How Society Maintains And Creates Reality

Posted on August 31, 2019

View this essay online:
https://academic-master.com/how-society-maintains-and-creates-reality/

Introduction

Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The* Social Construction *of Reality* explains how everyday knowledge becomes organized into an apparently objective world. Their argument does not claim that physical reality is created by opinion or that facts disappear when people disagree. It focuses on social reality: institutions, roles, identities, norms, categories, and meanings that exist because people create them, repeat them, teach them, and treat them as binding. The theory connects phenomenology, symbolic interaction, sociology of knowledge, and institutional analysis. Its lasting value lies in showing that society is simultaneously a human product, an objective reality confronting individuals, and a process through which individuals become social beings (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Everyday Knowledge as the Starting Point

Berger and Luckmann begin with the world of everyday life because it is the reality people experience as most immediate and practical. Individuals wake, work, speak, travel, exchange money, follow schedules, and interpret others without continuously questioning the foundations of these activities. Everyday reality appears orderly because it is shared through language, routines, and expectations. People assume that others understand common objects and situations in roughly compatible ways. This shared knowledge is not complete or perfectly consistent. It is sufficient for coordinated action. Sociology of knowledge studies how such understandings are distributed, maintained, and connected to institutions rather than limiting itself to elite theories or formal intellectual systems (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Externalization: Human Beings Produce a Social World

Externalization refers to the ongoing expression of human activity into the world. People create tools, customs, words, rules, organizations, rituals, and solutions to recurring problems. A classroom timetable, marriage ceremony, traffic rule, job title, or currency system begins through human action rather than emerging as a natural law. Individuals act under inherited conditions, but they also modify

practices and create new ones. Externalization is necessary because human behavior is not completely directed by instinct. People build stable environments that guide action. The concept emphasizes agency, yet it does not imply that every institution is deliberately designed. Many social patterns develop gradually through repeated responses whose long-term consequences were not planned (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Habitualization and Institutionalization

Repeated action becomes habitual because familiar solutions reduce effort. When people perform the same task in a similar way, the pattern can be anticipated and taught. Institutions emerge when habitual actions are typified as appropriate for particular kinds of people in recurring situations. A teacher is expected to teach, a judge to interpret law, and a customer to pay through accepted procedures. Institutionalization makes coordination possible because people do not negotiate every interaction from the beginning. It also limits alternatives by defining normal behavior. Institutions therefore provide stability and control simultaneously. Their authority increases when the original circumstances of their creation are forgotten and later generations receive them as established arrangements (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Objectivation: Human Products Appear Independent

Objectivation occurs when institutions created by people confront individuals as realities that seem external and independent. Language captures and transmits these products, allowing them to persist beyond the people who first created them. Money has value because institutions and communities recognize it, yet an individual cannot simply decide that it has no consequences. Schools, laws, corporations, borders, and professional credentials similarly depend on collective recognition while exercising real power over opportunities. Calling them socially constructed does not mean they are imaginary. It means their reality is maintained through human practices, authority, records, sanctions, and belief. Constructed institutions can have material effects as serious as those produced by physical objects (Searle, 1995).

Legitimation and the Need for Explanation

Institutions require legitimation when they are transmitted to people who did not participate in their creation. Legitimation explains why arrangements exist, why roles should be obeyed, and why alternatives are unacceptable or unthinkable. It ranges from simple statements, such as “this is how we do it,” to moral rules, legal doctrines, religious narratives, scientific theories, and comprehensive symbolic universes. These explanations connect separate institutions into a meaningful order. A legal system may be justified through justice, a school through merit and citizenship, or a family structure

through nature and tradition. Legitimation can support cooperation, but it can also conceal inequality by presenting historically specific arrangements as universal necessity (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Language and the Construction of Categories

Language is central because it names experiences, creates categories, stores memory, and allows knowledge to travel across time and place. Once a category exists, it influences what people notice and how they interpret behavior. Terms such as citizen, criminal, professional, disability, childhood, and success carry institutional histories and practical consequences. Language does not mechanically determine thought, and people can challenge available categories. Nevertheless, naming organizes attention and authority. Official definitions may decide who receives services, who is punished, or whose experience is recognized. Social change often involves changing language, but words become effective only when institutions, resources, and behavior also change. Symbolic reform without material reform can leave the underlying reality intact.

Internalization and Socialization

Internalization is the process through which the external social world becomes meaningful within the individual. Children encounter language, roles, emotions, rules, and identities through primary socialization in families and close relationships. They do not experience these lessons as one possible culture among many; they initially receive them as reality itself. Secondary socialization later introduces specialized worlds such as school, religion, occupation, law, and professional knowledge. Individuals learn not only what to do but what kind of person they are expected to be. Socialization is never perfectly complete. People move among conflicting institutions, reinterpret earlier lessons, and resist assigned identities. The self remains social without becoming merely passive (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Roles and the Distribution of Knowledge

Roles connect institutions with individual conduct. A role contains expectations, vocabulary, responsibilities, and access to specialized knowledge. Doctors, engineers, accountants, police officers, parents, and students know different parts of the social world and are authorized to perform different actions. Modern societies depend on this distribution because no individual can master every field. Specialization creates efficiency but also dependence on experts and organizations. It raises questions about trust, accountability, and exclusion. Professional groups may protect necessary standards, yet credentials can also restrict access and preserve status. Understanding roles helps explain why institutions persist even when individual occupants change. The role appears larger and more durable than the person temporarily performing it.

Symbolic Interaction and the Definition of the Situation

Berger and Luckmann's theory is closely related to symbolic interactionism, particularly the idea that people act according to meanings developed through interaction. W. I. Thomas argued that situations defined as real become real in their consequences. Erving Goffman later showed how individuals manage impressions and follow interactional rules in everyday encounters. These perspectives explain how reality is negotiated at the local level. A classroom, courtroom, hospital, or online meeting works because participants recognize the setting and act through appropriate roles. Misunderstanding or rejecting the definition can produce conflict. Micro-level interaction does not replace institutional power, but it is one of the places where institutions are repeatedly performed and renewed (Goffman, 1959; Thomas & Thomas, 1928).

Power, Inequality, and Whose Reality Prevails

A limitation of purely consensual accounts is that social reality is not created by equal participants. Governments, corporations, professional bodies, media organizations, and dominant groups possess greater capacity to classify, record, enforce, and circulate definitions. A powerful institution can make its version of reality consequential even when many people reject it. Race, gender, class, citizenship, and disability categories have been shaped through law, science, administration, and resistance. Berger and Luckmann acknowledge social control, but later theories place greater emphasis on power and conflict. A complete analysis must ask who defines the situation, whose knowledge becomes official, who benefits from the classification, and what resources allow alternative interpretations to survive (Foucault, 1972).

Media and Platform Reality

Digital media provide a contemporary example of reality construction. News organizations, search engines, social platforms, and recommendation systems select which events become visible and how they are categorized. Trending lists, verification labels, metrics, and influencer conventions create shared understandings of importance and credibility. Users participate by posting, commenting, sharing, and repeating formats, while platform companies shape the conditions through algorithms and policies. Online reality is not separate from offline institutions because digital narratives influence elections, markets, health behavior, and personal identity. At the same time, fragmented feeds can produce competing realities. The theory helps explain why repetition, community, and institutional authority matter in deciding which claims feel natural.

Can Constructed Reality Be Changed?

If institutions are human products, change is possible, but it is rarely easy. Established arrangements are embedded in law, architecture, habits, records, organizations, and identities. People may defend an institution because it benefits them, because alternatives seem dangerous, or because they cannot imagine a different order. Change can begin through crisis, social movements, technological innovation, demographic shifts, legal decisions, or everyday refusal. Successful transformation usually requires new practices and legitimations, not criticism alone. For example, changing assumptions about disability involves language, accessible design, employment policy, education, and representation. The constructed character of reality creates responsibility: society can be remade, but only through organized and sustained action.

Misunderstanding Social Construction

The phrase “socially constructed” is sometimes used to mean false, arbitrary, or entirely subjective. That interpretation is inaccurate. Construction refers to the social processes through which categories and institutions acquire meaning and stability. Some constructions are supported by strong evidence and serve valuable purposes; others are unjust or misleading. Physical constraints also matter. A disease has biological processes even though diagnosis, stigma, treatment access, and disability policy are socially organized. Climate exists independently of belief, while political responses and risk categories are constructed. The useful question is not whether something is “real or constructed.” It is how different dimensions of reality interact and how institutions shape human understanding and consequence.

Conclusion

Society creates and maintains reality through externalization, habitualization, institutionalization, objectivation, legitimation, and internalization. People produce patterns that later confront them as established facts, and socialization teaches each generation how to inhabit those patterns. Language, roles, expert knowledge, power, and daily interaction preserve institutions while also creating opportunities for change. Berger and Luckmann’s framework remains influential because it connects personal identity with large social structures without reducing one to the other. Its most important lesson is that institutions are neither natural inevitabilities nor weightless opinions. They are durable human achievements with material consequences, and understanding their construction makes both critical analysis and responsible transformation possible (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

References

1. Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckmann. *The Social Construction of Reality*. Anchor Books,

1966.
2. Blumer, Herbert. *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. University of California Press, 1969.
3. Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Anchor Books, 1959.
4. Searle, John R. *The Construction of Social Reality*. Free Press, 1995.
5. Thomas, W. I., and Dorothy Swaine Thomas. *The Child in America*. Knopf, 1928.
6. Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Pantheon Books, 1972.