

# Social Construction Transcript

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These videos are being made for Open Oregon Educational Resources.

Rain is a fact of life. The storms roaring in from the ocean soak the forests and the yards. The brisk wind scours our beaches and our hearts. The gentle rain on the vineyards grows our grapes and brings us peace. This rain is real, but our experience of rain is socially constructed. That's what we're here to talk about today.

Social construction is a term introduced by Austrian-born American sociologist and Protestant theologian Peter Berger and American-Austrian sociologist Thomas Luckmann in 1966. These men wrote a book called "The Social Construction of Reality." In it, they assert that our social world is constructed in the daily habits and patterns that people repeat regularly. Social constructions are shared understandings that are jointly accepted by large numbers of people in society or social groups. How we make sense of our world depends on shared social agreements. These agreements can change over time, and even when the agreements are made up, they are real in their consequences.

Let's look at our example of rain to make sense of this. Clearly, if you go outside when it's raining, you will get wet. Rain is physically real. However, even our language around rain is socially constructed. The word "rain" and the raindrops themselves don't look at all alike. Also, our behavior in the rain is socially constructed. People in Chicago and people in Oregon deal with rain differently. In a very informal poll, the writers from "The Oregonian" asked people how often they use an umbrella. 66% of them said never. When they were asked why, most of the people said it was because they wanted their hands free. 8% of the people said they wouldn't use them because they would be embarrassed. What? People get wet because they are embarrassed? Here we see social construction in action. Real Oregonians don't use umbrellas, so if you want to be a real Oregonian, you follow the habit. The conversation in Chicago is really different. It's not whether you use an umbrella, it's how you find one that will actually work.

What else is socially constructed? Symbols are socially constructed. Symbols are gestures or objects that have meanings associated with them that are recognized by people who share a culture. One common symbol is a flag. In the US, when we use the symbol of the flag, we understand the cloth and colors to represent the United States. When we see pictures of people using the symbol of the flag to protest, it brings up emotions. We associate the cloth and colors with our country deeply, yet there are different socially constructed meanings related to the flag. Some believe that the flag is so important that it should only be displayed and treated in very respectful ways. Others believe that the flag is so important that burning it is the ultimate form of protest. Although we share the social construction of the symbol, not all of us share the same interpretation.

Another common symbol is money. We agree that this piece of paper can be exchanged for things that are worth a dollar, and as a society, we share this agreement. If you tried to convince a car salesperson that you could actually buy a car with this dollar, you wouldn't get very far. Even something as common as color can be socially constructed. Think for a moment about what colors you associate with girls and women, and what colors you associate with boys and

men. Many people in the US are likely to say blue for boys and pink for girls. Did you know that this designation is socially constructed? For example, a June 1918 article from the trade publication "Earnshaw's Infants Department" said, "The generally accepted rule is pink for the boys and blue for the girls. The reason is that pink, being a more decided and stronger color, is more suitable for the boy, while blue, which is more delicate and dainty, is prettier for the girl." Right now, in our society, it seems like if you think of a color for a boy -- in a binary system, if you think of a color for boys, it would be blue, and a color for girls would be pink. And as you can see, we are not fitting into that social construction. And lots of people don't, but, still, it's the way that social construction exists right now.

And more recently, pink is being reclaimed as a color for men. The men's magazine "GQ" declared in 2013 that "real men wear pink."

Our behavior is also socially constructed. We see this when we look at who uses masks or face coverings. Before the Covid 19 pandemic, it was rare to see people in the United States using masks. However, this behavior has been present in Asia since 2002 with the advent of the SARS epidemic. Mask wearing during the pandemic was also more common in countries with a high degree of social trust. It will be interesting to see how this behavioral norm changes as the pandemic comes to an end. Another behavior that may seem universal but that is actually socially constructed is kissing. When you think of who kisses whom, the first image is the Hollywood movie version of the sexy embrace between a woman and man. However this version is not the only way that kissing is socially constructed. We might also expect that parents and children kiss within the context of the family. In some cultures, even strangers kiss. In Latin America and France, the air kiss to the cheek is common, even when you don't know the person that well. In New Zealand, the Maoris share the hongi, a greeting in which they touch foreheads and breath together. This greeting acknowledges their interdependent connection with each other. The most famous interracial kiss on TV happened on Star Trek in 1968, only a year after the Supreme Court ruled that interracial marriage must be legalized in every state in the United States. In the times of Covid 19, we found that the kiss was quickly replaced by the ever-common elbow bump, and our understanding about who can kiss each other continues to evolve.

Even social categories that we might think of biological are socially constructed. When you consider gender, you may think that gender itself is fixed, that it's the same as sex assigned at birth, that society consists of women and men with specific physical characteristics and associated gender roles. However, social scientists assert that gender is socially constructed also. People identify as nonbinary, neither male nor female, and transgender, expressing a gender other than sex assigned at birth, as well as male or female. In addition, how we do gender changes over time. Consider for a moment how what we wear signals our gender. Who traditionally wears pants? Who traditionally wears dresses or skirts? These norms are challenged in different cultures and in different times. In Scotland, the kilt is part of the national dress for men. Hillary Clinton was considered unfeminine when she wore pantsuits. And Billy Porter wears elegant gowns all over town.

Finally, even though language, symbols, and behaviors are socially constructed, they are real in their consequences. This will be discussed in other videos, but here are two examples. Your gender significantly predicts your access to wealth. Women and nonbinary people are more likely to be poor, and there is a consistent gender pay gap all around the world.

In the United States, the first time that married women could own their own property occurred in 1848 in New York State. Perhaps more surprisingly, until the mid-1970s, women could not get credit without having a male cosigner, usually their husband or their father. And women are still often charged with higher interest rates than men.

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In a second example, some people believe that race is based on biological categories. However, scientists know that how we define race changes over time and place. In 1790, the US census used free white males, free white females, all other free persons, and slaves as racial categories. In 1970, the US census added a separate question related to being of Hispanic ethnicity. In 2020, the US census changed to allow people to select more than one race to describe their racial identification.

The social construction of race also continues to be hotly contested. For example, Barack Obama is known as our first Black president. His father, Barack Obama, Sr., was a successful Black Kenyan economist, and his mother, Ann Dunham, was an accomplished White American anthropologist. While he was running for president, some people said he wasn't Black enough, while others said he wasn't White enough. And beyond this exceptional example, scholars and people of color know that race matters.

Now we see that social constructions are shared understandings between groups of people. Social constructions can change over time or location, and they are real in their consequences. Because we create social constructions in our everyday interactions, we have hope for change. The next time you enjoy a walk in the rain, with or without your umbrella, think about it. [ Music ]

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