

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

Gwen Sharp: Hi, my name is Gwen Sharp!

Lisa Wade: And my name is Lisa Wade!

Gwen Sharp: We're going to discuss the concept of social construction and talk about why it's an important idea to understand. Social construction is one of the key concepts in sociology. It refers to the way we create meaning for social interaction with others.

In this slideshow, we're going to illustrate the depth to which our reality is shaped by shared social constructions by talking about how language. Symbols, color, food, gestures, and even people are socially constructed. We're then going to talk about why social constructions are so important and how social constructions change.

Lisa Wade: First, let's talk about language. A language is a system of sounds and sometimes, figures to which we collectively attach meaning. Everybody speaking a common language agrees that certain sounds mean certain things.

This is my cat Otis. And the written figures of English speakers agree stand for "cat." As you can see, the word "cat" and the animal "cat" are not at all similar. The word "cat" is nothing like the animal it refers to. But we all agree that the word "cat" stands for this animal. When someone makes the sound that we say when we see the letters C-A-T, we'll all imagine something similar to what we have here.

Gwen Sharp: Except probably not so fat.

Lisa Wade: Language is really just a set of symbols. We agree that certain arrangement of lines and curves represent a letter. And that the letter corresponds to a certain sound and that in certain combinations, those letters or sounds translate into things like "cats" so we can speak more broadly of symbols and social construction.

Gwen Sharp: A symbol is a thing that stands in for another thing. This is a symbol of America. People all around the world know that but it only stands for America. Because we've all agreed it does. It doesn't actually say "America" and there's not a map of the U.S. on it. It's only the fact that we all connect this image to the idea of America that makes it a symbol of America and makes us think of other symbols like bald eagles or the Statue of Liberty.

Two fun examples of the process of social construction are colors and food.

Lisa Wade: Color is socially constructed when certain colors are so shaded with certain ideas, things, or groups of people. For example, in the U.S. today, we associate blue with boys and pink with girls.

However it wasn't until about the 1950's, that our current gender color scheme became widely accepted.

Before that, the colors were reversed. In this vintage advice column, we learn that the generally accepted rule is pink for the boy and blue for the girl. 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. Now over time, of course, these gender rules had been reversed and today, everybody in the US knows that pink is for girls and blue is for boys. And if you doubt this, try giving your friend's infant son a pink shirt and see how it goes.

Gwen Sharp: We also socially construct what types of food should be eaten when. In the US, this would be widely recognized as breakfast. Though we eat all these products and spread and pork at other times of day, this particular group in foods cooked in these particular ways is generally considered appropriate for eating in the morning. We defined spaghetti, soup, and baked potatoes as things you eat later in the day.

Other cultures have different ideas about what foods are appropriate in the morning. This ad for the *Korea Times* encourages readers to wake up to the smell of coffee, the taste of your favorite breakfast, whatever wakes you up; which, in this case, is a bowl and vegetables and tofu in broth. Most people who grew up in the US would be startled if they were encouraged to eat vegetable soup for breakfast. But in Korea this is perceived as a perfectly normal breakfast, although it appears that coffee is culturally universal.

We also socially constructed connections between foods and certain cultures and groups of people. This, of course, is a fortune cookie which in the US is served at the end of the meal at Chinese restaurants. Everybody knows it's a Chinese food. Except that it isn't. American tourists are often surprised when they don't see Fortune cookies in China. It appears fortune cookies actually emerged in Japan, but this historical reality is unlikely to change our social construction of fortune cookies as Chinese at this point. They've been defined as Chinese food and they're served in Chinese restaurants regardless of their origin.

Lisa Wade: Many bodily gestures are socially constructed too. People of the same culture usually more or less agree on what gestures mean. The same gesture may be meaningless, but mean something else elsewhere. For example, in the US, this thumbs-up gesture means "all right!" or "good job!" but it has different meanings and other societies. Reportedly in Iraq, it means "up yours." This has caused some confusion for US troops in Iraq who get this gesture from Iraqis. Is it being used in the American "well-done" style or with the Iraqi "screw you" meaning"?

A little social construction can make a big difference. This image of Michelle and Barack Obama caused a lot of speculation in the US about the meaning of “fist bump.” The public conversation about how to interpret this gesture revealed what's usually taken for granted that a given gesture does not have an inherent meaning but is the result active social construction. That is, meaning doesn't come out of nowhere but is the result of people making claims about what something means.

Gwen Sharp: In addition to the social construction, language, symbols, gestures, and things like food, we socially constructed people according to their characteristics. In social constructing people, we create categories and ideas about what people in those categories are like.

For instance, in the US today, people generally believed that American Indians are more connected to nature more than other groups and women are inherently more interested in shopping than our men. You might recognize these as stereotypes which are forms of social constructions.

Lisa Wade: Now, social instructions matter because they're collectively held beliefs. That is, something has been successfully, socially constructed, when the majority of people and culture agree on its meaning. Once they've been collectively adopted, social constructions can be difficult to change.

For instance, we've all agreed that this piece of paper printed by the government is a one dollar bill and symbolizes a certain amount of buying power .You can individually decide it stands for, say, a hundred times as much buying power. But the cashier you explain this to you isn't gonna care too much about your redefinition of this symbol. The socially accepted meaning of this symbol has a power and an inertia that exist beyond an individual's ability to change it.

Gwen Sharp: Similarly, in the US you can't just decide to replace the thumbs-up gesture with this one and start using it whenever you usually give a thumbs up without causing people around you to get upset and probably getting fired. This holds for many socially constructed meanings.

For example in the US, no matter how much we dislike the fact that people are judged by the color of their skin, we can't just decide to personally ignore color and therefore expect racial inequality to disappear. The color of people's skin is consequential in our society. Whether we personally knowledge it or not and saying we don't see color, doesn't erase those consequences.

Of course social constructions do change all the time. Groups may actively try to renegotiate meanings. The Obama “fist bump” controversy is an example this. Some individuals on the political right trying to shape our collective understanding of what a “fist bump” means when they suggested that it was related to terrorism their efforts were generally mocked, however. Michelle Obama even went on “The View”

and recreated the “fist bump” with the hosts, so the attempt to undermine the Obama campaign by shaping the meaning of this gesture as a sign of terrorism mostly failed.

Lisa Wade: Another example is the way certain celebrities have been able to redefine pink as an appropriate color for men to wear. Don Johnson popularized pastel pink for men in the early 1980’s, but the trend didn’t last much beyond the “Miami Vice” era.

More recently a number influential hip-hop stars like Kanye West and Andre 3000 appeared in pink, making an acceptable color for heterosexual men to wear. Suddenly pink was an “in” color for men to wear again.

Social movements can be understood in part as collective efforts to change socially constructed ideas about the world. For example, both the civil rights and the feminist movement work to change socially constructed ideas about African-Americans and women. These civil rights protesters challenge the common perceptions that African-Americans are somehow less than fully human; a challenge echoed by the classic feminists claim “Feminism is the radical notion that women are people.”

Gwen Sharp: The last two examples illustrate why it’s important to understand the process of social construction. If the social constructions of black skin or female bodies are related to opportunities and constraints in our society, then those social constructions are extremely powerful. It shouldn’t surprise us then that socially constructed meanings are often the subject of intense struggles between different groups.