The Social Construction Of Reality Essay, Research Paper

Philosophy and science have always been based on the idea that the world of appearances is an illusion that both reveals and conceals an underlying reali-ty. In many instances, this idea has been attached to mystical systems of thought, as in some Eastern philosophies that view reality as a play of fictions manifested by a universal mind. In the West, it has been the intellectual under girding for rationalism and empiricism, which have given rise to contemporary science and social science.

First we should understand the main principles and issues of human nature. How does an individual define what is real? One does it through ones perception of the world, which is based on learned interpretations. This learning is social: we learn from and among persons in social interaction. The main vehicles which convey this meaning: symbols, including language, cultural myths — larger social meanings of objects, actions, signs, episodes, the structure and practice of our institutions, our rules for congruent action. These vehicles of meaning together construct: our world-view — our sense of how the world works, what is valuable, why things are the way they are. Our sense of ourselves, our identity, purpose, our ideologies — our sense of the appropriateness of, the structure of, and the exercise of, power, action and roles in society. Our selves, our societies, our institutions change continually, through interaction. The “real conditions” of our existence are not subjective, however, they only have meaning through social interaction their perceived value, causes, and significance are socially produced. Reality, insofar as it means to us, is situational, or pragmatic: the context governs our interpretation.

The social construction of reality thus becomes important because it is a subjective reality, a product of the conventions of society. Without society, and the inherent conventions therein, man would man would have no way to define the reality which he perceives, and the social language which has risen up around us would not exist at all. The fact is, that the language does exist, and therein lies the significance of sociology. To address W. I. Thompson’s statement is to examine the means by which man makes differentiations about reality. If the concrete world is seen to be objective, which it is’ then it must be the perceptions of man that alter the way it is seen. These changes occur through value judgments and conventions, which may be so deeply embedded in the conventions of society as to be seen as innate. What they truly are subjective interpretations of reality, based on social orientation. This orientation allows man to make differentiations about reality — that is, as a subjective interpreter of reality, man utilizes conventions to differentiate between what he believes in the concrete world and what he does not believe. He does not question the concreteness of things, but he questions the authenticity and relevance to his own world, in a seemingly egocentric manner. If man perceives something that is not relevant, or does not correspond to his idea of reality, he deems it not real. Thus, the statement If men define a situation as real, it is real; in its consequences” demonstrates the subjective nature of man’s reality, in a sociological sense. If man sees a situation as real and authentic, he considers it worthy of action, or reaction. This reaction may be seen as the consequence. This consequence is real because it is an effect of the action which man has been motivated to take in response to a situation in the concrete world, which he has deemed relevant to his existence. In relation to WI Thompson’s statement, it may be said that the consequences are by nature real” because man has already deemed the situation as real by recognizing and reacting to its relevance to him. This relevance is not always defined through action, but is defined through impression as well. Impressions result from the real life situations which man finds relevant, and make him change his way of thinking. This altered perception affects the conventions ingrained within man and turns into a generalization in the way in which man perceives the world. These perceptions keep in mind, are the products of his social conditioning. Thus, labels and categorizations arising from social conditions represent perceptions which ion some way alter or solidify the conventions of man within his society. In relation to various terms in the reading, this point can be more properly illustrated. Society and subsequently man’s reality, is constructed upon the basis of variations amongst the members of society. These variations include race, class, gender and sexuality. These varying individual characteristics represent the different means by which each individual can perceive reality. This reality is defined through the category of each variation, which an individual falls into. For instance, a black, middle class, heterosexual women has 5 certain set of perceptions by which she defines reality which are direct products of the variations which she is subject to and the resulting experiences due to these characteristics. In a sense, an individual is defined by convention, and then molded by the experiences in life, which result from the application of convention to the individual by the external world. In other words, a person is perceived a certain way, or receives feedback, due to certain aspects of appearance. Keep in mind, these conventions are not always accurate or fair, but inevitably arise and becomes the feedback, either informed or uninformed, which the individual receives from other members of society. Thus does the process of a social construction or reality take place.

An aspect of this construction of reality is found through tracking. Tracking is the tendency of our social institutions to categorize and rank the members of our society almost from birth. The categorization and ranking of children begins in the first years of grade school with the administering of tests which create ranks and categorizations in which to place the children, based on the performance of the children on the tests. The reality of each child is defined to an extent, by the categories in which they are immediately placed as a result of tracking. This tracking continues, and becomes an early form of feedback by which the child is programmed to perceive his place in society, and thus his place in the external environment. Tracking is a means by which conventions are perpetuated within the minds, convention and thus the realities of the individual members of society.

Sexual orientation is also defined by a certain perpetuation of convention. The assumption that heterosexuality is a product of inborn sex drive was for a long time accepted as reality, as a scientific truth. But as a direct result of the development of sociology, the orientation of an individual is no longer considered natural, nor are the conventions of sexuality related to empirical truth. Rather, they are now perceived as a product of the perception of the individual. This demonstrates the shift from scientific empirical evidence to sociological evidence as the means by which to define reality. The reality is not a heterosexual objective reality anymore. In other words, that scientific convention has disappeared in this day and age, largely due to the rise to the rise of the encompassing social science that sociology is. What was once called a heterosexual mystique” in the first third of the century is now considered by sociology to be a myth, because an individual defines his reality and reacts to the aspects of objective reality, which he deems relevant to him. The relevance is a product of the social conventions which man chooses both unconsciously and consciously, to adopt.

In a more general sense, the function of racism within society illustrates the means by which the reality of the individual is defined, whether ethical or not, through the conventions which he adapts. Racism is the most clear and visible illustration of the means by which man can define a reality, which is inaccurate or unjust. Yet, even though the reality is inaccurate, the individual chooses to adopt it rendering himself ignorant or bigoted. Labeling occurs within all walks of society, and this labeling occurs as an outgrowth of the tracking, which is institutionalized within society. The resultant categorizations illustrate the means in which reality has been distorted so often by man, and demonstrates how fallible in character man truly is. Yet, through this fallibility, this subjectivity emanating from convention, does man define himself. The purpose of sociology is to study and record this phenomenon, and maintain the distinctions therein, so that the conventions of society do not obscure the fact that individuals are bonded by their humanity, not their individual categorizable physical characteristic.

As participants, individuals tend to construct reality according to their conventions. The consequences of these conventions are defined through the relevance and reality, which the individual finds in the concrete situation. This process represents the significance to sociologist by which they can differentiate between social myth and human, universal perception.