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Building Reality

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

Understanding the Social Construction of Reality

Laying the Foundation: The Bases of Reality

Building the Walls: Conflict, Power, and Social Institutions

Appreciating the Contributions of Sociological Research

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