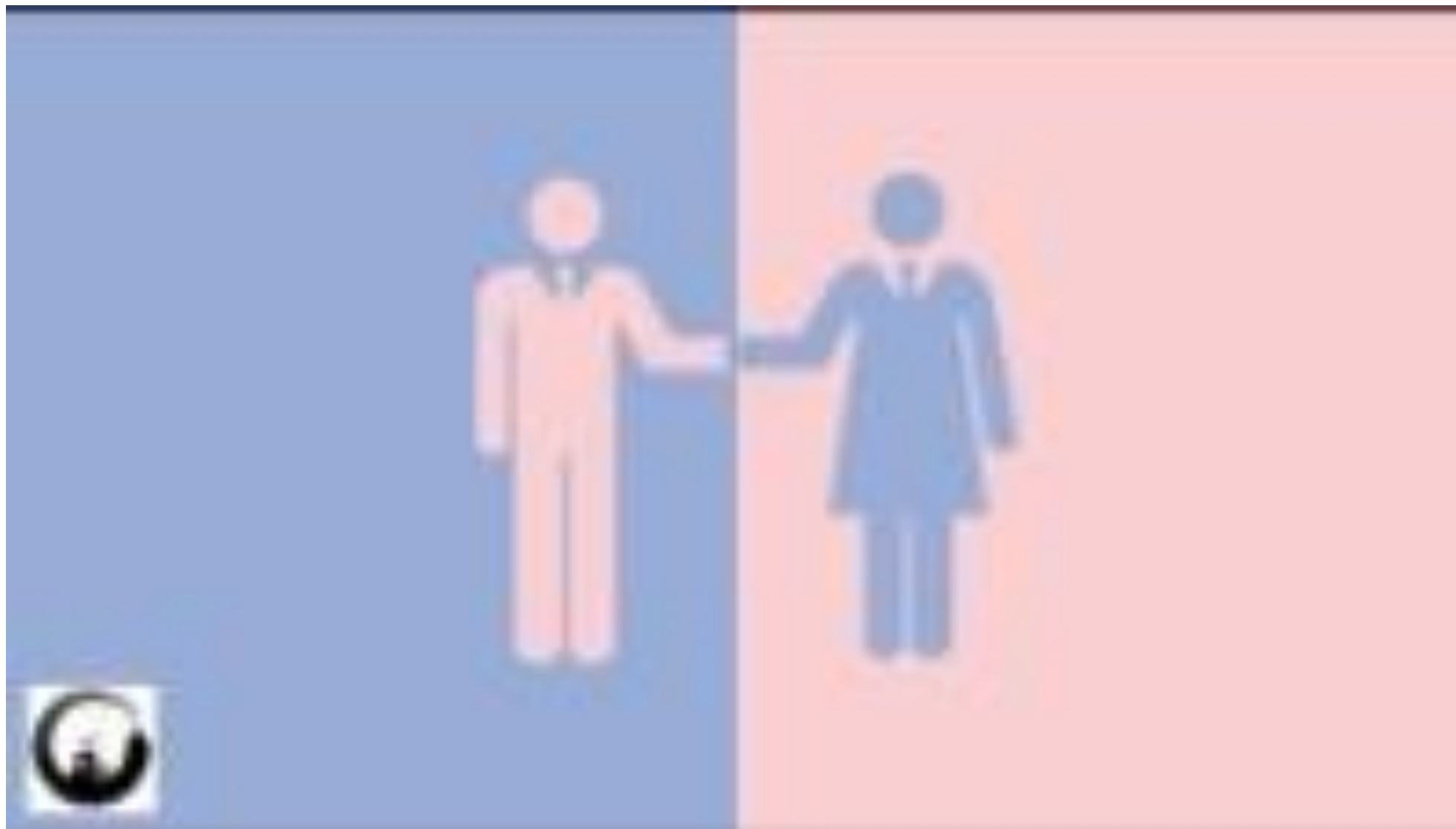
One reality

- Our reality is real because we give meaning to it
- It is an ongoing, dynamic process
- People act on their interpretation of their knowledge or interaction
- Individuals react to their interactions and behave in a manner which is expected of them

(Dillon, 2010; Giddens and Sutton, 2013; Haralambos and Holborn, 2004)

Examples

- Money – we give value to money
- Countries/nations – are labelled
- Books – paper with words on them collated into one
- Can we think of more?



Examples of social constructs

- Social Class
- Government
- Race
- Organized religion
- Deviant behavior
- Beauty
- Family Structures
- Behavior – etiquette
- Cryptocurrency e.g. bitcoin

A socially constructed reality

- Group of ideas come together to form a new compound or a new way of thinking
- 'language provides the fundamental superimposition of logical on the objectivated social world'
- i.e. We interpret language in light of our knowledge and our thinking in order to put a name to objects.
- 'knowledge constitutes the motivating dynamics of institutionalized conduct'
- i.e. As a result of the knowledge gained we act accordingly

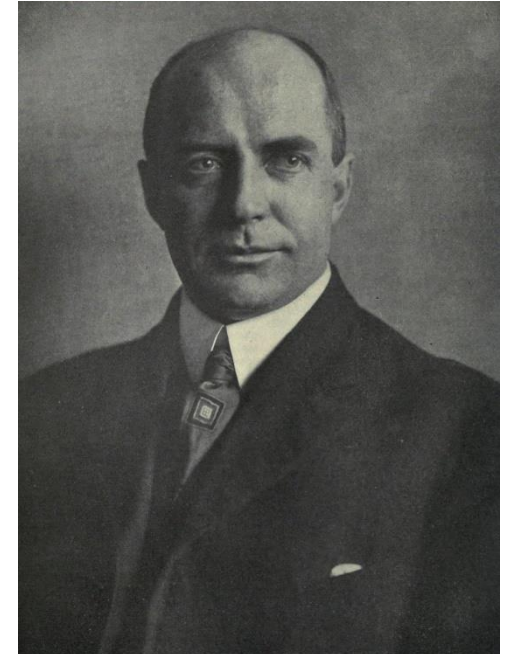
Berger and Luckmann, 1979

Key Theorists and Concepts



Alfred Schutz and William Isaac Thomas

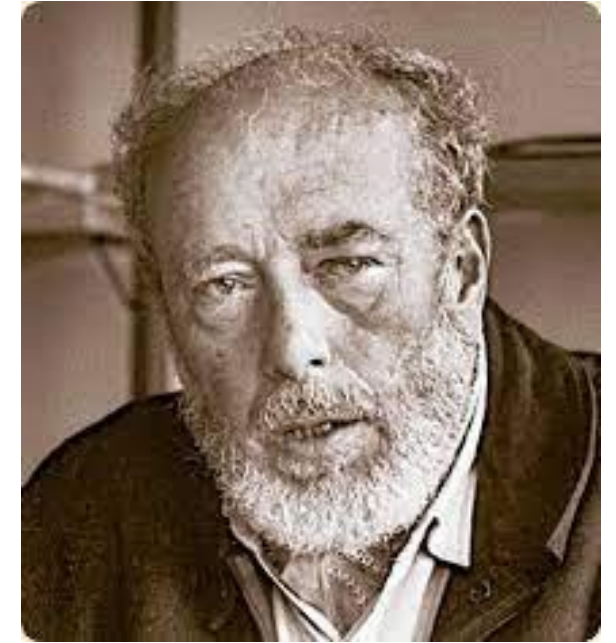
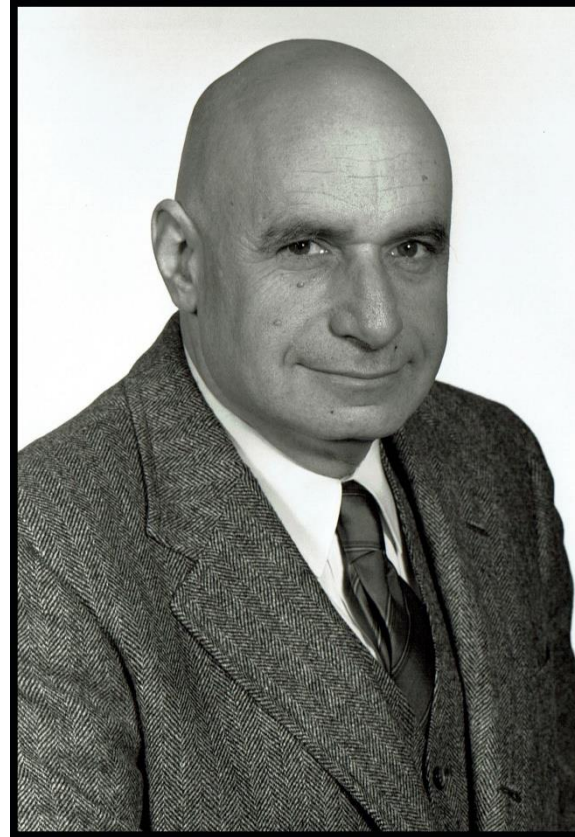
- Although neither coined the phrase social constructionism they were influential
- Alfred Schutz – phenomenological theorist – ‘the systematic investigation of consciousness’ - disregards the question of what we know about the world but how we have acquired that knowledge (Marshall, 1998)
- William Isaac Thomas – symbolic interaction



(Dillon, 2010; Giddens and Sutton, 2013; Haralambos and Holborn, 2004)

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann

- The Social Construction of Reality (1966)
- People make sense of their social reality with reference to 'their own particular family-community-social environment' (Berger and Luckman, 1966 cited in Dillon, 2010 p. 291)
- As a result they interpret their reality from their experiences within those groups.
- Language helps us shape our reality and we invent new words as our reality changes
- The changing of meaning of words??



(Dillon, 2010)

"The reality of everyday life appears already objectified, that is, constituted by an order of objects that have been designated as objects before my appearance on the scene. The language used in everyday life continuously provides me with the necessary objectifications and posits the order within which these make sense and within which everyday life has meaning for me... The reality of everyday life is not only filled with objectifications; it is only possible because of them"

(Berger and Luckman, 1966: 22, 35; see also Schutz, 1960: 80-81 cited in Dillon, 2010 p. 291)

Lev Vygotsky

- Mainly concentrated on children and learning
- Parents provide children with the tools to develop their way of thinking
- Believed that what we learn is from what we have experienced



(Dillon, 2010; Giddens and Sutton, 2013; Haralambos. and Holborn, 2004)

Jean Piaget

- Theory of Cognitive Development
- Children learn by understanding the world around them



Social Constructionism – the Environment

- The Environment
- What is the history of the problem?
- Who is making the claim that there is a problem?
- Do those that make the claim have an interest in it and will they benefit from action?
- What do they say about it and does the evidence support this?
- How do they say it?
- How is it argued, is it emotional, scientific, political or moral arguments
- Who opposes the claim
- Who loses if action is taken?

(Dillon, 2010; Giddens and Sutton, 2013; Haralambos. and Holborn, 2004)

Social Construction - Race

- Race is a social construction
- There is no biological basis for difference between people of different races
- 'influenced by the dominant belief systems of the society in which they live' (Haralambos and Holborn p. 158)



In the post war years (1950s and 1960s) it was alleged these signs were often seen in windows

(Giddens and Sutton, 2013; Haralambos and Holborn, 2004)

Social Constructionism - religion

- Social Constructionists will not pay attention to a certain religious affiliation
- Looks at religion as a whole
- How those groups interact with religious beliefs, e.g. is their belief stronger now than it has been previously?

(Dillon, 2010; Giddens and Sutton, 2013)

Social Constructionism and Disability

Medical Model of Disability

- Problem with the person
- Aims to 'fix' people with disabilities and 'normalise' them
- Reactive

Social Model of Disability

- Problem with how society perceives individuals with disabilities
- Nothing is inherently wrong with the person with a disability
- Proactive

Weak Social Constructionism

Brute Facts!

- Objective
 - Gravity
 - Night and day
 - What makes up an atom
-
- Not social constructed – it exists whether humans are there or not

(Dillon, 2010; Haralambos and Holborn, 2004)

Strong Social Constructionism

- Oppose the thought that there are facts that are not socially constructed
- A mountain is only a mountain because someone has stated that it is so and therefore it is universally agreed that this object is a mountain
- Money – our economy goes up and down therefore it is socially constructed
- Time is a social construct

(Dillon, 2010; Giddens and Sutton, 2013; Haralambos. and Holborn, 2004)

Criticisms

- Assumes that we can only learn if we interact with others
- Does not provide answers to problems simply explains interactions without going to the root of any problem (e.g. environmental issues)
- Does not take into account natural phenomenon – earthquakes/volcanic eruptions
- E.g. Religion fails to take into account interactions between different religious groups

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