1.5: Social Constructionism

Social constructionism is a theory of knowledge that holds that characteristics typically thought to be immutable and solely biological—such as gender, race, class, ability, and sexuality—are products of human definition and interpretation shaped by cultural and historical contexts (Subramaniam 2010). As such, social constructionism highlights the ways in which cultural categories—like “men,” “women,” “black,” “white”—are concepts created, changed, and reproduced through historical processes within institutions and culture. We do not mean to say that bodily variation among individuals does not exist, but that we construct categories based on certain bodily features, we attach meanings to these categories, and then we place people into the categories by considering their bodies or bodily aspects. For example, by the one-drop rule (see also page 35), regardless of their appearance, individuals with any African ancestor are considered black. In contrast, racial conceptualization and thus racial categories are different in Brazil, where many individuals with African ancestry are considered to be white. This shows how identity categories are not based on strict biological characteristics, but on the social perceptions and meanings that are assumed. Categories are not “natural” or fixed and the boundaries around them are always shifting—they are contested and redefined in different historical periods and across different societies. Therefore, the social constructionist perspective is concerned with the meaning created through defining and categorizing groups of people, experience, and reality in cultural contexts.

The Social Construction of Heterosexuality

What does it mean to be “heterosexual” in contemporary US society? Did it mean the same thing in the late 19th century? As historian of human sexuality Jonathon Ned Katz shows in The Invention of Heterosexuality (1999), the word “heterosexual” was originally coined by Dr. James Kiernan in 1892, but its meaning and usage differed drastically from contemporary understandings of the term. Kiernan thought of “hetero-sexuals” as not defined by their attraction to the opposite sex, but by their “inclinations to both sexes.” Furthermore, Kiernan thought of the heterosexual as someone who “betrayed inclinations to ‘abnormal methods of gratification’” (Katz 1995). In other words, heterosexuals were those who were attracted to both sexes and engaged in sex for pleasure, not for reproduction. Katz further points out that this
definition of the heterosexual lasted within middle-class cultures in the United States until the 1920s, and then went through various radical reformulations up to the current usage.

Looking at this historical example makes visible the process of the social construction of heterosexuality. First of all, the example shows how social construction occurs within institutions—in this case, a medical doctor created a new category to describe a particular type of sexuality, based on existing medical knowledge at the time. “Hetero-sexuality” was initially a medical term that defined a deviant type of sexuality. Second, by seeing how Kiernan—and middle class culture, more broadly—defined “hetero-sexuality” in the 19th century, it is possible to see how drastically the meanings of the concept have changed over time. Typically, in the United States in contemporary usage, “heterosexuality” is thought to mean “normal” or “good”—it is usually the invisible term defined by what is thought to be its opposite, homosexuality. However, in its initial usage, “hetero-sexuality” was thought to counter the norm of reproductive sexuality and be, therefore, deviant. This gets to the third aspect of social constructionism. That is, cultural and historical contexts shape our definition and understanding of concepts. In this case, the norm of reproductive sexuality—having sex not for pleasure, but to have children—defines what types of sexuality are regarded as “normal” or “deviant.” Fourth, this case illustrates how categorization shapes human experience, behavior, and interpretation of reality. To be a “heterosexual” in middle class culture in the US in the early 1900s was not something desirable to be—it was not an identity that most people would have wanted to inhabit. The very definition of “hetero-sexual” as deviant, because it violated reproductive sexuality, defined “proper” sexual behavior as that which was reproductive and not pleasure-centered.

Social constructionist approaches to understanding the world challenge the essentialist or biological determinist understandings that typically underpin the “common sense” ways in which we think about race, gender, and sexuality. Essentialism is the idea that the characteristics of persons or groups are significantly influenced by biological factors, and are therefore largely similar in all human cultures and historical periods. A key assumption of essentialism is that “a given truth is a necessary natural part of the individual and object in question” (Gordon and Abbott 2002). In other words, an essentialist understanding of sexuality would argue that not only do all people have a sexual orientation, but that an individual’s sexual orientation does not vary across time or place. In this example, “sexual orientation” is a given “truth” to individuals—it is thought to be inherent, biologically determined, and essential to their being.

Essentialism typically relies on a biological determinist theory of identity. Biological determinism can be defined as a general theory, which holds that a group’s biological or genetic makeup shapes its social, political, and economic destiny (Subramaniam 2014). For example, “sex” is typically thought to be a biological “fact,” where bodies are classified into two categories, male and female. Bodies in these categories are assumed to have “sex”-distinct chromosomes, reproductive systems, hormones, and sex characteristics. However, “sex” has been defined in many different ways, depending on the context within which it is defined. For example, feminist law professor Julie Greenberg (2002) writes that in the late 19th century and early 20th century, “when reproductive function was considered one of a woman’s essential characteristics, the medical community decided that the presence or absence of ovaries was the ultimate criterion of sex” (Greenberg 2002: 113). Thus, sexual difference was produced through the heteronormative assumption that women are defined by their ability to have children. Instead of assigning sex based on the presence or absence of ovaries, medical practitioners in the contemporary US typically assign sex based on the appearance of genitalia.

Differential definitions of sex point to two other primary aspects of the social construction of reality. First, it makes apparent how even the things commonly thought to be “natural” or “essential” in the world are socially constructed. Understandings of “nature” change through history and across place according to systems of human knowledge.
Second, the social construction of difference occurs within relations of power and privilege. Sociologist Abby Ferber (2009) argues that these two aspects of the social construction of difference cannot be separated, but must be understood together. Discussing the construction of racial difference, she argues that inequality and oppression actually produce ideas of essential racial difference. Therefore, racial categories that are thought to be “natural” or “essential” are created within the context of racialized power relations—in the case of African-Americans, that includes slavery, laws regulating interracial sexual relationships, lynching, and white supremacist discourse. Social constructionist analyses seek to better understand the processes through which racialized, gendered, or sexualized differentiations occur, in order to untangle the power relations within them.

Notions of disability are similarly socially constructed within the context of ableist power relations. The medical model of disability frames body and mind differences and perceived challenges as flaws that need fixing at the individual level. The social model of disability shifts the focus to the disabling aspects of society for individuals with impairments (physical, sensory or mental differences), where the society disables those with impairments (Shakespeare 2006). Disability, then, refers to a form of oppression where individuals understood as having impairments are imagined to be inferior to those without impairments, and impairments are devalued and unwanted. This perspective manifests in structural arrangements that limit access for those with impairments. A critical disability perspective critiques the idea that nondisability is natural and normal—an ableist sentiment, which frames the person rather than the society as the problem.

What are the implications of a social constructionist approach to understanding the world? Because social constructionist analyses examine categories of difference as fluid, dynamic, and changing according to historical and geographical context, a social constructionist perspective suggests that existing inequalities are neither inevitable nor immutable. This perspective is especially useful for the activist and emancipatory aims of feminist movements and theories. By centering the processes through which inequality and power relations produce racialized, sexualized, and gendered difference, social constructionist analyses challenge the pathologization of minorities who have been thought to be essentially or inherently inferior to privileged groups. Additionally, social constructionist analyses destabilize the categories that organize people into hierarchically ordered groups through uncovering the historical, cultural, and/or institutional origins of the groups under study. In this way, social constructionist analyses challenge the categorical underpinnings of inequalities by revealing their production and reproduction through unequal systems of knowledge and power.