Sociology for a New Century

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Making Societies

The Historical Construction of Our World

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Constructing Historical Reality

Imagine a high school honors student who designs software as a part-time job, plays piano well enough to give private recitals, and is the captain of her debate team. But when her SAT scores turn out to be only average, she is wracked by self-doubt and personal crisis. Is she really intelligent? Are her aspirations to be a surgeon or music professor the silly fantasies of immaturity? Is all the hard work she has invested in making something of herself wasted on a noodlehead? If she were not a noodlehead after all but wise beyond her years, she might ask, "What does the SAT measure anyway?" She might wonder whether it measures only what she has learned in school. Her self-doubt would contend that it must measure "real" intelligence in some way. But her more reasonable side would ask what we mean when we say "intelligence." What if *intelligence* is just a word that refers to whatever the SAT measures? By common sense, intelligence is a quality of the brain, something that some people have more of than others. It is a "thing" that explains why some people get better grades at school, perform better at jobs, learn new skills, understand other people, and operate a VCR.

The idea that intelligence is an inherent, unchanging characteristic that people use to deal with all aspects of life is a relatively recent development. This "internal" conception of intelligence assumed in standardized tests contrasts with "contextual" conceptions. Internal conceptions treat intelligence as an essential quality of the mind—the ability to do abstract problems inside the head. In contrast, contextual conceptions treat intelligence as people's capacity to interact with the world around them. The distinction refers not only to what intelligence is but also how we recognize that some people are more intelligent than others. Internal intelligence can be recognized only by eliminating the influence of everything except the brain itself. Intelligence tests try to measure internal conceptions by reducing all contextual factors to a minimum, putting a subject working on his or her own in a room with paper, pencil, and a

proctor. Those who treat intelligence contextually hold that it is impossible to control all contextual factors and that the test-taking situation itself is a social context that affects how people perform. Rather than eliminate contextual factors, they argue that intelligence is a matter of how well a person negotiates the complexity of context such as the presence of other people; the kind of prior experience a person has had in similar situations; the sights, sounds, and texture of the situation; and the ambiguity or clarity of communication received. From the contextualist perspective, intelligence tests do not measure a person's general ability to interact in the real world but only that person's ability to do "abstract problems in one's head while under the surveillance of a stranger draped in great authority, who will later enter one's score into a semi-secret bureaucratic information system which may affect one's future educational and occupation life" (Andersen 1994:128).

What Is Intelligence and Why Does It Matter?

Psychologists have also challenged the notion of intelligence implicit in intelligence testing by questioning whether there is a single quality that people have or whether there are multiple intelligences. People who do well in mathematics may not do well in music; those who learn languages quickly may not understand how to navigate interpersonal relationships.[1] Our imaginary student can take solace in learning that the SAT measures do not predict very well how well she will do in college, on the job, or in life. But she still might have a nagging feeling that the SAT does measure something and that she does not measure up to her expectations.

There is a deeper issue about intelligence than whether it is internal or contextual or whether there is one or many: Why do people think of it as a "thing" at all? Our imaginary student may be surprised to learn that

[1]Howard Gardner (1983) identified seven distinct types of intelligence: (1) linguistic (involved in writing, reading, telling stories, and doing crossword puzzles), (2) logical-mathematical (involved in patterns, categories, relationships, math problems, strategy games, and experiments), (3) bodily-kinesthetic (involved in athletics, dancing, and crafts such as sewing and woodworking), (4) spatial (involved in solving mazes and jigsaw puzzles, drawing, and daydreaming), (5) musical (involved in singing and making music; often discriminating listeners), (6) interpersonal (involved in leadership skills, communication, understanding of others' feelings), and (7) intrapersonal (involved in self-motivation).

many societies have no concept of the thing American society calls intelligence. In fact, society has not always had any such concept. There was a very distinct historical process by which all the complex and multifaceted qualities that enable people to perform tasks well or poorly were lumped together as a "thing," an entity that has a name—intelligence.

The concept of intelligence in the English language goes back to the 14th century, when it referred to people's general understanding. In the 16th century, it was first used to distinguish people from each other but described acquired knowledge, as in military intelligence, rather than innate ability. In the centuries that followed, public discourse increasingly cited intelligence as a quality that justified inequality, for example, the argument that intelligent people should govern. Intelligence also took on a more exclusively cognitive meaning in these centuries, creating a distinction between head and heart, mind and body, reason and emotion (Williams 1983).

When a teacher told our imaginary student that perhaps she scored lower than she hoped because she was a member of a minority group, she was not sure whether to take offense. If she delved into the history of intelligence, she would find that people created the concept and then figured out a way to measure it in part to prove that poor and minority people were inferior. Many of the original designers of intelligence testing also were motivated by proving that some men were smarter than women, whites smarter than nonwhites, and higher-class people smarter than lower-class people. Intelligence tests were not designed to identify individual traits and then generalized to gender, racial, and class groups. Intelligence was assumed to be a group trait, and tests were designed to prove it (Andersen 1994; Gould 1981).

In the 19th century, Herbert Spencer's doctrine of "survival of the fittest" gave a scientific luster to the popular belief that it was natural for the poor to suffer. Spencer said of the poor that "the whole effort of nature is to get rid of such, to clear the world of them, and make room for better" (Andersen 1994:121).[2] About the same time, English biologist Francis Galton began searching for a method to distinguish the talented from untalented. Assuming that "eminence" indicated inherent talent, he discovered that people listed in biographical dictionaries of distinguished men of achievement tended to clump in families. Even though

[2]Darwin used the term *fitness* to mean the ability to reproduce, not the quality of life that organisms lived. By this definition, the higher fertility rates of the lower classes would qualify them as more fit.

he acknowledged that the children of the upper classes had greater opportunities, he argued that the pattern was explained by innate ability. Because such evidence did not meet the standards of scientific proof, he set about measuring biological variables such as head size, sensory acuity, keenness of sight and hearing, color sense, and judgment in bisecting a line but found that they did not correlate with other measures of intelligence or achievement.

Although Galton failed to find a biological basis for achievement, he inspired the modern science of psychometrics, the science of intelligence testing. For example, a statistician named Charles Spearman created a concept called *g*, which stood for "general intelligence" when he developed a statistical technique designed to identify a single dimension of data. Once it had a name and a way to measure it, intelligence could be thought of as a real thing. The qualities that are commonly attributed to intelligence—that is, it is distributed along a single, hierarchical continuum from low to high; people are distributed according to a bell-shaped curve, with a lot of people in the middle and a few at each end; and people who score high on one measure of it score high on others—are all qualities of the instruments used to measure it, not necessarily some "it" in nature. People do not naturally fall into a distribution that looks like a bell-shaped curve. The people who designed the first intelligence tests tinkered with the tests, eliminating questions and adding others until results fit the curve. The bell-shaped curve is more a quality of the test than any inherent human quality (Andersen 1994; Gould 1981; Hacking 1999). In other words, the qualities by which people generally characterize intelligence are not natural qualities of humans that science discovered and then measured but were invented by scientists who invented measuring devices that conformed to their preconceptions.

After considering all this, it may be small solace for our student to know that even if the SAT does not really measure her abilities, the admissions office of the college she wants to attend, the people who distribute financial aid, and her parents and friends think it does. Even if intelligence is not "real" in some ultimate sense, it is certainly real in its consequences. People in a position to dramatically affect her life treat intelligence as very real.

Intelligence illustrates the questions addressed in this book: (1) How do the "things" that we experience in social life and study in social science get created? I will argue that these "things" did not exist in nature and then get discovered. Even if people's brains have different capacities, why do some societies treat particular qualities of mind as "things" and distinguish them from other "things" such as emotion, sensory acuity, and ability to make decisions? (2) How do these "things" become understood as explanations of people's place in society? How does intelligence come to be understood as an explanation for why some people have better houses, take nicer vacations, and get more satisfying jobs? (3) How do some "things" become associated with other "things" that are used to lump people into groups? How does intelligence get connected to "things" such as race or gender to characterize groups of people? Why are people with one kind of body—men—assumed to have more of "it" than those with another kind of body—women? Why are groups of people with darker skin sometimes assumed to have less of "it" than groups with lighter skin? (4) Why does the understanding that these "things" are real have such a powerful influence on people's lives and so doggedly resist change? Individuals labeled as lacking intelligence often accept such a designation as a reasonable justification for why they have harder lives than those labeled as having more of it. (5) How have some groups invented and used these "things" to establish and preserve their privileged place in society? How have other groups challenged and affected the outcome of creating such "things"? Why was a concept such as intelligence useful to educated white men in subordinating the social position of minorities, women, and the poor? How have the protests of minorities, women, and the poor against characterizations of themselves as less intelligent affected the prevailing concept of intelligence itself? (6) Can learning that these "things" do not exist in nature but are historically invented help weaken the power that some groups have over others? If the concept of intelligence is used to sustain the dominance of whites over racial minorities, men over women, and the wealthy over the poor, can a challenge to the concept itself facilitate greater social equality? Such a challenge would not change the mental capacities that anyone has but might reconstruct the social processes by which such capacities are assessed and what consequences flow from such assessments.

The Social Construction of Reality

Sociologists call the historical process by which our experiences become put into categories and treated as things the **social construction of reality** (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Hacking 1999; Pollner 1987; Zerubavel 1991). People deal with what they experience in terms of categories, then act on the basis of those categories. Sociologists want to understand how

people came to understand intelligence as a category different from other categories such as emotion, knowledge, sensitivity, or character. While much of education teaches students what is real and not real, sociology contributes to education by teaching students to understand how things came to be understood as real.

The "coin" of sociological knowledge has two sides, making familiar what people do not understand and gaining new understanding of the familiar. Most people come to sociology to learn about what they do not understand—such as why people commit crimes or why some acts are defined as criminal; why some people have more wealth, power, and respect than others; why some organizations work more efficiently than others; why racial, class, and gender oppression persists; and why people of different cultures misunderstand each other. But sociology also helps in "peeling back the covers" surrounding the very familiar—how people carry on a conversation; how gestures and motions affect interaction; how racial, class, and gender inequality is acted out and perpetuated interpersonally; how emotions are social as well as psychological; and how the very categories that underlie all social life are created. An important aspect of gaining deeper insight into the world of the familiar is the notion that "reality" itself arose through human activities. Things that people assume "just are"—such as time, space, gender, class, and race—arise through human activities and could be quite different if circumstances were otherwise. Social construction implies that society is not something apart from "reality" and that "reality" is not something outside human interaction; it is constituted from human ideas and interaction.

For sociology, the social construction of reality is less about some ultimate philosophical sense of what is "real" or "not real" than it is about how people explain the world they live in and whether that world can be changed. To say that something is socially constructed means that it cannot be explained in terms of "it's just there" or "it's natural." Sociologists can explain how the concept of intelligence arose historically. It is not just there. Nor was it "out there" waiting to be discovered, even though certain discoveries, such as the fact that behavior is in the brain, not in bodily humors, influenced the process. The sense of what is real does not come just from what is "out there." That is not to say that reality is just "made up" or a figment of the imagination. A rock can hurt you regardless of what it is called, but if people had not constructed the concept of "rock," we would not distinguish the hard, round gray object on the ground from the soft gray round thing in the bird's nest. Its "rockness" is

socially constructed. Sociologists can explain why the gray thing on the ground is understood as "rock" or "holy shrine" or "a work of art." For intelligence, the issue is not whether people all have the same abilities to reason mathematically, remember facts, or comprehend what they read. It is why some societies explain those differences in terms of a single, inherent underlying "thing" called intelligence and why the way these differences are constructed has consequences for people's lives.

This book examines how social reality has been constructed in **Anglo-European societies.**[3] These are societies in Europe or former European settler colonies such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. This book explores how the realities that people in those societies usually take for granted have been created—how concepts of time, space, race, gender, and class have been constructed. Time is commonly thought of as something "out there" that clocks and calendars measure, place is assumed to be the "out there" where social activities take place, races and genders are defined as genetic in origin, the differences between men and women or people of different races are often explained as natural, and inequalities in wealth and power are attributed to natural abilities and talents. Insofar as all these things are seen as natural, it is assumed there is no need for a social or historical explanation for why they are the way they are. Both common sense and much social science take for granted what is considered natural and disregard any need to explain such things.

The social origins of these things are often forgotten, allowing people to think that their sense of time and place and their definition of race/ethnicity, gender, and class are the only ways it could be. If the "facts of life" that are most taken for granted have social, not natural, origins, they do not have to be the way they are. People make things the way they are. To be sure, some people have a greater influence on the way they are than others; that is, some people have more power than others. But when members of a society take social reality as a given—something that is just there, not something that is constructed—they participate in its perpetuation. No doubt, there is much of reality that most

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[3] I use the term *Anglo-European* to refer to societies in Europe and those of former European settler colonies such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Since the book emphasizes the importance of categories, I avoid using the term *Western* both because it is inexact and implies that there is a coherent obverse category *Eastern*, a concept that makes no sociological sense. When I refer to Europe proper, I will say so explicitly if it is not clear from the context.

people want to perpetuate, but equally certain there are things they want to change. It is hoped that by realizing how much taken-for-granted realities are historically constructed, we can become empowered to change the things we want to change.

Essentialist Views of Reality

Time can be bought and goes forward. Space is something out there independent of us. People are black or white or yellow or red. They are either men or women. They are rich or poor because the most talented and hardest working are appropriately rewarded. In Anglo-European societies, both common sense and much social science take these statements for granted. But each of these statements might seem bizarre to people at certain other times or other cultures. Common sense in Anglo-European societies takes an **essentialist perspective** and assumes that everything that we see and touch is merely a manifestation of a deeper essence. Every chair embodies some essential "chairness"; every woman is but one example of "womanness." One can then establish whether any one concrete object is "really" a chair or not. Is a piece of art that looks like a chair, created by an artist to rest in a museum and never intended to have anyone sit in it, really a chair? Depending on what a person thinks is the essence of "chairness," one could argue that it is or is not really a chair. People generally assume that they can distinguish between a real authentic chair and something that only looks like a chair and that such a distinction is very real.

From the essentialist perspective, things are the way they are by nature (although sometimes "nature" can be defined by humans, as in the nature of a chair).[4] Within essentialist thinking, the essence also serves as an explanation. Why does a particular object in my office have four legs and a seat? The essentialist answers, "Because it is a chair." Why do many women prefer to stay at home and care for children rather than

[4]*Nature* is typically used in two ways: (1) to mean not created by human activities, as in "pristine nature." This usually carries a connotation of something living, although geology and astronomy are also considered natural sciences. This is the meaning of nature in the "nature versus nurture" debate over human behavior, for example, whether men are naturally more aggressive than women. (2) "Nature" is also used to describe inherent features of things whether they are made by humans or not, as in "the nature of the game" or "It's only natural to feel that way." Many usages do not distinguish between two senses, such as "human nature." When I mean one sense but not the other, I will state so explicitly.

work in paid jobs? "Because they are women." Why do men commit more crimes than women? An essentialist perspective would assume that it has something to do with the nature of maleness. "Men are naturally more aggressive than women," they might say. Some versions might attribute the differences to an intermediate cause such as genetics, but they still assume that something in the nature of being male creates aggression.

For essentialist thinking, races, genders, and measurements of time and space just "are." People can change how they treat races or what rights and opportunities people of different races have but not the "fact" that races are distinct groups or that each person is a member of one race. Even a superficial examination of other societies reveals that nearly all qualities normally attributed to natural reality are absent in at least some other societies. For Anglo-European society, time is linear, moving from the past to the present to the future, but people in many societies think of time as cyclical; some languages do not even have past or future tense. If time is naturally linear, there is no need to explain why it is linear. But if some societies treat time as primarily cyclical, that is, repeating itself, like the seasons, we not only must understand why that is so but also ask why people treat it as linear. If people from different cultures experience difficulty communicating with each other because they have a different sense of time, or if the linear sense of time affects how people structure their lives or arrange social institutions, the need for explanation becomes even more compelling.

Space and hierarchy also differ so radically among cultures that they cannot be natural nonsocial realities. Like time, people usually think of space in abstract terms, particularly abstract dimensions—length, breadth, and height—within which activities happen. But for most societies, the space in which an activity is set is indistinguishable from the activity itself. People today think of races as people of different physical characteristics, such as skin color, but in 19th-century America, people with white skin and blond hair from Sweden and Ireland were considered different races from Anglo-Saxon Americans. While men and women are distinguished from each other in virtually all societies, the characterization of men or women and the rights, rules, and responsibilities expected of them differ greatly among societies. Anglo-European society before the past few hundred years considered men and women to be biologically one category, not as biological opposites. Some societies have more than two genders, defining a category of people that might share genital characteristics with men or women but who are thought of

as fundamentally different. Why Anglo-European society changed to treat men and women as biological opposites and why it does not treat people with ambiguous sexual features as a category in themselves are issues that sociologists need to explain.

The Constructionist View of Reality

In contrast to the essentialist view, the **constructionist perspective** assumes that reality is created by society. Even our sense of what is real does not come just from what is "out there"; we take what our senses register and define what the reality is. There is no "chairness" "out there" outside of society and existing prior to society, but rather people decided to categorize all the things that have four legs (or occasionally three or five), a back, and a seat as chairs. They then decided to distinguish chairs from stools, benches, couches, and pieces of art. In this perspective, it is fruitless to debate whether something is "really" a chair because there is no essence of chair to compare a particular actual object with. If people agree that something is a chair and treat it as a chair, from the constructionist perspective, it is, for all practical purposes, a chair. "Reality" depends on the categories we form and the names we give them.

How Real?

Some constructionist perspectives, especially those called *postmodern*, treat constructed realities as "only" constructed; they hold that nothing is real, that everything is illusion, a fantasy of the imagination. That is not the perspective here. In my view, there is no other essential reality that is "more real" than constructed reality. The difference between an essentialist and a constructionist perspective is not a matter of "how real" things are imputed to be but how we explain that reality. Sociologists William I. Thomas and Dorothy Swaine Thomas articulated what has become known as the **Thomas principle**: "If [people] define situations as real, then they are real in their consequences" (Thomas and Thomas 1928:52). Socially constructed realities are just as real, just as consequential, as if they were determined solely by nature.

The more people act as though something is real, the more consequential that definition of reality becomes. For example, people have long assumed that races are real and that each person is, in fact, really white, African American, Asian, American Indian, or whatever. Most biologists, however, believe that the concept of race has no biological foundation. There are no genetic boundaries between those people that societies define as racially distinct. But to label people as black or white—or yellow or brown—has great social consequences. If a person gets a better job, a different mate, more respect, greater trust, or is killed because of his or her race, the consequences are very real indeed. Saying that race is socially constructed does not make it any less real than if it were natural. But the explanation of why racial differences exist and the prospects for changing racial structures would differ profoundly.

Defining Reality: Categories and Language

When our senses get input, the brain mentally pigeonholes the physical stimulus into learned categories. Depending on the context, you could see the same object as a chair, an art object, or a piece of firewood. When we interact with others, we make sense of whatever we are talking about in terms of those categories. You could categorize the same person as professor, woman, African American, friend, family member, or any combination. Some categories are so taken for granted that people do not think of them as categories but as real "things." Take the week, for example. Although it is merely an aggregation of 7 days, people treat the week as a thing. We have good weeks and bad weeks, busy ones and easy ones. Weeks structure much of our lives. Working on the weekend, going out on a date on Thursday, or having your favorite television show switched to a new night feels unsettling. We do not dismiss such events by saying that the week is just a social construction anyway. It is similar with space categories such as inches, feet, and miles. People are a little more aware that these are constructed because most of world uses a different set of categories based on the meter. But they rarely consider that some societies have no standard measurements that they use to measure most kinds of distance but have many kinds of measurements for different kinds of activities.[5] Racial, gender, and class categories are especially important to understand.

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[5]Most people use nonstandard measures of distance more than they realize. Some parts of the country measure travel distances in time units rather than distance (for example, when asked how far from work they live, they will say, "Ten minutes"), while other regions might answer in blocks or miles. Most people can probably convert those distances into miles. For specific settings, we often use specific measurements; for example, people in a large office building might think of how many offices they work from someone else. The English language still includes clichés to describe distance such as "a stone's throw."

Language, especially naming things, is one of the most important ways that sociologists have studied how people construct reality in everyday life. Common sense holds that "things" exist in nature and that people name them when they discover or decide to use them. But social scientists who take a constructionist perspective emphasize that the relationship of discovery and naming more often works in the opposite direction—that naming can make things seem real. People ordinarily do not notice things until they have a name. Take colors, for example. The color spectrum in physics is continuous from ultraviolet to infrared. There are no natural divisions distinguishing one color from another. Anglo-European society divides the spectrum into six basic colors: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple—the English-language names given to ranges of color. We can make finer distinctions, either by putting two objects that are similar next to each other or by training the eye to distinguish between finer distinctions that have names such as crimson, scarlet, or cardinal. But most people, when they see what trained eyes would call crimson, scarlet, or cardinal, see red. In contrast, the Shona culture of Zimbabwe has three colors they call *cipsuka, cicena,* and *citema,* while the Bassa culture of Liberia has only two colors, *hui* and *ziza* (Newman 2000). *Hui* includes all the parts of the spectrum English designates as red, orange, and yellow, while *ziza* covers green, blue, and purple. Because English has separate names for red and yellow, people in English-speaking cultures actually see them as distinct colors. For the Bassa, what Anglo-Europeans see as red and yellow would be seen as two variations of the same thing. So names can influence how people perceive something as natural as color. This is not just a matter of mere labels. People from different cultures treat colors in different categories such as red or *cipsuka* or *hui* and, insofar as colors matter, react differently to them.

Do categories dictate *what* we see or only *how* we see things? The answer is really, both. Sometimes it is relatively simple to distinguish between how something is socially constructed and the objects that are constructed (Hacking 1999). Some people have always been able to do mathematics, remember facts, or comprehend what they read better than others even before there was a concept of intelligence. And in some societies, people who were considered gifted in these skills were given privileges, and those found deficient were stigmatized (but there were also cases when the gifted were punished, as were many alleged witches). For these kinds of categories, the way they are socially constructed affects more *how* we see them. Whether we see people who cannot do mathematics, remember facts, or comprehend reading as genetically deficient, a member of a minority group, or the victim of a poor environment has profound effects on how they are treated but does not create the objects that the concepts refer to. Even without the concept of intelligence, some people would be able to do mathematics, remember facts, or comprehend reading better than others. But when the concept exists in a culture, people can use the concept to achieve goals they would have been otherwise unable to attain. The concept of measurable intelligence has been used against those individuals and groups deemed less intelligent. In 1916, Lewis Terman, one of the designers of modern intelligence tests, explained how he hoped they would be used:

> It is safe to predict that in the near future intelligence tests will bring tens of thousands of these high-grade defectives under the surveillance and protection of society. This will ultimately result in curtailing the reproduction and of feeble-mindedness and in the elimination of an enormous amount of crime, pauperism, and industrial inefficiency. (Gould 1981:179)

More recently, Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray generated considerable controversy by arguing that lower intelligence explains the economic failures of minorities and lower-class people (Herrnstein and Murray 1994). The controversy raged not only over their alleged racism but also over their policy recommendations that educational programs that tried to close the gap between races and classes were fruitless (Fischer et al. 1996).

Other social phenomena have no object other than what is socially constructed. Unlike the ability to remember facts or call the object we sit in a chair, the "things" referred to by concepts such as national states, the week, philosophy, schools, television, cars, and numbers would not be there if they had not been socially constructed. Most social institutions (except perhaps the family), abstract ideas, and technological inventions are constructed in terms of *what* they are, not just *how* people perceive them.

The distinction between *what* we perceive and *how* we perceive can be qualified in two ways. First, many of the things that have objects existing independently of their social constructions might not be noticed if they were not socially constructed. Some of the abilities people associate with intelligence would be less noticed in societies that lack a conception of intelligence or have specific institutions devoted to improving it, as schools do. Urban, industrial societies do not rank people according to their ability to estimate physical distance, although societies where food

is procured by throwing spears or shooting arrows might very well recognize this type of intelligence.

Second, *how* things are constructed can in fact cause the objects that are constructed to change. If social institutions treat some races as though they are less intelligent than others, the members of the first race are likely to perform better in intelligence tests, thereby "proving" that the races are "really" different. So the "objective" evidence that they are less intelligent is caused by the assumption that they are different. In such cases, it is difficult to separate the social construction of intelligence in racial terms from the object to which the concept of intelligence refers.

Gradients and Bounded Categories

Why do some societies rank people along a continuum from genius to imbecile? Why do people divide society into distinct racial categories? Are there really two and only two genders? Because reality is defined by the categories people use, it is important to understand how categories are formed and the **logic of how categories are constructed.** By the logic of how they are constructed, I mean the formal characteristics of how categories relate to each other. Some categories are treated as exclusive from each other with no overlap (like people usually think of gender—a person is required to be either male or female but not both, although we will later see it does not have to be that way). Or can categories overlap, as teacher and student do in large universities where teaching assistants are typically both?

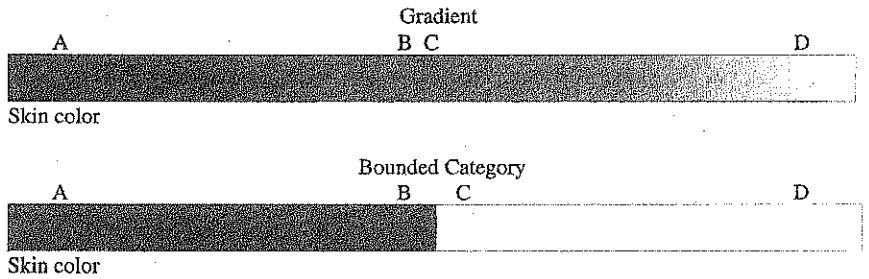
One especially important aspect in the logic of constructing categories concerns whether categories are gradients or bounded categories. **Gradients** can be defined along a continual slope with only fuzzy divisions. Anglo-European societies generally treat intelligence like that. Intelligence tests are designed on that assumption, giving people numerical scores rather than determining whether people can perform specific skills.

In contrast, other categories are bounded. **Bounded categories** have distinct, rigid boundaries. Intelligence used to be treated more in bounded categories than it is now. Early in the 20th century, H. H. Goddard, director of research at the Vineland School for Feeble-Minded Girls and Boys in New Jersey, invented the term *moron* (from the Greek word for *foolish*) to distinguish those children who could learn from "idiots," who could not master spoken language, and "imbeciles," who could not learn to read and write. These words have lost their technical

FIGURE 1.1

Boundaries and Gradients

Figure 1.1 Gradients and Bounded Categories



meaning and are now derogatory words in common language (Gould 1981).

In the United States, race is treated as a bounded category, not a gradient. As mentioned earlier, people are generally classified by others as belonging to one race, and they are considered more like other people in that category than people outside of it, even if they are close in skin color.

Figure 1.1 illustrates the difference between gradient and bounded categories. Physically, skin color is like the first rectangle, the gradient. It varies along a continuum from very dark to very light, with people at every point in between. If you think of skin color as gradient, people with skin colors B and C are considered very similar. However, U.S. society has treated skin color as a bounded category. A person is placed on one side of the boundary or the other, as in the second rectangle in Figure 1.1. Although skin colors B and C appear to the senses as in the first rectangle, they are treated as though they match the second one. Because U.S. society has constructed race as a bounded category, people with skin colors A and B are put in one category and thought of as being alike; C and D are similarly put in one category and thought of as being alike, but B and C are put in different categories and thought of as being different. One is "black" and one is "white." There is no gray in this categorization. Conventionally, anyone with one white parent and one African American parent was defined as African American. When American states had overtly discriminatory laws, a person with any African American ancestors was defined black.

Not all societies construct racial categories as bounded categories. In Brazil, for example, although people with dark complexions are some-

times discriminated against, races are conceptualized as a gradient, not a bounded category. A disproportionate number of dark people are poor, but if a person becomes wealthier, he or she is understood by others to become whiter. Race works very differently in the United States and Brazil because of the way that racial categories are constructed. Skin color is just one of the many characteristics that our senses perceive as gradients but that many societies treat as bounded categories. Anglo-European society also treats some characteristics as gradients that others divide into bounded categories. Many cultures have rites of passage that mark the transition from one stage of life to another. Rites of passage, such as Bar Mitzvah or Confirmation, school graduation, marriage, and retirement, mark the entry into specialized roles such as religious membership, school, family, or work rather than comprehensive age-based identities. In contrast, in Anglo-European societies, stages such as childhood, adolescence, adulthood, or old age blend gradually into one another. Similarly, in contrast to many societies with rigid class boundaries between peasants, nobility, and royalty, the dominant American culture defines class as a gradient from impoverished to wealthy. While most Americans "see" the same categories of race and gender, how they "see" the class structure varies greatly. Some people, especially poorer people, would see a family with a police officer and firefighter earning a combined $60,000 annual income as upper middle class; others, especially wealthy people, would see the same family as lower middle class or working class.

The Consequences of Categories: The Case of the Family

One reason to scrutinize categories is to reveal what is omitted from them and to understand the consequences of those omissions. For example, some people argue, in an essentialist manner, that some groups of people who live together are "real" families and other groups are not. Those in "real" families receive economic benefits from employers and governments as well as certain legal rights and social respect that other groupings do not receive.

What groupings of people count as a family, and what groupings do not? For proponents of the "traditional family," the left column of Table 1.1 lists statements that describe what families are supposed to be like or are supposed to do; the right column lists the logical opposite of the statements in the left column. Thus, the traditional family regulates sexuality and raises children. All societies have groupings that accomplish these tasks, and biology may even influence these arrangements.

TABLE 1.1
The Category of Family in Anglo-European Culture

What a Family Is	*What a Family Is Not*
Joined by love rather than material gain	Joined by material gain
Raises children	Does not raise children
Committed to each other for life	Not committed for life
Adults in group recognized by government or religion as married	Adults in group not recognized by government or religion
At least two adults	Less than or more than two adults
Adults are male and female	Adults in some combination other than one male and one female
Adults have sex only with each other	Adults have sex with others outside group
Is the unit within which people live private lives	People live their private lives alone or in some other kind of unit

But if we examine other societies, we see that the definition of family summarized in Table 1.1 is not inevitable. Anglo-European society is one of the few societies in human history to emphasize romantic love as the basis for marriage. Arranged marriages are still common in very large societies such as those in India. In 1997, fewer than half of all American families had children under age 18 living at home, and single parents are found in more than a quarter of families that do have children at home (Casper and Bryson 1998). Many societies do not expect mothers and fathers to do most of the child rearing. The Nayar of the Kerala region in India expect the mother's brother, rather than the biological father, to share in raising children; the mother's brother also passes property to his sister's male children. The biological father has no responsibility to his children except to acknowledge paternity (Gough 1974). But on what basis can it be said that some of these families are more "real" families than others? Only by social constructions of what makes a "real" family. The differences in how various societies define families indicate that the family is socially constructed, and a constructionist perspective asks how the

family came to be defined in these ways. The definition of the traditional family needs to be explained, not taken as inevitable.

Even if the traditional family is a worthy ideal, the deviations tolerated by its proponents are inconsistent. Why is a legally married heterosexual couple that has no plans of ever having children considered more of a family than a homosexual couple that is raising the biological children of one parent? Why is a single mother with her children less of a family than a married couple with adopted children? Is a couple that marries so one spouse can immigrate to the United States less of a family than a couple that marries because the woman accidentally got pregnant? There is no neat boundary between family and not-family because a family is not a preexisting "thing," and the concept of family has been constructed historically in response to a broad variety of factors. Its construction is continuing today (Holstein and Gubrium 1994).

The Process of Social Construction

How does historical construction of reality take place? How does something that nobody thinks of as a thing become seen as a "real" thing? Let's take a case to illustrate the process: the way that we came to have a week with 7 days, drawing from Zerubavel's (1985) account. The week is a regular sequence of days—in our case, 7 days—in which each day has a name and a social meaning. For example, people generally attach a different meaning to having dinner with someone on Wednesday than Saturday night. Religions define some days of the week as sacred and prohibit or require certain activities. When humans first arose as a species, they probably did not have a regular interval of days like our week. They probably hunted and gathered when they needed to and probably had religious ceremonies on an irregular or seasonal basis. Since they did not know how to count, they probably felt no need for exact rhythms among daily activities. When they started to grow food rather than hunt and gather, it is likely that some people traded extra grain for objects that other people possessed. They may have found that it was easier if they knew in advance when everyone would come together to trade. Depending on what kind of grain most of them grew and how long it could be stored before spoiling, they may have slowly regularized the trading schedule to be every 5 days, 7 days, 8 days, or whatever.

It was probably traders who created "Market Day" to make trading easier and more reliable. About the same time, priests, who were the most powerful leaders in society, began to name and add meaning to the sequence, treating it as a "thing." That is, they reified it—made it a real "thing." **Reification** means that "facts" that were originally merely someone's ideas, speculations, or theories take on a reality of their own. It is the process by which things become real. It is important to remember that reification is a *process*, an activity that specific people do, not just something that happens without intention. The first step that people take is to create a "thing." Following "Market Day," the priests may have proclaimed a day of rest, "Rest Day." In some cases, they began to name not just "Market Day" and "Rest Day" but all the days, using the conventions of their culture, which often meant drawing meaning from nature. So they named days after planets, "Sun Day" and "Moon Day." People began to think of the cluster of 7 days as a thing, a week. Weeks could then be given attributes that we give to things. There could be good weeks and bad weeks, busy weeks and easy weeks, even short weeks and long weeks. As "things," weeks could be talked about as "doing." They could drag on, they could cause conflict, or they could structure people's lives.

What originally was an exact rhythm for market days and holy days every 7 days became a rhythm for other activities. As the names of the days were repeated on a 7-day cycle, people developed a sense of a week. Once created, the week has become a compelling reality around which people organize their lives. When governmental institutions emerged, their meetings were organized by the 7-day cycle. Thousands of years later, when universities were created, their classes were held on that schedule. The week has thus been a social reality for a long time.

Naming is a very important part of reification. It makes the category or activity seem "real" so that people forget that it was created by people. Who thinks any more about why we have 7 days in our week? The category or activity takes on a life of its own as if it were a part of nature. When people forget that somebody created something, they start to treat it as something "out there." They do not think about how anybody created Sunday or Monday but just assume that they are part of reality, external to or outside of them. Not only have the days of the week been disconnected from the people who originally created them, but all social reality has—the discipline of sociology, the categories of professor and student, the institution of the university, and even the concept of society itself.

Like the days of the week, other social constructions feel like "things." Why? We come into this world knowing nothing, just a vague patchwork

of drives and urges, but we soon learn what is real. No one tells us that somebody in the past decided that there would be 7 days in a week for Anglo-European society or that other societies have 4, 5, 9, or 19 days. Instead, we learn what day of the week it *is* now. We learn that Monday comes after Sunday as a "fact," not as a social construction. We learn that Friday is a holy day if we are raised Muslim, Saturday if we are Jewish, and Sunday if we are Christian. When we get a little older, we learn that having dinner on Wednesday has a very different connotation than having dinner on Saturday. We learn these things not as "mere" facts but as the way it is. The days of the week become a taken-for-granted part of reality, a piece of knowledge, not a matter of opinion or of human invention.

After an activity or category is created and named, it begins to become a principle by which other activities or categories are structured. Social realities feel real and are treated as though they are real, and for all practical purposes, they *are* real because they have been socially constructed as real through the process of reification. This book is really all about *how* reification takes place and what consequences it has on people's lives.

When reified patterns are bound up in organizational clusters that perform vital social tasks, they become institutionalized. **Institutionalization** goes beyond reification, by which things feel real. Institutionalization integrates reified patterns into activities and categories. The weekly schedule is now institutionalized into every facet of life —from when people wash clothes to when they exercise to when they work or worship. To change the week would require changing the schedules for virtually everything. When activities and events are institutionalized, they become so pervasive and knit together so many aspects of life that they feel part of nature. People have forgotten their human origins and rarely imagine reality being any other way until they discover the human origins of those things they take for granted and gain some appreciation for how they might be different.

History

Although social reality is constructed, it is not created from scratch. People construct new realities from old realities, so whatever is constructed has a continuity with what came before. Institutionalized realities become the taken-for-granted context to which new innovations are adapted. The people who first objectified the days of the week acted in the context of a trading society dominated by religious leaders who used existing knowledge of the cosmos to name the days. Different societies with different configurations of activities, knowledge, and leadership created different kinds of weeks. Universities invented a new division of time, the semester (and later the quarter), but they constructed it on the basis of weeks, which already existed. When radio was invented, they scheduled programs on set days of the week. When television later arose, after some early experimentation, they adopted the same type of scheduling as the radio. In other words, all these organizations changed things as little as possible to achieve what they wanted to achieve.

This sort of continuity means that while society certainly changes dramatically and quickly, there is still stability. The 7-day week has existed for thousands of years and resisted attempts to change it. The double cycle of 12-hour half days has existed since Babylonian times, although anyone designing a system of hours today would probably design it differently. Schools operate on an annual plan designed to make it possible for children to help with summer harvests, even though America has been much more industrial than agrarian for nearly a century. These stable features of social life are examples of **path dependence**, the tendency for innovations once they are institutionalized to reproduce the same pattern over time. Imagine how explorers tramped across a wilderness seeking to get from one place to another, beating down a rough path where resistance was the least. Pioneers followed in wagons, with each group burrowing deeper wheel tracks into the soil and over the rocks. When automobiles became common in the 20th century, the wagon paths were paved. Eventually, some were widened into national highways where the cities had developed along the original explorers' routes. The highways might have followed more efficient routes more suitable for speedy cars and trucks, but by this time, houses, stores, factories, and farms had sprung up along the way. As a result, highways take what seem to be senseless routes sometimes entirely differently from where they would go if they were developed from scratch today. So it is with social life. Each generation travels the social paths of the previous generations.

Path dependence helps us understand some things that otherwise would not make sense today. Many aspects of inequality organized by class, race, and gender were originally developed within very different contexts than those that exist today but became the basis for other kinds of inequality (Tilly 1998). For example, as will be elaborated in Chapter 4, racism was developed to help legitimate North American slavery, but af-

ter slavery was abolished, racism has been used for many other purposes. In the late 19th century, southern farmers and northern manufacturers found that they could use racism to divide agricultural laborers and industrial workers. Meanwhile, farmers, miners, and industrialists in the West were creating a racism against Asians, especially Chinese. It is not coincidental that anti-Chinese stereotypes were similar to those about African Americans of the same period: They were lazy, ignorant, promiscuous, violent, and irresponsible. The rhetoric of racism could be transferred from one group to another. The anti-Chinese racists did not have to reinvent the wheel.

Dominant Institutions and Power

This last example illustrates another important point: Not everyone plays the same role in constructing reality. The intensified racism of the late 19th century resulted from the actions of some groups much more than others. What becomes socially constructed is disproportionately the result of dominant institutions in society. **Institutions** are groups of organizations, categories, and ways of doing things that do something important in society. Religion, education, the economy, government, family, mass media, and medicine are all institutions in modern society, though not all societies have the same set of institutions. Some institutions have more power than others. **Power** is the ability of some actors to influence the behavior of others and includes all forms of influence, from persuasion (such as advertising) to authority (such as the professor who requires students to write papers) to coercion (such as a robber who forces someone to turn over his or her money). **Dominant institutions** are those institutions in society that wield the most power, that is, that most profoundly influence other institutions and affect people's lives. In American society, economic institutions have more effect on religious institutions than vice versa. Even though religious institutions profoundly affect the lives of their dedicated adherents, they do not affect the entire population as pervasively as economic institutions. Different societies in different eras have different dominant institutions. For a thousand years or more, the Christian church was the most dominant institution in European society.

One clue as to which institution is dominant in any society is the one that builds the largest and most monumental buildings. In medieval Europe, the largest buildings were the majestic and still stunning cathedrals erected by the Catholic Church. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the largest buildings were government buildings, such as the stately U.S. Capitol or the exquisite Chateau de Versailles where the French kings held court. In the 20th century, the grandiose glass and steel skyscrapers that house banking and corporate headquarters etch the skylines of the world's large cities. The changing skyline reveals the history of power. Organized religion, governments, and large corporations have been the dominant institutions in Anglo-European societies over the past several centuries and have disproportionately contributed to the construction of social reality.

The changing roles of these institutions are one key to understanding the social construction and reconstruction of gender during the past several centuries. Organized religion, governments, and corporations have contested (and cooperated) over the meaning of womanhood and manhood. In medieval times, the Catholic Church defined womanhood and manhood primarily in terms of the nuclear family. A woman was defined as wife and mother, a man as husband and father, and these roles were regulated by the sacrament of matrimony. But the rise of large national states created a new meaning for manhood: A man was a soldier and a citizen. Any male who shirked those responsibilities was considered less of a man. Marriage became a civil as well as a religious relationship. In the 20th century, corporations became the dominant force in shaping social relations. Men and women were distinguished by their different relationship to employers. In the first half of the century, men left home and worked as the breadwinners while women stayed at home as wives and mothers. A man who did not provide for his family or a woman who neglected husband and children was considered "not really" masculine or feminine. But in the second half of the century, as real wages fell, more women entered the labor force, provoking a reconsideration of gender roles at home and in public. Men in most industrial societies are not really expected to support a family anymore, but many women expect their husbands or housemates to share in what was once considered women's work. Business institutions are thus indirectly reshaping what is meant by masculine and feminine.

Although some people and groups disproportionately determine what becomes reified and institutionalized, no one has absolute power. The historical construction of society is contested. **Contestation** means that people and groups actively contend against each other over defini-

tions of reality and the consequences of those definitions. Reality is constructed neither by the consensual progress of history nor by the uncontested acts of the powerful. Even if the powerful have greater influence, explaining outcomes requires attention to the social dynamics of the contestation. In recent decades, minorities have protested that standardized tests such as the SAT are culturally biased, forcing colleges and universities to reevaluate what "qualification" for admissions means. The feminist movement has not only won greater career opportunities for women but also challenged whether masculinity is antithetical to housework and child care.

STOP HERE

Intersections

Although this book has separate chapters on time, space, race, gender, and class, these topics deeply intersect each other. **Intersection** refers to how the social dynamic of one sphere affects another. Time and space interpenetrate and shape race, gender, and class, and the components of each group cannot be really treated apart from one another. Time and space are interdependent not only in physics but also in society. Race, gender, and class intersect to form highly structured systems of inequality and domination.

Intelligence and Intersections

Intelligence illustrates the principle of intersections. Anglo-European society does not define intelligence only in terms of understanding mathematics, memorizing facts, or reading comprehension. People who can do those things faster than others are considered more intelligent. Virtually all the formal procedures for measuring intelligence have a time component. The English language even labels those with less mental capacity as "slow." Similarly, the ability to reason spatially is an important component of measured intelligence. Virtually all intelligence testing includes items to assess spatial reasoning. As discussed earlier, not only have subordinate racial, gender, and class groups been frequently characterized as less intelligent, but intelligence testing was also designed to demonstrate what scientists believed were differences in intelligence among these groups.

The social construction of intelligence can also illustrate how time, space, race, gender, and class intersect with each other. One of the most

common stereotypes about men's and women's different abilities is that men can reason spatially better than women and that they have a better sense of direction and a more fully developed mental map to help them travel around. Related to this stereotype is the common mockery that men refuse to ask for directions when lost. The serious side of this image is that men's sense of direction is tied to their masculinity and that a "real man" does not need to ask for directions.

The relationship of intelligence to race, gender, and class is even more apparent. Intelligence has often been a purported explanation of the subordinate social positions of racial minorities, women, and lower-class people. H. H. Goddard, in 1919, attempted to justify social inequality in terms of intelligence:

> How can there be such a thing as social equality with this wide range of mental capacity? . . . Democracy means that the people rule by selecting the wisest, most intelligent and most human to tell them what to do to be happy. (Gould 1981:161)

This general justification of inequality by reference to intelligence also illustrates another aspect of intersection. Inequalities along each of the dimensions—race, gender, and class—reinforce each other and are dependent on one another. This book will not argue whether race, gender, or class is the most important or the most fundamental but will examine how the different dimensions intersect and affect each other. Lewis Terman illustrated how intelligence has been used to intersect race and class in a 1916 speech at Princeton University:

> Among laboring men and servant girls there are thousands like them. . . . The tests have told the truth. These boys are ineducable beyond the merest rudiments of training. No amount of school instruction will ever make them intelligent voters or capable citizens. . . . They represent the level of intelligence which is very, very common among Spanish-Indian and Mexican families of the Southwest and also among negroes. Their dullness seems to be racial, or at least inherent in the family stocks from which they came. (Gould 1981:221)

He is not just saying that poor people and racial minorities are disadvantaged because they supposedly lack intelligence. He is making a case that poverty is inherited through intelligence, that poor whites are no more capable of self-improvement than blacks and Mexicans. The passage assumes that the audience will already believe that blacks and Mexicans lack basic abilities needed for success and is using his characterization of intelligence to construct class. So in this instance, the construction