CHAPTER

3

Building Reality

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

The year was 1897. Eight-year-old Virginia O'Hanlon became upset when her friends told her there was no Santa Claus. Her father encouraged her to write a letter to the *New York Sun* to find out the truth. The editor's reply—which included the now famous phrase, "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus!"—has become a classic piece of American folklore. "Nobody sees Santa Claus," the editor wrote, "but that is no sign that there is no Santa Claus. The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men [*sic*] can see" ("Is There a Santa Claus?" 1897).

Drug experts have been concerned for years about the illicit use of stimulants commonly prescribed for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (such as Adderall and Ritalin) among college students who want to enhance their concentration and test performance. But recently, researchers have started to worry about the use of these drugs among workers in high-stress professions who want to increase their productivity. Unfortunately, reliable research on the prevalence of ADHD drugs in the workplace does not yet exist. Nonetheless, one neurologist believes that "even without conclusive data, misuse [is] *undoubtedly* rising" [emphasis added] (quoted in Schwarz, 2015, p. 1).

What do these two very different examples have in common? Both reflect the fickle nature of "truth" and "reality." Young Virginia was encouraged to believe in the reality of something she could and would never perceive with her senses. She no doubt learned a different sort of truth about Santa Claus when she got older, but the editor urged her to take on faith that Santa Claus, or at least the idea of Santa Claus, exists despite the lack of objective proof. That sort of advice persists. A survey of 200 child psychologists around the United States found that 91% of them advised parents not to tell the truth when their young children asked about the existence of Santa Claus (cited in Stryker, 1997).

Likewise, this drug researcher urges people to believe in something that has not been demonstrated scientifically. What's important is that the conclusion feels right even if it is not based on hard evidence.

Situations like these can sometimes have dangerous consequences. Consider the case of Jenny McCarthy, the former MTV star who has written several best-selling books in which she claims that

the measles, mumps, and rubella vaccine—something most infants in this country routinely receive—had probably given her son autism. Rather than provide research evidence (principally because there really is none), McCarthy based her conclusion on her own intuition—what she called "mommy instinct"—and information she'd picked up on the Internet (she once proudly proclaimed, "The University of Google is where I got my degree from"; quoted in Achenbach, 2015, p. 5). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Institute of Medicine, the Autism Science Foundation, and the National Academy of Sciences have all concluded there is no link between vaccines and autism. Nevertheless, the contention that vaccines could harm children struck an emotional chord with many fretful parents. Consequently in some states the percentage of children who get this vaccine as well as other vaccines has consistently dropped over the past several years. Perhaps not coincidentally, measles cases are on the rise. In 2007 there were about 50 confirmed cases of measles in the United States. In 2014, there were over 600 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014c). The vast majority of these cases were in persons who were unvaccinated. As a result, in 2015, California became the first state to require parents to vaccinate their children, regardless of personal or religious opposition.

Such precarious uses of truth may appear foolish or even deceitful. Yet much of our everyday knowledge is based on accepting as real the existence of things that can't be seen, touched, or proved—"the world taken-for-granted" (P. L. Berger, 1963, p. 147). Like Virginia, we learn to accept the existence of things such as electrons, the ozone layer, black holes in the universe, love, and God, even though we cannot see them. And like Jenny McCarthy, we learn to accept unsubstantiated conclusions as long as they support our interests.

How do we come to know what we know? How do we learn what is real and what isn't? In this chapter, I examine how sociologists discover truths about human life. But to provide the appropriate context, I must first present a sociological perspective on the nature of reality. How do individuals construct their realities? How do societal forces influence the process?

UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

In Chapter 2, I noted that the elements of society are human creations that provide structure to our everyday lives. They also give us a distinctive lens through which we perceive the world. For example, because of their different statuses and their respective occupational training, an architect, a real estate agent, a police officer, and a firefighter can each look at the same building and see very different things: "a beautiful example of early Victorian architecture," "a moderately priced fixer-upper," "an easy target for a thief," or "a dangerous fire hazard." Mark Twain often wrote about how the Mississippi River—a waterway he saw every day as a child—looked different after he became a riverboat pilot. What he once saw as a place for fun and relaxation, he later saw for its treacherous currents, eddies, and other potential perils.

What we know to be true or real is always a product of the culture and historical period in which we exist. It takes an exercise of the sociological imagination, however, to see that what we ourselves "know" to be true today—the laws of nature, the causes and treatments of certain diseases, and so forth—may not be true for everyone everywhere or may be replaced by different truths tomorrow (Babbie, 1986). For example, in some cultures, the existence of spirits, witches, and demons is a taken-for-granted part of everyday reality that others might easily dismiss as fanciful. On the other side of the coin, the Western faith in the curative powers of little pills—without the intervention of spiritual forces—might seem far-fetched and naïve to people living in cultures where illness and health are assumed to have supernatural causes.

Beliefs about what is real change over time too. In 1900, a doctor might have told a patient with asthma to go to the local tobacconist for a cigarette; people with colds may have been told to inhale formaldehyde (Zuger, 1999). Many pieces of taken-for-granted 20th-century child development advice—such as infants need to be bathed every day; picking up babies when they're crying spoils them; infants need to be on a strict feeding schedule; and the safest way to put babies to sleep is on their stomachs—have been called into question by contemporary pediatricians (First, 2011). Fifty years ago, obstetricians encouraged pregnant women to have a martini or a glass of wine each night to calm their nerves. Doctors also believed that alcohol prevented premature labor. Hence, women arriving at the hospital in early labor were often handed vodka or even given alcohol intravenously (Hoffman, 2005). You sure don't see that anymore. In recent years, we've seen the medical field reverse its stand on the rules used to define autism (Carey, 2012), the necessity of vitamin D and calcium supplements (Begley, 2011), routine mammograms for healthy women over 40 (Bleyer & Welch, 2012), acceptable blood pressure levels in people over 60 (Kolata, 2013), and regular blood tests for prostate cancer in healthy men (G. Harris, 2011d).

According to one researcher, about a third of major medical studies are eventually contradicted by further research (Ioannidis, 2005). The frequency with which medical "truths" emerge only to be reversed or debunked later on led one columnist to write, with a fair amount of exasperation, "Sometimes you really do want to tell the medical profession to just make up its mind" (G. Collins, 2011, p. A23). Quite possibly, people 100 years from now will look back at the early 21st century and regard some of our taken-for-granted truths as mistaken, misguided, or downright laughable.

The process through which facts, knowledge, truth, and so on are discovered, made known, reaffirmed, and altered by the members of a society is called the ***social construction of reality*** (P. L. Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This concept is based on the simple assumption that knowledge is a human creation. Ironically, most of us live our lives assuming that an objective reality exists, independent of us and accessible through our senses. Sayings like "Seeing is believing" and "Pics or it didn't happen" reinforce the assumption that our eyes can tell us what is real. We are quite sure trees and tables and trucks don't exist simply in our imaginations. We assume this reality is shared by others and can be taken for granted as reality (Lindesmith, Strauss, & Denzin, 1991).

At times, however, what we define as real seems to have nothing to do with what our senses tell us is real. Picture a 5-year-old child who wakes up in the middle of the night screaming that monsters are under her bed. Her parents comfort her by saying, "There aren't any monsters. You had a nightmare. It's just your imagination." The next day, the child comes down with the flu and wants to know why she is sick. The parents respond by saying,

You've caught a virus, a bug.

A bug? You mean like an ant or a beetle?

No. It's the sort of bug you can't see, but it's there.

Granted, viruses can be seen and verified with the proper magnification equipment, but without access to such devices, the child has to take her parents' word for it that viruses are real. In fact, most of us accept the scientific reality of viruses without ever having seen them for ourselves. The child learns to accept the authoritative claims of her parents that something that was "seen" (the nightmare monster) is not real, although something that was not seen (the virus) is real.

Hence, reality often turns out to be more a matter of collective agreement than something inherent in the natural world. According to a recent report by the National Science Foundation (2014),

more Americans believe in astrology (the movement of stars and planets determine our lives) than believe that global climate change is influenced by the burning of fossil fuels. On some occasions, taken-for-granted realities change almost instantaneously. A few years ago, this curious newspaper headline caught my eye: "Pluto Is No Longer a Planet, Astronomers Say" (Kole, 2006). Did that little celestial body orbiting in the far reaches of the solar system unexpectedly implode or turn into an asteroid? No. A panel of leading astronomers simply reclassified it based on new criteria for determining what is and isn't a planet (actually it is now officially a "dwarf planet"). So literally overnight, a reality that we all take for granted suddenly changed. Think of all the schoolbooks that had to be rewritten to account for this new "fact."

Sociologists, particularly those working from the conflict perspective and symbolic interactionism, strive to explain the social construction of reality in terms of both its causes and its consequences. Their insights help explain many of the phenomena that influence our daily lives.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION: THE BASES OF REALITY

Think of society as a building constructed by the people who live and work in it. The building's foundation, its underlying reality, determines its basic shape and dimensions. And the foundation is what makes that building solid and helps it stand up through time and the elements. For students of architecture as well as sociology, the first thing to understand is the way the foundation is prepared.

Symbolic interactionism encourages us to see that people's actions toward one another and interpretations of situations are based on their definitions of reality, which are in turn learned from interactions with those around them. What we know to be real, we share with other members of our culture. Imagine how difficult it would be to believe in something no one else around you thought existed. Psychiatrists use terms such as *hallucination* and *delusion* to describe things experienced by people who see, hear, or believe things that others don't.

The social construction of reality is a process by which human-created ideas become so firmly accepted that to deny them is to deny common sense. Of course, some features of reality are grounded in physical evidence—fire is hot, sharp things hurt. But other features of reality are often based not on sensory experiences but on forces such as culture and language, self-fulfilling prophecies, and faith.

Culture and Language

As I mentioned in Chapter 2, we live in a symbolic world and interact chiefly through symbolic communication—that is, through language. Language gives meaning to the people, objects, events, and ideas of our lives. In fact, language reflects and often determines our reality (Sapir, 1949; Whorf, 1956). Thus, language is a key tool in the construction of society.

Within a culture, words evolve to reflect the things that have practical significance. Solomon Islanders have nine distinct words for *coconut*, each specifying an important stage of its growth, but they have only one word for all the meals of the day (M. M. Lewis, 1948). The Hanunóo people of the Philippines have different names for 92 varieties of rice, allowing them to make distinctions all but invisible to English-speaking people, who lump all such grains under a single word: *rice* (Thomson, 2000). Yet a traditional Hanunóo coming to this country would be hard pressed to see the difference between the vehicles we call *sedans*, *SUVs*, *hybrids*, *minivans*, *hatchbacks*, and *station wagons*.

Language also reflects prevailing cultural values. Consider, for instance, the words we use to describe spatial positioning. In most Western languages, English included, if you wanted to give

someone directions to your house, you'd say something like, "After the stop sign, take the first left, then the second right. You'll see a brown duplex in front of you. Ours is the door on the right." You wouldn't say, "After the stop sign, drive north, then on the second street drive east and you'll see a brown duplex directly to the east. Ours is the southern door." The two sets of directions may identify the same route, but the first uses *egocentric* coordinates, which rely on the location of our own bodies relative to the destination in question. The second set of directions—which would be common in some areas of the world like Polynesia, northern Australia, Namibia, and Bali—uses fixed *geographic* coordinates, which stay the same no matter which way we're facing (Deutscher, 2010). Speakers of Guugu Yimithirr, an Australian Aboriginal language, orient their lives exclusively around geographic coordinates. If they wanted to warn a walking companion of impending danger on the path, they'd say, "There's a hole in the ground north of your western foot" rather than, "There's a hole in front of your left foot." Indeed, the Guugu Yimithirr have no idea what *left*, *right*, *in front of you*, or *behind you* mean. Notice how these two linguistic approaches reflect very different cultural beliefs about the importance of the individual:

> If you saw a Guugu Yimithirr speaker pointing at himself, you would naturally assume he meant to draw attention to himself. In fact, he is pointing at a [geographic] direction that happens to be behind his back. While we [English speakers] are always at the center of the world, and it would never occur to us that pointing in the direction of our chest could mean anything other than to draw attention to ourselves, a Guugu Yimithirr speaker points through himself, as if he were thin air and his own existence were irrelevant. (Deutscher, 2010, p. 47)

In addition to affecting perceptions of reality, language reinforces prevailing ideas and suppresses conflicting ideas about the world (Sapir, 1929). In a highly specialized market economy such as the United States, for example, the ability to distinguish linguistically between "real" work, "house" work, and "volunteer" work allows us to telegraph our attitudes about a person's worth to society. In small agricultural societies, where all people typically perform tasks to provide the basic necessities and to ensure the survival of their tight-knit community, work is work no matter where it takes place or whether or not you're paid to do it.

Language can also pack an enormous emotional wallop. Words can make us happy, sad, disgusted, angry, violent, afraid, or upset. Many college campuses around the country now require course syllabi to include "trigger warnings," cautionary notices that topics covered in class (and the language used to discuss them) could contain potentially traumatic subject matter that might upset some students.

Racial, ethnic, sexual, or religious slurs can be particularly volatile. Among heterosexual adolescents, for example, homophobic name-calling (*queer*, *fag*, *dyke*) is one of the most common modes of bullying and coercion in high school (Pascoe, 2010). In 2013, the actor Alec Baldwin was caught on camera outside his Manhattan apartment calling a photographer a *cocksucking fag*. Baldwin wasn't disparaging the man's sexual orientation. I doubt he even knew what it was. Instead, he was enraged by the intrusion of paparazzi into his private life and no doubt thought using this term would be the most effective means of communicating his utter contempt for the practice. That same year, the famous cooking show host, Paula Deen, was fired by the Food Network after admitting that she had used the word *nigger*.

It's important to remember that languages are fluid. Hence they can expand, contract, and shift over time. For instance, every December, newspapers publish stories that list the words or phrases that became popular that year and entered the cultural lexicon. The 2013 version listed such terms as

bae, bitcoin, cronut, drone, selfie, and *twerk* (Barrett, 2013). In 2014, *emoji, copypasta, ice bucket challenge, polar vortex, rekt,* and *turnt* made the list (Barrett, 2014). No doubt future versions will contain a whole host of common terms no one's heard of yet.

The emotional effect of words can have health implications, too. Researchers estimate that an antibiotic-resistant intestinal bacterium called *Clostridium difficile* infects about a million people and kills 14,000 in the United States each year (Grady, 2013; Pollan, 2013). Symptoms include profuse diarrhea, uncontrollable vomiting, high fever, and significant weight loss. The most effective treatment for this condition, by far, is a procedure called a "fecal transplant" in which feces taken from healthy donors is infused into patients infected with *Clostridium difficile* (van Nood, 2013). The healthy feces, which contain thousands of strains of "good" bacteria, is diluted with salt water, sanitized, and deodorized before being pumped into patients usually via a tube inserted through the nose. This fluid bears no resemblance, either by sight or smell, to its original form. Yet despite its demonstrable success—as one author put it, "Rarely does medical science come up with a treatment so effective, inexpensive, and free of side effects" (Roach, 2013, p. 320-321)—many patients who could be helped refuse to consider the treatment. And even though the first fecal transplant was performed over half a century ago, no U.S. insurance company formally recognizes (and will pay for) the procedure (Roach, 2013). Why? Because people can't get past the disgust—what some refer to as the "ick factor"—associated with the term "fecal transplant." In an attempt to overcome people's repulsion, researchers have begun experimenting with a procedure in which patients swallow the substance in capsule form (Belluck, 2014).

The broader demands of everyday life also influence the way language is used. For instance, as societies become more developed, the pace of life quickens, and we become impatient. This phenomenon is reflected in the compression (and subsequent speedup) of language over the years. Contractions (like *we're* and *isn't*) shorten words. Portmanteaus combine two existing words into one, like *brunch* for "breakfast and lunch," *docudrama* for "documentary and drama," and *webinar* for "web seminar" (Garner, 2010). Technology contracts language even further. If you do a lot of instant tweeting or texting, you have no doubt made use of "shortspeak"—the reduction of words and sentences through the use of abbreviations, acronyms, and emoticons. We don't even have to finish typing our words anymore. As I'm sure you know, online search engines routinely use autofill to complete entries even before you're done typing them. A few years ago, Google engineers discovered that a delay of 400 *milliseconds* between a keyboard click and a computer response—roughly the time it takes to blink an eye—is too long for some people and may actually cause them to use the search engine less. As one engineer put it, "Subconsciously, you don't like to wait. Every millisecond matters" (quoted in Lohr, 2012, p. A1).

Within a culture, certain professions or groups sometimes develop a distinctive language, known as *jargon*, which allows members of the group to communicate with one another clearly and quickly. Surfers, snowboarders, and gamers each have a specialized vocabulary (not understandable to most outsiders) through which they can efficiently convey to others information about wave quality, snow conditions, or changes in the latest version of *World of Warcraft*. Teenagers must keep up with a constantly evolving vocabulary to avoid falling out of favor with their peers. At the same time, jargon can sometimes create boundaries and therefore mystify and conceal meaning from outsiders (Farb, 1983). For instance, first-year medical students spend countless hours memorizing a new vocabulary as if they were learning a foreign language (Hartzband & Groopman, 2011). By using esoteric medical terminology when discussing a case in front of a patient, health care professionals define who is and who isn't a member of their group, reinforce their image as highly trained experts, and keep

the patient from interfering too much in their decision making. Often medical information has to be conveyed quickly, making it even more incomprehensible to outsiders. See if you can figure out the patient's condition from how this intensive care nurse described it to an attending physician:

> IL-2 patient, hypotensive, B.P. hovering between 70 over 40 to 60 over 30, occasionally tachy, bolused once this morning for a pressure of 80 over 50, getting another bolus right now, already fluid overloaded, crackles at the bases. (T. Brown, 2010, p. 5)

This sort of communication roadblock has become a cause for concern in the field of medicine. Research indicates that two thirds of patients are discharged from hospitals without even knowing what their diagnosis is and 60% of patients misunderstand the directions they receive from visits to their doctor's office (cited in Joshi, 2015). Consequently, many books and websites now help patients overcome their position of powerlessness by instructing them on how and when to ask physicians the right questions so they can make informed decisions about a course of treatment. For their part, some medical schools require their students to be trained in how to avoid jargon (at the same time they're learning it) and how to listen to their patients (D. Franklin, 2006). And there is some evidence that doctor–patient interactions have become a bit more patient centered and collaborative in recent years (Peck & Conner, 2011).

Language is sometimes used to purposely conceal as well. A *euphemism* is an innocuous expression substituted for one that might be offensive. On the surface, people use such terms in the interests of politeness and good taste, such as saying "perspiration" instead of "sweat," "bathroom tissue" instead of "toilet paper," or "no longer with us" instead of "dead." However, euphemisms also shape perceptions and emotions. Does it matter, for instance, whether an economic crisis is called a *downturn*, *slump*, *recession*, *crash*, *depression*, or *meltdown*? Political regimes routinely use euphemisms to cover up, distort, or frame their actions in a more positive light. Here are a few examples of euphemisms, followed by their real meanings. Can you think of others?

- Pre-owned—used
- Seasoned—old
- Misinformation—lies
- Economically nonaffluent—poor
- Big boned; full-figured—overweight
- Lady of the night—prostitute
- Sleeping with; doing it—having sex
- Conscious uncoupling—divorce
- Postconsumer waste material—garbage
- Between jobs—unemployed
- Deselected, involuntarily separated, downsized, nonretained, given a career change opportunity, vocationally relocated, streamlined, or dehired—fired

In sum, words help frame or structure social reality and give it meaning. Language also provides people with a cultural and group identity. If you've ever spent a significant amount of time in a foreign country or even moved to a new school, you know you cannot be a fully participating member of a group or a culture until you share its language.

MICRO-MACRO CONNECTION

THE LANGUAGE OF WAR

The governmental or political use of language illustrates how words can determine the course of people's everyday lives both at home and abroad. We all know what the word *war* means: It's when two opposing forces wage battle against one another, either until one side surrenders or until both agree to a truce. The vocabulary of war is vast, containing words such as *troops*, *battle*, *regiments*, *ammunition*, *artillery*, *allies*, *enemies*, *heroes*, *casualties*, and so forth.

In wartime, there is good and evil, us and them, victory and defeat. The language of war contains euphemisms, too, designed to minimize the public's discomfort and increase its support: *collateral damage* (civilian deaths during military combat), *surgical strikes* (attacks intended to destroy a specific target and minimize *collateral damage*), *friendly fire* (accidental shooting at fellow soldiers), *pullback* (retreat), *sectarian violence* (civil war), *enhanced interrogation* (torture).

Once a conflict is defined as a *war,* people's lives are subjected to a different set of rules and expectations. *War* rallies people around their collective national identity and a common objective, creating mandatory expressions of patriotism and a willingness to fight and make sacrifices (Redstone, 2003). The interpretation of people's behavior dramatically changes as well. For example, some characterized the atrocities that occurred during the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the 1990s as the normal consequences of war. However,

> Is wide-scale sexual violence, including the rape of women and the forced oral castration of men, neighbors burning down their neighbors' homes, the murder and targeting for murder of civilians—men and women, children, the elderly, and infirm—"normal" simply because it takes place within the context of something we call "war"? (Wilmer, 2002, p. 60)

Immediately after the attacks of September 11, 2001, then-President Bush unofficially declared a *war* on terrorism, which continues to this day. But the administration later opted for the term *War on Terror* and then *Global War on Terror* rather than *War on Terrorism*, evoking both the violent actions of terrorists and the fear they're trying to create. In 2005, the administration shifted its language and began testing a new slogan, *A Global Struggle Against Violent Extremism*, in an attempt to convey the impression that the war was as much an ideological battle as it was a military mission (Schmitt & Shanker, 2005). The Obama administration continues to use equally ambiguous terms like *Overseas Contingency Operation* and *Systematic Effort to Dismantle Terrorist Organizations,* thereby avoiding reference to "war" and "violence" altogether.

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Whether the enemy is *terror, terrorism, terrorist organizations, terrorist networks, Islamofascism, or violent extremism*, invoking the vocabulary of war has some strategic advantages—among them, justifying actions that would not be acceptable in any other context. As one columnist put it, "In wartime, words are weapons" (Safire, 2006, p. 16). By continually using the language of war, an administration can frame the expansion of government powers and the limitation of civil liberties as the steps we need to take to protect freedom, bring "enemies" and "evildoers" to justice, and avoid another catastrophe.

In a wartime mode, even though concerns about national security are warranted and fears of attack are very real, the system, according to one prominent law professor, "by definition sweeps very broadly and ends up harming hundreds if not thousands of people" (quoted in Liptak, 2003, p. A1). Actions that in other contexts would be unacceptable occur largely without debate or opposition, reflecting the power of language in shaping the social reality of everyday life.

Even in the absence of any foreign enemy, militarized vocabularies and tactics can shape perceptions. In the past few years, we've witnessed more and more police departments around the country resorting to a military model to frame their interactions with the public (Kraska, 2007). Through its "1033 Program," the Pentagon provides local police departments with military weapons, munitions, high-tech surveillance equipment, armored personnel carriers, mine-resistant ambush-protected tanks, even helicopters free of charge. Since the program was created in the 1990s, police departments have received over $5.1 billion worth of military equipment (Dansky, 2014). Furthermore, contemporary police training programs routinely teach members of SWAT teams to think and act like soldiers (American Civil Liberties Union, 2014). A clear example of this approach occurred in 2014. As protestors took to the streets in the aftermath of the police shooting of unarmed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, police responded in a distinctly military fashion. They wore camouflage gear, drove armored attack vehicles, and carried military-grade assault weapons and ammunition. Such militarization encourages officers to adopt a "warrior" mentality and think of the citizens they're supposed to safeguard as enemies (American Civil Liberties Union, 2014). As one former Marine asked, "When did 'protect and serve' turn into 'us versus them'?" (Szoldra, 2014, p. 1).

Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

As you will recall from Chapter 2, we do not respond directly and automatically to objects and situations; instead, as the symbolic interactionist perspective points out, we use language to define and interpret them, and then we act according to those interpretations. By acting on the basis of our definitions of reality, we often create the very conditions we believe exist. A ***self-fulfilling prophecy*** is an assumption or prediction that, purely as a result of having been made, causes the expected event to occur and thus confirms the prophecy's own "accuracy" (Merton, 1948; Watzlawick, 1984). Every holiday season, we witness the stunning effects of self-fulfilling prophecies on a national scale. Each September the toy industry releases the results of its annual survey of retailers, predicting which

toys will be the top sellers at Christmas. Usually, one toy in particular emerges as the most popular, hard-to-get gift of the year. In the 1980s, it was Cabbage Patch Kids. In the early 1990s, it was Mighty Morphin Power Rangers and Ninja Turtles. More recently, items such as Beanie Babies, SpongeBob SquarePants toys, Razor scooters, ripsticks, American Girl dolls, toy digital cameras, Legos, figurines from *Frozen* or *Jurassic World,* and Xbox Kinect and Wii video games have taken their turn as the "must have" toy of the year. By around November, we begin to hear the hype about unprecedented demand for the toy and the likelihood of a shortage. Powerful retail store chains, such as Toys "R" Us and Walmart, may announce the possibility of rationing: one toy per family. Fueled by the dreaded image of a disappointed child's face at Christmas, thousands of panicked parents and grandparents rush to stores to make sure they're not left without. Some hoard extras for other parents they know. As a result, supplies of the toy—which may not have been perilously low in the first place—become severely depleted, thereby bringing about the predicted shortage. The mere belief in some version of the reality creates expectations that can actually make it happen.

Self-fulfilling prophecies are particularly powerful when they become an element of social institutions. In schools, teachers can subtly and unconsciously encourage the performance they expect to see in their students. For instance, if they believe their students are especially intelligent, they may spend more time with them or unintentionally show more enthusiasm when working with them. As a result, these students may come to feel more capable and intelligent and actually perform better (R. Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

Self-fulfilling prophecies can often affect people's physical health, too. For years, doctors have recognized the power of the "placebo" effect—the tendency for patients to improve because they have been led to believe they are receiving some sort of treatment even though they're not. For instance, in one study, 42% of balding men taking a placebo drug either maintained or increased the amount of hair on their heads (cited in Blakeslee, 1998). Researchers estimate that in studies of new drugs, between 35% and 75% of patients benefit from taking dummy pills. In 1999, a major pharmaceutical company halted development of a new antidepressant drug it had been promoting because studies showed that placebo pills were just as effective in treating depression (Talbot, 2000). Even when patients know they're taking placebos, the effects can be significantly better than if they underwent no treatment at all (Kaptchuk et al., 2010).

The inverse of the placebo effect is the creation of expectations that make people worse, sometimes referred to as the "nocebo" effect. Anthropologists have documented numerous mysterious and scientifically difficult-to-explain deaths that follow the pronouncement of curses or evil spells (Watzlawick, 1984). In one study, a team of gastroenterologists asked experimental subjects (some who suffered from lactose intolerance and some who didn't) to ingest lactose. The researchers told them they were examining its effects on bowel symptoms. In reality, all the subjects received sugar water. Yet 44% of those with known lactose intolerance—as well as 26% of those without it—complained of gastrointestinal symptoms (Enck & Häuser, 2012). In another study, patients with asthma were given a bronchodilator (a drug that widens air passages, making breathing easier) but were told it was a bronchoconstrictor (a drug that narrows air passages, making breathing more difficult). Half of them experienced difficulty breathing after the treatment (cited in "The Nocebo Response," 2005). It's estimated that somewhere between 4% and 26% of people in medical trials who receive fake drugs eventually withdraw from the study because of the "drug's" side effects, like nausea or dizziness. In other words, in many cases where people expect to get worse, they do. As one doctor put it, "words are the most powerful tool a doctor possesses, but words, like two-edged swords, can maim as well as heal" (quoted in Enck & Häuser, 2012, p. 4). Once again, we see how human beings shape reality as much as reality shapes them.

Faith and Incorrigible Propositions

David Blaine is a famous street performer and illusionist who combines sophisticated magic tricks with a hint of comedy. In one of his more astounding stunts, he appears to rise up and float several inches off the ground for a few seconds. Suppose you saw him perform such a feat in person. He looks as if he is levitating, but you "know better." Even though your eyes tell you he is floating in midair, you have learned that it's just not possible. Rather than use this experience to entirely abandon your belief that people can't float in midair, you'll probably come up with a series of "reasonable" explanations: "Maybe it's an optical illusion, and it just appears like he's floating." "Perhaps there are wires holding him up." To acknowledge the possibility that he is literally floating is to challenge the fundamental reality on which your everyday life is based. It is an article of faith that people aren't capable of levitating.

Such an unquestionable assumption, called an ***incorrigible proposition***, is a belief that cannot be proved wrong and has become so much a part of common sense that one continues to believe it even in the face of vast contrary evidence. By explaining away contradictions with "reasonable" explanations, we strengthen the correctness of the initial premise (Watzlawick, 1976). In the process, we participate in constructing a particular version of reality. For instance, if an incorrigible proposition for you is that women are inherently less aggressive than men, seeing an especially violent woman might lead you toward explanations that focus on the peculiar characteristics of *this particular* woman. Maybe *she's* responding to terrible circumstances in her life; maybe *she* has some kind of chemical imbalance or neurological disorder. By concluding that she is an exception to the rule, the rule is maintained.

In 2011, some evangelical Christians claimed that on May 21 of that year, God would send devastating earthquakes and begin a process that in 5 months would destroy the world. Believers would be spared and raised to heaven in "the rapture." When doomsday didn't materialize and the world still existed on May 22, those who believed in the prophecy provided a variety of rationalizations that allowed them to maintain the original belief. For instance, some pointed to human fallibility: "I don't know where we went wrong other than that we obviously don't understand Scriptures in the way that we should" (quoted in Hagerty, 2011, p. 1). Others argued that May 21 only marked the beginning of a 5-month countdown to the end of the world and that the *real* day to worry about was *October* 21. When that didn't happen either, some claimed that the prayers of the believers actually worked and that God delayed judgment so that more people could be saved.

HUGH MEHAN AND HOUSTON WOOD

The Infallible Oracle

Sociologists Hugh Mehan and Houston Wood (1975) furthered our understanding of incorrigible propositions by examining the research of the anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1937). Evans-Pritchard described an elaborate ritual practiced by the Azande, a small African society located in southwestern Sudan. When faced with important decisions—where to build a house, whom to marry, and so on—the Azande consulted an oracle, or a powerful spirit. They prepared for the consultation by following a strictly prescribed ceremony. A substance was extracted from the bark of a certain type of tree and prepared in a special way during a séance-like ritual. The Azande believed that a powerful spirit would enter the potion during this ceremony. They then posed a question to the spirit in such a way that it could be answered either yes or no and fed the substance to a chicken. If the chicken lived, they would interpret the answer from the spirit as yes; if the chicken died, the answer was no.

Our Western belief system tells us the tree bark obviously contains some poisonous chemical. Certain chickens are physically able to survive it, others aren't. But the Azande had no knowledge of the bark's poisonous qualities or of chicken physiology. In fact, they didn't believe the tree or the chicken played a part in the ceremony at all. The ritual of gathering bark and feeding it to a chicken transformed the tree into the spirit power (not unlike how consecrated bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ in the Roman Catholic Eucharist). The chicken lived or died not because of a physical reaction to a chemical but because the oracle "hears like a person and settles cases like a king" (Evans-Pritchard, 1937, p. 321).

But what if the oracle was wrong? What if an Azande was told by the oracle to build a house by the river and the river overflowed its banks, washing away the house? How could they reconcile these sorts of inconsistencies with a belief in the infallibility of the oracle?

To us, the answer is obvious: There was no spirit, no magic, just the strength of the poison and the fitness of the chickens it was fed to. We see these bad decisions as contradictions, because we view them from the reality of Western science. We observe this ritual to determine if in fact there is an oracle, and of course we're predisposed to believe there isn't. We are looking for proof of the existence of something of which we are highly skeptical.

For the Azande, though, the contradictions were not contradictions at all. They knew the oracle existed. This was their fundamental premise, their incorrigible proposition. It was an article of faith that could not be questioned. All that followed for the Azande was experienced from this initial assumption, and they had ways of explaining contradictions to their truths, just as we do. When the oracle failed to give them proper advice, they would say things like, "A taboo must have been breached" or "Sorcerers must have intervened" or "The ceremony wasn't carried out correctly."

Protecting incorrigible propositions is essential for the maintenance of reality systems. By explaining away contradictions, we are able to support our basic assumptions and live in a coherent and orderly world.

BUILDING THE WALLS: CONFLICT, POWER, AND SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

We, as individuals, play an important role in coordinating, reproducing, and giving meaning to society in our daily interactions. But we are certainly not completely free to create whatever version of social reality we want to create. We are, after all, born into a preexisting society with its norms, values, roles, relationships, groups, organizations, and institutions. Just as the walls of a building constrain the ability of the inhabitants to move about, directing them through certain predetermined doorways and corridors, these features of society influence our thoughts and deeds and consequently constrain our ability to freely construct our social world (Giddens, 1984). As Karl Marx (1869/1963) wrote, "[People] make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past" (p. 15).

As the conflict perspective points out, certain people or groups of people are more influential in defining reality than others. In any modern society, where socioeconomic classes, ethnic and religious groups, age groups, and political interests struggle for control over resources, there is also a struggle for the power to determine or influence that society's conception of reality (Gans, 1971). Those who emerge successful gain control over information, define values, create myths, manipulate events, and influence what the rest of us take for granted. Conflict theorists therefore argue that people with more power, prestige, status, wealth, and access to high-level policymakers can turn their perceptions of the world into the entire culture's perception. In other words, "He who has the

bigger stick has the better chance of imposing his definitions of reality" (P. L. Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 109). That "bigger stick" can be wielded in several ways. Powerful social institutions and the people who control them play a significant role in shaping and sustaining perceptions of reality for everybody else. But if you wish to develop the sociological imagination, you need to understand the role of not only these larger forces in shaping private lives but also private individuals who struggle to shape public reality.

The Economics of Reality

Definitions of reality frequently reflect underlying economic interests. Consider, for instance, the story of a once-successful painter named Marla Olmstead. In the mid-2000s, Marla's paintings were compared in style and spirit with the work of master artists like, Jackson Pollock, Pablo Picasso, and Claude Monet and sold for thousands of dollars apiece. Her work appeared in some of New York's finest art galleries. One gallery owner thought that each of her paintings could easily have sold for $50,000 (Marla Olmstead, 2004). Many art critics noted that her pieces were rhythmic, beautiful, and magical. She was featured on *Today* and *60 Minutes* as well as in the *New York Times* and *Time* magazine. Marla garnered all this attention not because of the quality of her work alone but because of who she was at the time. When she first burst onto the artistic scene a decade ago, Marla was 4 years old—and she'd already been "painting" for 2 years.

At that young age, Marla used bright acrylic paints, which she splattered and scraped on large 36-square-foot canvases. She sometimes worked on one piece for days at a time, and her parents never knew exactly when she was done. When she decided she'd finished, she gave her paintings titles, printed her name at the bottom, and went on to a more typical interest for a young girl: a TV show, a doll, a swim in the pool.

While some critics doubted whether she was solely responsible for her work (in 2007, she was the subject of a skeptical documentary called *My Kid Could Paint That*), there's no doubt that she was a force in the art world. But was Marla's early work the expression of a creative, visionary prodigy, or was it the result of a child playing around with paint? Such a question is not trivial. It reflects a deeper issue regarding the role of economics in shaping the way social reality is defined.

The key concerns from the conflict perspective are who benefits economically and who loses from dominant versions of reality. Take mental illness, for example. The number of problems officially defined by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) as mental disorders and defects has now reached nearly 400 (Horwitz, 2002). In defining what constitutes a mental disorder, the APA unwittingly reflects the economic organization of U.S. society. In the United States, individuals seldom pay the total costs of health care services out of their own pockets. Most of the money for medical treatment comes from the federal and state governments or from private insurance companies. Only if problems such as gambling, depression, anorexia, and cocaine addiction are formally defined as illnesses is their treatment eligible for medical insurance coverage. In 2010, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs changed its definition of posttraumatic stress disorder, making it substantially easier for hundreds of thousands of veterans to receive compensatory benefits. Posttraumatic stress disorder is a condition characterized by emotional numbness, irritability, and flashbacks following the experience or observation of some traumatic event. In the past, only soldiers who had been in combat and who could document specific firefights, bomb blasts, or mortar attacks qualified for benefits. Under the new rule, veterans only have to prove they served in a war zone and in a job consistent with the events they say caused their condition. The rule also allows compensation for

VISUAL ESSAY—WHAT IS ART?

Jean-Louis Atlan/Paris Match via Getty Images

Jean-Louis Atlan/Paris Match via Getty Images

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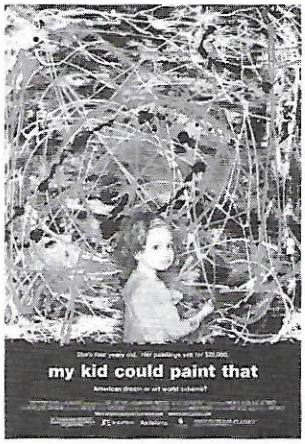

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In this chapter, we've been exploring how people collectively construct reality. Most of the time, we agree on what's real and what isn't; other times, though, our definitions conflict. That's important to know because how we ultimately define things can have enormously important consequences—personally, socially... and even financially. On this page, you can see some images of Marla Olmstead, the 4-year-old little girl who took the art world by storm several years ago with her vivid paintings. Some of her pieces appeared in upscale galleries and sold for tens of thousands of dollars.

To some people, these works are just the random doodles of a 4-year-old; to others, they are masterpieces of an artistic genius. What do you think? What or who should determine what counts as art and who gets to be called an artist? The investors and collectors who paid thousands of dollars for each of her paintings clearly have a stake in its being defined as art. But what if she had never come to their attention and never sold a single piece? For something to be considered art, does it have to have some economic exchange value? And how do you think all the thousands of struggling artists who never sell anything their entire lives felt about Marla's instant and apparently effortless success? Would they have been less inclined to define her as an "artist" than the investors who bought her work?

service members who have a good reason to fear traumatic events even if they didn't experience them firsthand. It's estimated that this new rule will cost the government $5 billion in treatment costs over the next several years (Dao, 2010b).

In 2013, the American Medical Association decided to officially recognize obesity as a disease, which could spur health insurance claims for all manner of weight-loss surgeries, drugs, and behavior programs.

Another example of how economics affects the social construction of reality is our society's history of attempts to protect people with disabilities. Over 37.4 million adults and children in the United States have some type of disability (ProQuest Statistical Abstract, 2015). The 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines disability as "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such individuals" (U.S. Department of Labor, 2004, p. 1). Under this law, employers are required to accommodate employees who have a documented disability and are forbidden to fire them simply because of their disability. For instance, a company that has wheelchair-bound employees must have ramps or elevators that give these workers access to all areas of the building. Ironically, the added cost of employing disabled workers may actually work to their disadvantage by making them less attractive to potential hirers in the first place. One study found an 11% drop in the employment rate of people with disabilities after the ADA was enacted (DeLeire, 2000). Moreover, highly publicized stories of employees with questionable disabilities seeking accommodations—for example, an office worker allergic to perfume demanding that his employer install an expensive new air filtration system—give the impression that the ADA is placing an excessive economic burden on companies. Although powerful businesses and industries were not able to prevent this act from being passed in the first place, they have been able to create a reality that still works in their interest.

The Politics of Reality

The institution of politics is also linked to societal definitions of reality. To a great extent, politics is about controlling public perceptions so people will do things or think about issues in ways that political leaders want them to. During important political campaigns, we can see such attempts to influence public perception. Mudslinging, euphemistically called "negative campaigning," has become as common an element of the U.S. electoral process as speeches, debates, baby kissing, and patriotic songs.

Most politicians know that if you say something untrue or unproven about an opponent often enough, people will believe it. In fact, while companies that sell consumer products must meet some standard of accuracy in their advertising, we have no federal truth-in-advertising laws for political campaign ads. Candidates have the legal right to lie ("Bunk Busters," 2007). Ironically, constant public denials of bogus charges often reinforce their reality and keep them in the news. In 2011, President Obama was forced to hold a news conference and present his birth certificate because the false claims that he isn't a U.S. citizen—which first arose during the 2008 election campaign—wouldn't go away. In some states, over half of Republican registered voters believed he was born outside the United States (D. Jackson, 2011). The validity of claims becomes irrelevant as accusations are transformed into "fact" and become solidified in the minds of the voting public. The problem has become so acute that a website, FactCheck.org, exists solely to monitor the factual accuracy of what major U.S. politicians say in advertisements, debates, speeches, interviews, and news releases.

When the lives of thousands of citizens are at stake and public opinion is crucial, information control becomes particularly tight. Between September 2001 and the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the Bush administration worked diligently to foster a belief that Iraq and its then dictator, Saddam Hussein, played a direct role in the September 11 attacks and had stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction. They were quite successful. Immediately after the attacks, national opinion polls showed that only 3% of Americans mentioned Iraq or Saddam Hussein when asked who was responsible. But by January 2003, 44% of Americans reported that either "most" or "some" of the hijackers were Iraqi citizens. In fact, none were (Feldmann, Marlantes, & Bowers, 2003). Two years after the attacks, 69% of Americans said in a *Washington Post* poll that they thought it at least likely that Hussein was involved in the attacks, even though the link between Iraq and al-Qaeda was never established (Milbank & Deane, 2003). Nevertheless, these beliefs provided the kind of public support necessary to justify the military invasion and occupation of Iraq. In 2008, the Center for Public Integrity (2008) concluded that the administration had made close to 1,000 false public statements on either the existence of weapons of mass destruction or the link between al-Qaeda and Iraq. Such a molding of public perception is accomplished most notably through the media.

The Medium Is the Message

Communication media are the primary means by which we are entertained and informed about the world around us (see Chapter 5). But the messages we receive from the media also reflect dominant cultural values (Gitlin, 1979). In television shows and other works of fiction, the way characters are portrayed, the topics addressed, and the solutions imposed on problems all link entertainment to the economic system and prevailing societal tastes in consumption.

The media are also our primary source of information about local, national, and international events and people. News broadcasts and newspapers tell us about things we cannot experience directly, making the most remote events meaningful (Molotch & Lester, 1974). The way we look at the world and define our lives within it is therefore shaped and influenced by what we see on Internet news sites, watch on TV news shows, hear on the radio, or read in our daily papers.

Because the news is the means by which political realities are disseminated to the public, it is an essential tool in maintaining social order (Hallin, 1986; Parenti, 1986). In many societies, news sources don't even try to hide the fact that they are mouthpieces of one faction or another. In repressive societies, the only news sources allowed to operate are those representing the government. In North Korea, for instance, the flow of news information is clearly controlled by the government. People who live in societies with a cultural tradition of press independence, in contrast, assume that news stories are purely factual—an accurate, objective reflection of the "world out there" (Molotch & Lester, 1975). Like everything else, however, news is a constructed reality.

Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of potentially newsworthy events occur every day. Yet we'll see maybe 10 of them on our favorite evening broadcast or the home page of our favorite online news service. These events exist as news not because of their inherent importance but because of the practical, political, or economic purposes they serve. The old newsroom adage "If it bleeds, it leads" attests to the fact that events with shocking details—which appeal to the public's fondness for the sensational—are those most likely to be chosen. At its most independent, the news is still the product of decisions made by reporters, editors, network executives, and corporation owners, all of whom have their own interests, biases, and values (Molotch & Lester, 1974).

The manipulation of events for political gain is such an ordinary part of the cultural landscape that it's become institutionalized with its own term: *spin*. To put a spin on an event is to

give it a particular interpretation, often one that is to the speaker's advantage. Spin is a valuable political resource. Every U.S. president, whether Republican or Democrat, has staff members who spin the facts to put his policies in the best possible light, often by withholding information from the public, fudging statistics, issuing nondenial denials, or exaggerating the progress or benefits of particular actions and policies (Stolberg, 2004). And it's not just politicians who spin reality. Blogs are a continuing source of spin as they mix fact with the blogger's opinion, much of it selected and phrased to present a clearly one-sided version of reality. During the contentious debate over health care reform back in 2009, interest groups on both sides attempted to sway public opinion by spending nearly $60 million on television advertisements in a span of 6 months (Seelye, 2009). Spin has become a profession in its own right. Immediately following a televised presidential debate, for instance, a gaggle of trained supporters (the "spin doctors") for both candidates situate themselves in a specified area—called "spin alley"—where they creatively provide television viewers with a version of the outcome that benefits their candidate. Top aides and party officials are dispatched to various blogs, cable news programs, and local news studios. Teams of researchers send dozens of messages to reporters covering the debate, accusing the other candidate of misstatements or lies.

Although "freedom of expression" and "freedom of the press" are core American values, media manipulation of information has been not only tolerated but encouraged in some situations. Take the coverage of the military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan following the attacks of September 11, 2001. During the initial stages of the war, press coverage seemed to be relatively open. The Pentagon allowed hundreds of "embedded" reporters to accompany fighting forces and transmit their stories from the front battle lines. According to one study, 61% of their reports during the first 3 days of the war were live and unedited (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2005). By granting such unprecedented access, Pentagon officials hoped that these reporters would convey the "heroism and hard work" of American soldiers to a worldwide audience and in the process discredit Iraqi propaganda (Getlin & Wilkinson, 2003).

But even then, some media critics were concerned that the reporters were tools of the military, especially given their often close attachment to the soldiers with whom they were traveling. The Pentagon required embedded journalists to sign a contract giving the military control over the content of their stories (Jamail, 2007). According to one study, 80% of embedded reports included no commentary at all from soldiers (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2005).

For everyday news stories, even in societies that restrict the press, official censorship is usually unnecessary. Because of the economic pressures to attract audiences and keep their attention, TV networks and newspapers usually censor themselves (Bagdikian, 1991). Reporters pursue stories that are relatively easy to research and that have immediate interest for audiences. Less exciting, more complicated stories don't get enough journalistic resources or are cut in the editing process. We usually have no way of knowing which events have *not* been selected for inclusion in the day's news or which plausible alternatives are kept out of the public eye.

The economic and political motivation for such selectivity becomes apparent when we consider who owns the media. For instance, one company, Clear Channel, owns about 840 local radio stations in all 50 states (under the corporate name iHeart Media), reaching more than 110 million listeners every week; Clear Channel also owns over 1 million outdoor advertising displays in 30 countries on 5 continents (Clear Channel Communications, 2014). Cumulus Media Networks (2014) has more than 4,500 affiliate radio stations and reaches 140 million listeners each week Another, the Sinclair Broadcast Group (2014), owns and operates or provides sales services to 162 television stations in 79 markets and reaches approximately 37.5% of U.S. television households.

We can see such consolidation of ownership at the national level as well. In 1983, 50 companies controlled 90% of all U.S. media outlets. Today, just six companies—Comcast, Disney, News Corp, Time Warner, Viacom, and CBS—own 90% of all media outlets, concentrating control over what we see, hear, and read. To put it another way, 232 media executives control the information received by 277 million Americans (Lutz, 2012).

Many media observers fear that the concentration of corporate-owned news outlets twists certain stories to promote particular economic or political interests. In recent years, media owners have refused to run advertisements, stories, or commentaries that supported single-payer health insurance, criticized U.S. military intervention, or opposed certain international trade agreements. Television and print journalists have been fired, forced to resign, or reassigned for presenting stories critical of subsidiaries owned by the parent company (Parenti, 2006).

As the viewing and listening public, our recourse is difficult. To criticize faulty government policies and consider solutions to difficult social problems, we need solid information, which is frequently unavailable or difficult to obtain. The recent growth in popularity of podcasting, blogs, Internet Protocol television, micro radio stations, and subscription satellite networks may be a sign that some citizens are growing weary of the filtered and sometimes partisan information they receive from traditional news sources. Indeed, distrust of the news media has become so acute that some people turn to deliberately fake news/comedy shows like *The Daily Show, The Onion,* and *Last Week Tonight* to keep abreast of national and world events.

So the challenge we face in our own private lives is to recognize the processes at work in the social construction of reality and to take them into account as we "consume" the news. A critical dimension of the sociological imagination is the ability to "read silences"—to be attentive to what the mass media *don't* say. Fortunately, one of the purposes of sociology is to scientifically amass a body of knowledge that we can use to assess how our society really works.

Moral Entrepreneurs

Individual efforts to control the construction of reality are difficult. But we are not consigned to meekly accept the reality presented to us by powerful organizations and institutions. Individuals banding together in interest groups have managed time and again to contribute to the construction of social reality. For instance, they have created new understandings of the rights of ethnoracial minorities, brought environmental degradation to the public's attention, and changed our attitudes toward particular social problems..

Although economic and political power have been the motivating concerns of many of these groups, certain people have had moral concerns they passionately want translated into law. Groups that seek to outlaw or increase the punishment for such things as pornography, drunk driving, sexually explicit song lyrics, abortion, and gambling, as well as groups that promote gun control, literacy, awareness of domestic violence, and support for AIDS research, are crusading for the creation of a new public conception of morality. These ***moral entrepreneurs*** (Becker, 1963) need not be wealthy or influential individuals. Instead, by virtue of their initiative, access to decision makers, skillful use of publicity and public relations, and success in neutralizing any opposing viewpoints, they are able to turn their interests into public policy (Hills, 1980). For instance, in 2015, a Maine woman embarked on a nationwide, 60-day road trip to call attention to the public safety problem caused by elderly people driving. She met with legislators, volunteer organizations, doctors, and even groups of elderly people to share the story of her son, who was run over by an 84-year old driver (Washuk, 2015).

Sometimes groups seek to convince the public that a phenomenon that is currently a crime ought not be. For instance, people trying to convince legislators to legalize the use of marijuana for medicinal purposes have shown moderate success by emphasizing the medical properties of marijuana (pain or nausea relief) and disregarding the psychoactive effects associated with its recreational use (getting "high"). Indeed, many avoid the term *marijuana* entirely, opting instead for the more scientific-sounding *cannabis* (Chapkis, 2010).

APPRECIATING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Up to this point, I've been describing how individuals, groups, organizations, and various social institutions go about constructing reality. We've seen that these realities sometimes shift with time, place, and individual perception. Faced with this type of fluctuation, sociologists, as well as scholars in other disciplines, seek to identify a more "real" reality through systematic, controlled research. The rules sociologists abide by when conducting research give them confidence that they are identifying more than just a personal version of reality. They hope to determine a reality as it exists for a community of people at a particular point in time.

Moving beyond the level of individual conclusions about the nature of social reality is crucial if we are to escape the distortions of personal interests and biases. A danger of relying solely on individual perceptions is that we are likely to conclude that what we experience is what everyone experiences. For example, the famous psychiatrist Sigmund Freud used his own childhood as the ultimate "proof" of the controversial concept called the Oedipus complex (the belief that sons are secretly in love with their mothers and jealous of their fathers). He wrote to a friend in 1897, "I have found, in my own case too, being in love with the mother and jealous of the father, and I now consider it a universal event of early childhood" (quoted in Astbury, 1996, p. 73).

To avoid the risk of such overgeneralizations, sociologists try to determine what most people believe or how most people behave. But in doing so, they sometimes run the risk of simply restating what people already know. Indeed, a criticism of sociology you hear from time to time is that it is just a fancy version of common sense. A lot of the things that we think are obvious based on our personal observations, however, turn out not to be so straightforward under the closer scrutiny of social research. Consider the following "commonsense facts":

- Rape, assault, and murder occur most often between total strangers.
- Because of the high divorce rate in the United States, people are reluctant to get married.
- American children today are more likely to live in a single-parent household than they were 100 years ago.

Most of us probably assume these statements are true. Given what you've seen online or on television, they probably make a lot of sense. But how accurate are they?

According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics (2011), over the past three decades, only 14% of all homicides in the U.S. were perpetrated by strangers. In addition, only 44% of assaults involve strangers. The rest occur between acquaintances, friends, colleagues, romantic partners, and family members. In 79% of rapes and sexual assaults that involve college-age female victims, the attacker is a nonstranger, either an intimate partner, friend, acquaintance, or relative of the victim (Sinozich & Langton, 2014).

According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census (ProQuest Statistical Abstract, 2015), 10.3% of men and 8.8% of women between the ages of 55 and 64 have never been married. In fact, about 40% of

marriages in 2013 included at least one person who had been previously married. Forty-two million Americans have been married more than once (Livingston, 2014). Although we are quite willing to end a bad marriage, we still tend to place a high value on the institution of marriage itself.

The percentage of children who don't live with both their parents—about 32% of all children (ProQuest Statistical Abstract, 2015)—is roughly the same as it was a century ago. At that time, life expectancy was much lower than it is today, so it was highly likely that before reaching adulthood a child would lose at least one parent to death (Kain, 1990).

As you can see, sometimes commonsense "facts" don't hold up under the weight of evidence provided by social research.

The Empirical Nature of Sociological Research

Research is all around us. Throughout our lives, we are flooded with statistics that are supposedly the result of scientific studies—which detergents make clothes brighter, which conditioners repair hair better, which dog food tastes best, which wireless providers have the widest 4G coverage, which chewing gum dentists recommend for their gum-chewing patients. Many of the important decisions we make, from purchasing a car to opting for a particular surgical procedure, are supported by some sort of research.

In addition, a significant proportion of our own lives is spent *doing* research. Every time we seek out the opinions of others, gauge the attitude of a group, or draw conclusions about an observed event, we engage in a form of research. Say, for example, you thought your exam scores would improve if you studied with others, so you formed a study group. After the exam, you compared your grade with the grade you received on the previous exam (when you just studied on your own) to see if there was any significant improvement. If there was, you would likely attribute your better performance to the study group. This is the essence of research: You had an idea about some social process, and you went out and tested it to see if you were correct.

Although useful and common, such casual research is fraught with problems. We may make inaccurate or selective observations, overgeneralize on the basis of a limited number of observations, or draw conclusions that protect our own interests (Babbie, 1992). Maybe your exam score would have improved even without the study group because you had a better understanding of the material this time and had a better sense of what the instructor expected.

Sociological research, which is a much more sophisticated and structured form of the sort of individual inquiry we use every day, can avoid some of these pitfalls. Of course, sociological researchers are human beings, and they too make errors in observation, generalization, and analysis. But they have a greater chance of avoiding these errors because, first and foremost, sociological research is an empirical endeavor. ***Empirical research*** operates on the assumption that answers to questions about human behavior can be ascertained through controlled, systematic observations in the real world. Individuals can reach naïve conclusions based on their personal impressions of what happens in society. Great scholars can spend years thinking about human life and developing logical explanations about particular social phenomena. But for most sociologists, the strength of an explanation depends on how much empirical support it has.

Another characteristic of sociological research that makes it a better reflection of social reality than individual inquiry is that it is ***probabilistic***. Instead of making absolute predictions, most sociologists prefer to state that under certain conditions, particular phenomena are likely to occur. In other words, human behavior operates within the laws of probability. Whenever sociologists set out to find the reasons, say, for why people hold prejudiced beliefs or why some countries have a higher birth

rate than others, they are searching for the factors that would explain these phenomena most but not all of the time. For instance, adults with less than a high school education are more likely than adults with college degrees to be prejudiced against members of other ethnoracial groups. But that doesn't mean that every single high school dropout is a bigot or that every person with a PhD embraces those who are ethnically or racially different. By focusing on the probability of some phenomenon occurring while at the same time allowing for exceptions and variations, sociologists provide a view of reality that simultaneously reflects the way things are and the way they can be.

Qualitative and Quantitative Research

In contrast to the casual way we carry out our personal research, sociologists seek to define reality through a careful process of collecting information and answering questions. Some sociologists collect nonnumeric information (text, written words, phrases, symbols, observations) that describes people, actions, or events in social life (called ***qualitative research***; Neuman, 1994). Others collect numeric data and rely on precise statistical analysis (called ***quantitative research***). And some use a combination of both.

Qualitative researchers often go out and observe people and events as they happen in society. For instance, qualitative researchers interested in how additional children affect parents' ability to balance the demands of work and home may spend an entire day with a family, listening, observing, and asking questions. Once they've collected enough information, they go about interpreting their observations, looking for identifiable patterns in people's everyday lives.

Quantitative sociological researchers methodically record observations across a variety of situations; they design and choose questions in advance and ask them in a consistent way of a large number of people; they use sophisticated techniques to ensure that the characteristics of the people in a study are similar to those of the population at large; and they use computers to generate statistics from which confident conclusions can be drawn.

Both kinds of sociological research are subjected to the scrutiny of peers, who will point out any mistakes and shortcomings. Researchers are obligated to report not only their results but also the methods they used to record observations or collect data and the conditions surrounding the study. Such detailed explanations allow other researchers to replicate a study—that is, to perform it themselves to see if the same results are obtained. The more a particular research result is replicated, the greater its acceptance as fact in the sociological community.

Theories, Variables, and Hypotheses

Whether qualitative or quantitative, social research is purposeful. Unlike personal research, which may be motivated by a hunch, whim, or immediate need, most social research is guided by a particular theory. A ***theory*** is a set of statements or propositions that seeks to explain or predict a particular aspect of social life (Chafetz, 1978). Theory does not, as is popularly thought, mean conjecture or speculation. Ideally, theories explain the way things are, not the way they ought to be.

Research and theory closely depend on each other. Research without any underlying theoretical reasoning is simply a string of meaningless bits of information (C. W. Mills, 1959); theory without research is abstract and speculative.

Some theories—such as structural functionalism, the conflict perspective, and symbolic interactionism—are quite broad, seeking to explain why social order exists or how societies work overall. Other theories are more modest, seeking to explain more narrowly certain behaviors among specific

groups of people. For example, Travis Hirschi (1969) developed a theory of juvenile delinquency called "social control theory," in which he argued that delinquent acts occur when an individual's bond to society is weak or broken. These bonds are derived from a person's attachments to others who obey the law, the rewards a person gains by acting nondelinquently (commitments), the amount of time a person engages in nondelinquent activity (involvements), and the degree to which a person is tied to society's conventional belief system.

To test theories, sociologists must translate abstract propositions into testable hypotheses. A ***hypothesis*** is a researchable prediction that specifies the relationship between two or more ***variables***. A variable is any characteristic, attitude, behavior, or event that can take on two or more values or attributes. For example, the variable "marital status" has several categories: never married, cohabiting, married, separated, divorced, widowed. The variable "attitudes toward capital punishment" has categories ranging from "strongly in favor" to "strongly oppose."

Hirschi was interested in why juveniles engage in delinquent behavior. Such a question is far too general to study empirically, so he developed a clear, specific, empirically testable prediction, or hypothesis, specifying a relationship between two variables: Strong "social bonds" will be associated with low levels of "delinquency."

In developing their hypotheses, sociologists distinguish between independent and dependent variables. The ***independent variable*** is the factor presumed to influence or create changes in another variable. The ***dependent variable*** is the one assumed to depend on, be influenced by, or change as a result of the change in the independent variable. If we believe that gender affects people's attitudes toward capital punishment, then "gender" would be the independent variable influencing "attitudes toward capital punishment," the dependent variable. For Hirschi's theory of juvenile delinquency, the strength of the social bond was the independent variable, and level of delinquency was the dependent variable.

The assumption behind most research that tests a hypothesis is that the independent variable *causes* changes to occur in the dependent variable—for instance, that a weak social bond *causes* a young person to become delinquent. But just because two variables seem to be related doesn't necessarily mean a causal relationship exists.

In fact, the two variables may not be related at all but merely seem to be associated with each other due to the effect of some third variable. Sociologists call such misleading relationships spurious. A classic example of a ***spurious relationship*** is the apparent association between children's shoe size and reading ability. It seems that as shoe size increases, reading ability improves (Babbie, 2007). Does this mean that the size of one's feet (independent variable) *causes* an improvement in reading skills (dependent variable)? Certainly not. This illusory relationship is caused by a third factor, age, that is related to shoe size (older kids have bigger feet) as well as reading ability (older kids can read better than younger kids). Hence, when researchers attempt to make causal claims about the relationship between an independent and a dependent variable, they must control for—or rule out—other variables that may be creating a spurious relationship. Can you think of a third variable that might strengthen or weaken a person's social bond *and* influence his or her tendency toward delinquent behavior?

Aside from concern with spuriousness, quantitative social researchers, like Hirschi, face the problem that many of the concepts that form the basis of theories are abstract and not easy to observe or measure empirically. We can't directly see concepts such as "attachments" or "commitments." So they must be translated into ***indicators***: events, characteristics, or behaviors that can be observed or quantified.

In his survey of 1,200 boys in Grades 6 through 12, Hirschi derived a set of indicators for his independent variable, the strength of the social bond. To determine young people's attachments to law-abiding others, Hirschi measured their attraction to parents, peers, and school officials. To determine the degree to which they derived rewards from acting nondelinquently (commitment), he asked them to assess the importance of things such as getting good grades. To determine the proportion of their lives spent in conventional activities (involvement), he asked them how much time they spent in school-oriented activities. Finally, to determine their ties to a conventional belief system, he asked them questions about their respect for the law and the police.

Hirschi measured the dependent variable, delinquent activity, by asking the boys if they'd ever stolen things, taken cars for rides without the owner's permission, banged up something on purpose that belonged to somebody else, or beaten up or hurt someone on purpose. In addition, he used school records and police records to measure delinquent acts that had come to the attention of authorities.

The empirical data he collected supported his hypothesis. The boys who indicated close attachments to their parents and peers, who got good grades, who were involved in lots of school-related activities, and who had high levels of respect for the law were the boys who didn't get into trouble. Hirschi was therefore able to use these results to strengthen the power of his original theory.

Modes of Research

Although the answers to important sociological questions are not always simple or clear, the techniques sociologists use to collect and examine data allow them to draw informed and reliable conclusions about human behavior and social life. The most common techniques are experiments, field research, surveys, and unobtrusive research.

Experiments An ***experiment*** is typically a research technique designed to elicit some sort of behavior under closely controlled laboratory circumstances. In its ideal form, the experimenter randomly places participants into two groups, then deliberately manipulates or introduces changes into the environment of one group of participants (called the experimental group) and not the other (called the control group). Care is taken to ensure that the groups are relatively alike except for the variable that the experimenter manipulates. Any observed or measured differences between the groups can then be attributed to the effects of the experimental manipulation.

Experiments have a significant advantage over other types of research because the researcher can directly control all the relevant variables. Thus, conclusions about the independent variable causing changes in the dependent variable can be made more convincingly. The artificial nature of most laboratory experiments, however, may make subjects behave differently than the way they would in their natural settings, leading some people to argue that laboratory experimentation in sociology is practically impossible (Silverman, 1982).

To overcome this difficulty, some sociologists have created experimental situations outside the laboratory. Arthur Beaman and his colleagues (Beaman, Klentz, Diener, & Svanum, 1979) conducted an experiment to see whether self-awareness decreases the likelihood of engaging in socially undesirable behavior—in this case, stealing. The researchers set up situations in which children arriving at several homes on Halloween night were sent into the living room alone to take candy from a bowl. The children were first asked their names and ages and then told, "You may take only one of the candies." For the experimental group, a large mirror was placed right next to the candy bowl so that the children couldn't help but see themselves. For the control group, there was no mirror. In the control group, 37% of the children took more than one candy, but only 4% of the children in the experimental group took

more than one candy. The researchers concluded from this experiment that self-awareness—brought about by seeing one's reflection in a mirror—can significantly reduce dishonesty.

Experimental research outside the laboratory can also be used to inform public policy. In 2010, the City of New York embarked on a multi-year experimental test of the effectiveness of its 6-year-old homelessness prevention program, a $23 million endeavor called Homebase. Half of the test subjects—people who are unable to pay their rent and therefore risk eviction—are being denied assistance from the program as researchers observe them to see if they become homeless. The other half receive the program's regular assistance services, including tenant–landlord mediation, emergency rental assistance, and job training (Buckley, 2010). The city hopes to determine if the program's intervention actually makes a difference in reducing the number of homeless. Some public officials have denounced the experiment as unnecessarily cruel.

Field Research In ***field research***, qualitative sociologists observe events as they actually occur, without selecting experimental and control groups or purposely introducing any changes into the subjects' environment. Field research can take several forms. In ***nonparticipant observation***, the researcher observes people without directly interacting with them and without their knowing that they are being observed. Sociologist Lyn Lofland (1973), for example, studied how strangers relate to one another in public places by going to bus depots, airports, stores, restaurants, and parks and secretly recording everything she saw.

Participant observation requires that the researcher interact with subjects. In some cases, the researcher openly identifies herself or himself. For instance, to gain insight into how people balance work and family, sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild (1997) observed employees over a period of 3 years at a large public relations company she called Amerco. She was particularly interested in why employees tend not to take advantage of available family leave policies. At Amerco, only 53 of 21,000 employees—all of them women—chose to switch to part-time work in response to the arrival of a new baby. Less than 1% of the employees shared a job or worked at home, even though the company permits it. Most of the workers worked a lot of overtime, coming in early and staying late. So why were these workers so unwilling to change their work lives to spend more time with their families even when the company would have supported them in doing so? Through her long-term observations of Amerco, Hochschild came to the conclusion that work has become a form of "home" and home has become "work." For many people at Amerco, home had become a place of frenzied activity and busy schedules, whereas work had become a sort of nurturing refuge where they could relax and share stories with friends. So they actually preferred spending more time at work.

This type of qualitative field research can be quite time consuming. Researchers can conduct only a limited number of interviews and can observe only a limited number of people and events. Hochschild collected rich information about people's work–family trade-offs, but she could study only one corporation. It's risky to generalize from the experiences of a small group of workers in one company in one society to all workers in all sorts of work environments.

In more delicate situations where the people being studied don't want their actions made public, the researcher may have to conceal his or her identity in order to gather accurate information. For instance, researchers have gone "undercover" to study everything from doomsday cults (Festinger, Riecken, & Schacter, 1956) to college sororities (Robbins, 2004). Sociologist Julia O'Connell Davidson (2002) wanted to examine the issue of power and control in the relationships between prostitutes and their clients. To study this topic, she posed as a "receptionist" for a prostitute she called "Desiree," fielding phone calls and supervising the "waiting room" for the clients who had arrived to see Desiree. While Desiree knew O'Connell Davidson was a sociologist, the clients did not. If these men knew they

were being studied, they might have altered their conversations and behaviors to cover up potentially damaging information.

Surveys When it is impossible or impractical to carry out field observations or to set up a controlled experimental situation, social researchers use the survey method. ***Surveys*** require that the researcher pose a series of questions to respondents orally, electronically, or on paper. The questions should be sufficiently clear so they are understood by the respondent the way the researcher wants them to be understood and measure what the researcher wants them to measure. In addition, the respondent is expected to answer the questions honestly and thoughtfully. The answers are often recorded in numerical form so they can be statistically analyzed.

All of us have experienced surveys of one form or another. Every 10 years, people who live in the United States are required to fill out questionnaires for the U.S. Census Bureau. You've probably filled out an evaluation form at the end of a college course. Or perhaps you've been interviewed in a shopping mall or have received an e-mail or text asking you to respond to a "brief survey" about a particular product or service.

Surveys typically use standardized formats. All subjects are asked the same questions in the same way, and large samples of people are used as subjects. One survey that has provided the basis for much sociological research on families is the National Survey of Families and Households. First conducted in the late 1980s, it includes information derived from interviews with over 13,000 respondents. A second wave of the survey, conducted between 1992 and 1994, and a third wave between 2001 and 2003 included interviews with surviving members of the original sample. The sample covers a diverse array of households, including single-parent families, families with stepchildren, cohabiting couples, and recently married persons. A great deal of family information was collected from each respondent, including family arrangements in childhood, dating experiences, experiences of leaving home, marital and cohabitation experiences, details of contact with kin, and data on economic well-being, as well as education, childbearing, and employment histories. Some of the research discussed in this book is based on analyses of data collected from this survey.

When sociologists Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz (1983) undertook a massive study of intimate couples in the United States, they sent questionnaires to people from every income level, age group, religion, political ideology, and educational background. Some of their respondents were cohabiting; others were married. Some had children; others were childless. Some were heterosexual, others homosexual. All couples filled out a 38-page questionnaire that asked questions about their leisure activities, emotional support, housework, finances, sexual relations, satisfaction, relations with children, and so forth. More than 6,000 couples participated. From these surveys, Blumstein and Schwartz were able to draw conclusions about the importance of money, work, sexuality, power, and gender in couples' lives.

Unobtrusive Research All the methods I've discussed so far—whether quantitative or qualitative—require the researcher to have some contact with the people being studied: giving them tasks to do in an experiment, watching them (with or without their knowing that they are participating in social research), or asking them questions. But the very act of intruding into people's lives may influence the phenomena being studied. This problem, known as ***reactivity***, calls into question the accuracy of the data that are collected, thereby threatening the credibility of the research.

In the late 1920s, an engineer and a time study analyst (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939) were hired to study working conditions and worker productivity at an electric company in Hawthorne, Illinois. They were interested in finding out whether changing certain physical conditions in the plant could improve workers' productivity and satisfaction. They quickly discovered that increasing the lighting in the workroom was linked with workers' producing more. Increasing the brightness of the

lights again the next day increased productivity even further. To bolster their conclusion, they decided to dim the lights to see if productivity dropped. Much to their dismay, productivity increased again when they darkened the room. They soon realized that the workers were responding more to the attention they were receiving from the researchers than to changes in their working conditions. This phenomenon is known as the "Hawthorne effect."

To avoid such influence, sociologists sometimes use another research technique, unobtrusive research, which requires no contact with people at all. ***Unobtrusive research*** is an examination of the evidence of social behavior that people create or leave behind. There are several types of unobtrusive research.

Analysis of existing data (also known as secondary data) relies on data gathered earlier by someone else for some other purpose. Émile Durkheim used this technique when he examined different suicide rates for different groups to gain insight into the underlying causes of suicide (see Chapter 1). Analysis of existing data is still used extensively by sociologists today. One of the most popular and convenient sources of data is the U.S. Census. Studies that examine broad, nationwide trends (e.g., marriage, divorce, or premarital childbearing rates) typically use existing census data.

Content analysis is the study of documented communications—books, speeches, poems, song lyrics, television commercials, websites, and so forth. This method is particularly useful for documenting cultural shifts over time. For example, sociologists Bernice Pescosolido, Elizabeth Grauerholz, and Melissa Milkie (1997) analyzed close to 2,000 children's picture books published from 1937 to 1993 to see if there were any changes in the way African Americans were portrayed. They believed that these depictions could tell a lot about the shifting nature of race relations in the larger society. The researchers looked not only at the number of black characters in these books but also at whether they were portrayed positively or negatively. They found, among other things, that in times of high uncertainty in race relations and substantial protest and conflict over existing societal norms, Blacks virtually disappeared from picture books. Furthermore, depictions of intimate, equal interracial interactions and portrayals of Blacks as primary characters remained rare.

Psychologists Jean Twenge, Keith Campbell, and Brittany Gentile (2012) analyzed the content of American books published between 1960 and 2008 using the Google Books Ngram database. This search engine allows you to assess how often a particular word or phrase appears in the millions of digitized books found in the database. The researchers found that over the span of 48 years, individualistic words and phrases like "personalized," "self," "unique," "I come first," and "I can do it myself" became more common, while words that reflected a more communal orientation, such as "community," "collective," "share," "united," and "common good" became less common. From these data they were able to argue that we are experiencing a shift in language usage reflective of a larger cultural ethos that has been increasingly characterized by a focus on the self and a reduced sense of group identity and responsibility.

Historical analysis relies on existing historical documents as a source of research information. Sociologist Kai Erikson (1966) was interested in how communities construct definitions of acceptable and unacceptable behavior. For his book *Wayward Puritans*, he studied several "crime waves" among the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the late 17th century. Erikson examined court cases, diaries, birth and death records, letters, and other written documents of the period. Piecing together fragments of information 300 years old was not easy, but Erikson was able to draw some conclusions. He found that each time the colony was threatened in some way—by opposing religious groups, betrayals by community leaders, or the king of England's revocation of its charter—the number of convicted criminals and the severity of punishments significantly increased. Erikson believed that these fluctuations occurred because the community needed to restate its moral boundaries and reaffirm its authority.

Visual sociology is a method of studying society through photographs, video recordings, and film. Some visual sociologists use these media to gather sociological data—much as documentary

photographers and filmmakers do. The visual images they create are meant to tell a sociological story. Other visual sociologists analyze the meaning and purpose of existing visual texts, such as sports photographs, TV advertisements, and the photographic archives of corporations. The visual essays that appear throughout this book use this methodology to examine important issues of sociological interest.

All these methods allow sociological researchers to collect information without intruding on and possibly changing the behavior of the people and groups they're studying.

The Trustworthiness of Social Research

Most sociologists see research as not only personally valuable but central to improving human knowledge and understanding. However, as consumers of this research, we must always ask, "How accurate is this information?" Sometimes it's difficult to interpret the evidence we come across in scholarly research articles (see Exhibit 3.1). Moreover, because we have a tendency to believe what we read in print or see reported on television or posted on websites, much of what we see may be either inaccurate or misleading. To evaluate the results of social research, we must examine the researcher's samples, the indicators used to measure important variables, and the researcher's personal qualities—namely, values, interests, and ethics.

Samples Frequently, sociological researchers are interested in the attitudes, behaviors, or characteristics of large groups—college students, women, Pinterest subscribers, single parents, and so on. It would be impossible to interview, survey, observe, or experiment on all these people directly. Hence, researchers must select a smaller ***sample*** of respondents from the larger population. The characteristics of this subgroup are supposed to approximate the characteristics of the entire population of interest. A sample is said to be ***representative*** if the small group being studied is in fact typical of the population as a whole. For instance, a sample of 100 students from your

EXHIBIT 3.1 Questions to Ask When You Read a Research Article

As you read a piece of published sociological research, you may be more able to assess the value of the research and the results if you ask yourself some questions about the article:

- What is the basic research problem the researcher is investigating?
- Is the research question derived from a particular sociological theory?
- Were any hypotheses stated? How were these hypotheses different from those tested in previous research?
- What type of research was used? Experiment? Survey? Use of existing statistics? Field research? Unobtrusive research?
- What were the independent and dependent variables? Did the author explain how the variables were measured?
- Who were the subjects in the study? How were they selected? Did the author think the sample was representative of the general population?
- What did the research find? How clearly were the statistical results discussed?
- Is there anything else you'd want to know about how the research was carried out that wasn't discussed by the author?

SOURCE: Adapted from Schutt, 2012, Appendix A.

university should include roughly the same proportion of first-year students, sophomores, juniors, and seniors that characterizes the entire school population. Sampling techniques have become highly sophisticated, as illustrated by the relative accuracy of polls conducted to predict election results.

In the physical sciences, sampling is not such an issue. Certain physical or chemical elements are assumed to be identical. One need only study a small number of vials of liquid nitrogen, because one vial of nitrogen should be the same as any other. Human beings, however, vary widely on every imaginable characteristic. You couldn't make a general statement about all Americans on the basis of an interview with one person. For that matter, you couldn't draw conclusions about all people from observing a sample consisting only of Americans, men, or teenagers. Samples that are not representative can lead to inaccurate and misleading conclusions.

Note the sampling problems revealed in the following letter to the editor of a small-town newspaper in the rural Midwest:

> I went to a restaurant yesterday for lunch. I began to feel guilty, when I reached into my pocket for a cigarette. . . . I was thinking of the government figures which estimated cigarette smokers at 26% of the population of the United States. But everywhere I looked inside that room, people were smoking. I decided to count them. There were 22 people in the room. . . . I was surprised to discover that the government's figures were an outright fabrication. . . . Seventeen people out of the 22 were cigarette smokers . . . that accounts for over 77% of the people in that restaurant. . . . The government's figures are understated by 51% and just plain wrong! (*Greencastle Banner Graphic*, 1992)

This letter writer assumed that the 22 people who frequented a small restaurant in a small, relatively poor rural town on a single day were an accurate representation of the entire U.S. population. Such a conclusion overlooks some important factors. Government studies show that the lower a person's income, the greater the likelihood that person will be a smoker. Furthermore, people in blue-collar or service jobs are more likely to smoke than people in white-collar jobs. Finally, the prevalence of smoking tends to be higher in rural areas of the Midwest and South than in other parts of the country (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006).

MICRO-MACRO CONNECTION

THE WEIRDEST PEOPLE IN THE WORLD

Biased samples can be especially misleading when researchers attempt to make broad statements about human nature. For instance, American undergraduate students make up about two thirds of subjects in all U.S. psychological studies, the topics of which range from visual perceptions to beliefs about fairness and cooperation. However, according to one recent review of such experiments, these subjects are totally unrepresentative of people worldwide. They may be similar to other subjects from societies that are Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD), but not representative of humans at large:

(Continued)

(Continued)

> Sampling from a thin slice of humanity would be less problematic if researchers confined their interpretations to the populations from which they sampled. However, despite their narrow samples, behavioral scientists often are interested in drawing inferences about the *human* mind and *human* behaviour. . . . Leading scientific journals and university textbooks routinely publish research findings claiming to generalize to "humans" or "people" based on research done entirely with WEIRD undergraduates. (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010, p. 63)

In one common experiment on fairness and cooperation in decision making, one subject (the "proposer") in a pair is given a sum of money and told that she or he can offer any portion of it to a second subject (the "responder"), who then decides whether to accept or reject the offer. If the responder accepts the offer, both subjects receive the proposed amount; if the responder rejects the offer, both subjects get nothing. Among WEIRD undergraduate subjects, proposers typically offer about 50% of the original amount and responders tend to reject offers below 30%. From these findings researchers have concluded that humans have a highly evolved sense of justice, leading us to make fair offers and to punish unfair ones, even if it comes at our own expense.

But when this experiment was conducted with subjects drawn from 23 small-scale societies in Africa, the Amazon rain forest, Oceania, Siberia, and Papua New Guinea, proposers made much smaller offers—in some cases, around 25%—and responders usually didn't reject them. In fact, in half of these societies, responders tended to reject offers only when they were *too high* (Henrich et al., 2010). Hence, experiments that utilize samples of WEIRD subjects may be measuring a specific set of social norms that emerge in societies where people regularly deal with money, markets, and strangers and not some universal component of human nature.

Indicators As you recall, one problem sociologists face when doing research is that the variables they are interested in studying are often difficult to see. What does powerlessness look like? How can you identify marital satisfaction? How would you recognize alienation or social class? Sociologists thus resign themselves to measuring indicators of things that cannot be measured directly. Researchers measure events and behaviors commonly thought to accompany a particular variable, hoping that what they are measuring is a valid indicator of the concept they are interested in.

Suppose you believe that people's attitudes toward abortion are influenced by the strength of their religious beliefs, or "religiosity." You might hypothesize that the stronger a person's religious beliefs, the less accepting he or she will be of abortion rights. To test this hypothesis, you must first figure out what you mean by "religious." What might be an indicator of the strength of someone's religious beliefs? You could determine whether the subjects of your study identify themselves as members of some organized religion. But this indicator might not tell you how religious your subjects are because many people identify themselves as, say, Catholic or Jewish but are not religious at all. Likewise, some people who consider themselves quite religious don't identify with any organized religion. So this measure would focus on group differences but would fail to capture the intensity of a person's beliefs or the degree of religious interest.

Perhaps a better indicator would be some quantifiable behavior, such as the frequency of attendance at formal religious services (Babbie, 1986). Arguably, the more someone attends church, synagogue, or mosque, the more religious that person is. But here, too, we run into problems. Church attendance, for instance, may reflect family pressure, habit, or the desire to visit with others rather than religious commitment. Furthermore, many very religious people are unable to attend services because they are sick or disabled. As you can see, indicators seldom perfectly reflect the concepts they are intended to measure.

Surveys are particularly susceptible to inaccurate indicators. A loaded phrase or an unfamiliar word in a survey question can dramatically affect people's responses in ways unintended by the researcher. For instance, opinion polls show a majority of people oppose programs that give "preferences to minorities." However, polls also show a majority of people *in favor of* programs that "make special efforts to help minorities get ahead in order to make up for past discrimination" (Sussman, 2010, p. 5). In 2009, during the debate over health care reform, several news agencies conducted polls to determine people's feelings about altering the health care system. A *New York Times*/CBS News poll found overwhelming support (66%) for the changes being proposed. Fox News, however, reported the support at a much lower 44%. Such an inconsistency had more to do with the way each agency worded its survey question than with the fluid, fluctuating nature of people attitudes. The *New York Times*/CBS poll asked people how they felt about "a government administered health insurance plan—something like the Medicare coverage that people 65 and older get." Fox News asked about "a government-run health insurance plan" (Sussman, 2010, p. 5).

Values, Interests, and Ethics in Sociological Research Along with samples and indicators, the researcher's own qualities can influence social research. Ideally, research is objective and nonbiased and measures what is and not what should be. However, the questions researchers ask and the way they interpret observations always take place in a particular cultural, political, and ideological context (Ballard, 1987; Denzin, 1989).

Consider the impact of values and interests. If prevailing social values identify an intact nuclear family as the best environment for children, then most researchers will be prone to notice the disadvantages and perhaps ignore the advantages of other family arrangements. Furthermore, research is sometimes carried out to support a narrowly defined political interest (as when environmental groups fund research showing the damaging effects of global warming) or economic interest (as when tobacco companies fund research that downplays the relationship between cigarette smoking and cancer). Following the 2011 killing of six people and the wounding of Arizona representative Gabrielle Giffords outside a Tucson supermarket, the National Rifle Association used its political sway to choke off government funding for scientific research on the impact of firearms in society (M. Luo, 2011). In 2009, a legal investigation found that between 1998 and 2005, 26 scientific journal articles on the use of the hormone replacement drugs Premarin and Prempro for menopausal women were written by ghostwriters who were on the payroll of Wyeth, the pharmaceutical company that manufactured Premarin (Singer, 2009). That same year, an investigation by the Department of Health and Human Services found that the Food and Drug Administration does almost nothing to monitor financial conflicts of interest of doctors who conduct clinical trials of drugs and medical devices (cited in G. Harris, 2009).

But it's not just a problem of unscrupulous researchers or financial benefactors. Academic journals are notoriously reluctant to publish studies that show no support for the hypothesized relationship between one variable and another. A reexamination of clinical trial studies of antidepressants conducted between 1987 and 2004 found that medical journals had a significant bias toward publishing

studies with positive results (E. H. Turner, Matthews, Linardatos, Tell, & Rosenthal, 2008). This problem has become so bad that an organization of 12 major medical journals proposed that pharmaceutical companies be required to register clinical trials at *the beginning* of drug studies so that negative and not just positive results would be publicly available (Meier, 2004).

We must remember that sociologists are people just like the rest of us, with their own biases, preconceptions, and expectations. Sociologists' values determine the kinds of information they gather about a particular social phenomenon. If you were conducting research on whether the criminal justice system is fair, would you study criminals, politicians, law enforcement personnel, judges, or victims? Each group would likely provide a different perception of the system. The most accurate picture of reality is likely to be based on the views of all subgroups involved.

In fact, values can influence the questions that researchers find important enough to address in the first place (Reinharz, 1992). For instance, research on families has historically reflected the interests of men. The term *labor force* has traditionally referred to those working for pay and has excluded those doing unpaid work, such as housework and volunteer jobs—areas that have always been predominantly female. Thus, findings on labor force participation are more likely to reflect the significant elements of men's lives than of women's lives. You can see that a lack of data does not necessarily indicate that a phenomenon or a problem doesn't exist. Perhaps all it indicates is that no researcher has yet undertaken a systematic study of it.

Ethics is another personal quality that affects the trustworthiness of social research. Research, as I mentioned earlier, often represents an intrusion into people's lives; it may disrupt their ordinary activities, and it often requires them to reveal personal information about themselves. Ethical researchers agree, therefore, that they should protect the rights of subjects and minimize the amount of harm or disruption subjects might experience as a result of being part of a study. Ethical researchers agree that no one should be forced to participate in research, that those who do participate ought to be fully informed of the possible risks involved, and that every precaution ought to be taken to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. Sociologists almost always conduct their research under the scrutiny of university review committees for the protection of human participants.

At the same time, however, researchers must attempt to secure the most accurate—and perhaps most useful—information possible. Sometimes, this requirement conflicts with ethical considerations. In 2007, the federal government began a 5-year, $50 million project designed to improve the way hospital patients are treated after car accidents, shootings, heart attacks, and other emergencies. Because such patients are often unconscious when they arrive at the hospital, researchers were allowed to conduct medical experiments on them without their consent, something that goes against usual ethical research protocol (Stein, 2007).

And what about research that requires information about people who may be involved in dangerous or criminal behavior or who do not want or cannot have their identities revealed? Sociologist Patricia Adler (1985) was interested in studying the worlds of drug dealers and smugglers. The illegal nature of their work makes them, by necessity, secretive, deceitful, and mistrustful—not the sort of individuals who make ideal surveyor interview respondents. So Adler had to establish a significant level of rapport and trust. Although she never became actively involved in drug trafficking, she did become a part of the dealers' and smugglers' social world and participated in their daily activities. Only by studying these criminals in their natural setting was she able to see the full complexity of the world of drug smuggling. Her research, however, raises important questions related to trustworthiness and ethics: Did her closeness to her subjects make it impossible to study them objectively? Did she have an obligation to report illegal activity to law enforcement officials?

LAUD HUMPHREYS

The Tearoom Trade

Most sociologists agree that the need to understand the depth and complexity of the drug world outweighed the ethical issues raised by Adler's research strategy. There is less agreement and more controversy, however, over situations in which researchers misrepresent their identities in order to gather information. Consider the 1970 study called *The Tearoom Trade* by Laud Humphreys, a study many sociologists find ethically indefensible. Humphreys was interested in studying anonymous and casual homosexual encounters among strangers. He decided to focus on interactions in "tearooms," which are places, such as public restrooms, where male homosexuals go for anonymous sex. (This study was done well before the HIV/AIDS epidemic significantly curtailed such activity.)

Because of the potentially stigmatizing nature of this phenomenon, Humphreys couldn't just come right out and ask people about their actions. So he decided to engage in a secretive form of participant observation. He posed as a lookout, called a "watchqueen," whose job was to warn of intruders as the people he was studying engaged in sexual acts with one another in public restrooms. In this way, he was able to conduct very detailed observations of these encounters.

Humphreys also wanted to know about the regular lives of these men. Whenever possible, he wrote down the license numbers of the participants' cars and tracked down their names and addresses with the help of a friend in the local police department.

About a year later, he arranged for these individuals to be part of a simple medical survey being conducted by some of his colleagues. He then disguised himself and visited their homes, supposedly to conduct interviews for the medical survey. He found that most of the men were heterosexual, had families, and were respected members of their communities. In short, they led altogether conventional lives.

Although this information shed a great deal of light on the nature of anonymous homosexual acts, some critics argued that Humphreys had violated the ethics of research by deceiving his unsuspecting subjects and violating their privacy rights. Some critics also noted that Humphreys might have been sued for invasion of privacy if he had not been studying a group of people rendered powerless by their potential embarrassment. Others, however, supported Humphreys, arguing that he couldn't have studied this topic any other way. In fact, his book won a prestigious award. But over 40 years later, the ethical controversy surrounding this study remains.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have described some of the processes by which reality is constructed, communicated, manipulated, and accepted. Reality, whether in the form of casual observations or formal research, is ultimately a human creation. Different people can create different conceptions of reality.

This issue can be raised from a personal level to a global one. People in every culture believe that their reality is the paramount one. Who is right? Can we truly believe that a reality in direct conflict with ours is equally valid? If we profess that everyone should have the right to believe what she or he wants, are we acknowledging the socially constructed nature of reality or merely being tolerant of those who are not "smart enough" to think as we do? Do we have the right to tell other people or other cultures that what they do or believe is wrong only because it conflicts with our definition of reality? Exasperating and complex, these questions lie at the core of international relations, global commerce, and everyday life.

YOUR TURN

The reality we take for granted is a social construction. This is particularly apparent when we look at the information presented to us as fact through published academic research, word of mouth, or the media. Reality is influenced by the individuals and organizations responsible for creating, assembling, and disseminating this information.

Choose an event that is currently making national headlines. It could be a story about the president or Congress, a major tragedy or natural disaster, a celebrity scandal, or a highly publicized criminal trial. Over the course of a week, analyze how this story is being covered by the following:

- Your local newspaper
- The major national newspapers (*USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*)
- Mainstream news magazines (*Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News & World Report*)
- Alternative magazines (*Utne Reader*, *Mother Jones*, *In These Times*, etc.)
- A local radio station
- National Public Radio (NPR)
- A local TV station
- A major TV network (NBC, CBS, ABC, Fox, CNN)
- Online news service (such as Newslink, Google News, Yahoo News)
- Late-night talk shows featuring topical comedy (such as *The Daily Show*, *Last Week Tonight*, *The Late Show*, *Conan*, *Late Night*, or *The Tonight Show*)

Pay particular attention to the following:

- The amount of time or space devoted to the story
- The "tone" of the coverage (Supportive or critical? Purely factual or reflective of certain political opinions? Specific, objective language or biased, inflammatory language?)

Summarize your findings. What were the differences in how the story was covered by the different media outlets? What were the similarities?

Interpret your findings. What do these differences and similarities suggest about the people who run these organizations? Whose political or economic interests are being served or undermined by the manner in which the story is being presented to the public? Which medium do you think is providing the most accurate, objective coverage? Why?

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

- The social construction of reality (truth, knowledge, etc.) is the process by which reality is discovered, made known, reinforced, and changed by members of society.
- Language is the medium through which reality construction takes place. It enables us to think, interpret, and define. Linguistic categories reflect aspects of a culture that are relevant and meaningful to people's lives.
- Not all of us possess the same ability to define reality. Individuals and groups in positions of power have the ability to control information, define values, create myths,

manipulate events, and ultimately influence what others take for granted.

- The purpose of a discipline such as sociology is to amass a body of knowledge that provides the public with useful information about how society works. This is done, quantitatively and qualitatively, through systematic social research—field research, surveys, and unobtrusive research. It is important to keep in mind, however, that this form of reality is also a social construction, shaped by the people who fund, conduct, and report on social research.

KEY TERMS

analysis of existing data: Type of unobtrusive research that relies on data gathered earlier by someone else for some other purpose

content analysis: Form of unobtrusive research that studies the content of recorded messages, such as books, speeches, poems, songs, television shows, websites, and advertisements

dependent variable: Variable that is assumed to be caused by, or to change as a result of, the independent variable

empirical research: Research that operates from the ideological position that questions about human behavior can be answered only through controlled, systematic observations in the real world

experiment: Research method designed to elicit some sort of behavior, typically conducted under closely controlled laboratory circumstances

field research: Type of social research in which the researcher observes events as they actually occur

historical analysis: Form of social research that relies on existing historical documents as a source of data

hypothesis: Researchable prediction that specifies the relationship between two or more variables

incorrigible proposition: Unquestioned cultural belief that cannot be proved wrong no matter what happens to dispute it

independent variable: Variable presumed to cause or influence the dependent variable

indicator: Measurable event, characteristic, or behavior commonly thought to reflect a particular concept

moral entrepreneurs: Groups that work to have their moral concerns translated into law

nonparticipant observation: Form of field research in which the researcher observes people without directly interacting with them and without letting them know that they are being observed

participant observation: Form of field research in which the researcher interacts with subjects, sometimes hiding his or her identity

probabilistic: Capable only of identifying those forces that have a high likelihood, but not a certainty, of influencing human action

qualitative research: Sociological research based on nonnumeric information (text, written words, phrases, symbols, observations) that describes people, actions, or events in social life

quantitative research: Sociological research based on the collection of numeric data that uses precise statistical analysis

reactivity: A problem associated with certain forms of research in which the very act of intruding into people's lives may influence the phenomenon being studied

representative: Typical of the whole population being studied

sample: Subgroup chosen for a study because its characteristics approximate those of the entire population

self-fulfilling prophecy: Assumption or prediction that in itself causes the expected event to occur, thus seeming to confirm the prophecy's accuracy

social construction of reality: Process through which the members of a society discover, make known, reaffirm, and alter a collective version of facts, knowledge, and "truth"

spurious relationship: A false association between two variables that is actually due to the effect of some third variable

survey: Form of social research in which the researcher asks subjects a series of questions verbally, online, or on paper

theory: Set of statements or propositions that seeks to explain or predict a particular aspect of social life

unobtrusive research: Research technique in which the researcher, without direct contact with the subjects, examines the evidence of social behavior that people create or leave behind

variable: Any characteristic, attitude, behavior, or event that can take on two or more values or attributes

visual sociology: Method of studying society that uses photographs, video recordings, and film either as means of gathering data or as sources of data about social life