

SOCIAL REALITY

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The Foundational Definition of Social Reality

Social reality constitutes the intricate, shared understanding of the world established and maintained collectively by the members of a society, a culture, or any defined group. It is fundamentally distinct from **objective reality**, which pertains to empirical facts and physical laws independent of human perception, such as gravity or chemical composition. In contrast, social reality encompasses the attitudes, beliefs, values, norms, and opinions that define meaning and structure within the social environment. This shared framework dictates what is considered true, important, acceptable, or valuable within that group context. While objective reality dictates the physical constraints of existence, social reality dictates the psychological and behavioral constraints, shaping everything from political systems to moral codes. Understanding this duality is crucial, as individual behavior is often guided far more powerfully by the accepted social reality than by strict objective facts, especially when those facts are ambiguous or complex.

The core definition highlights that social reality is not innate but is actively constructed and sustained through continuous social interaction and communication. If a large number of individuals within a society agree that a specific piece of paper holds monetary value, that paper acquires the function of currency within that social reality, regardless of its objective material worth. This mechanism applies across all aspects of social life, including institutions like marriage, government, or education. These institutions exist because the collective consciousness accepts their reality and efficacy. Furthermore, social reality provides the essential context for identity formation; an individual understands who they are and how they should behave based on the roles and expectations defined by the group's accepted norms.

Psychologically, the internalization of social reality is critical for cognitive stability and social integration. When an individual's internal interpretation aligns with the group's external reality, feelings of coherence and belonging are reinforced. Conversely, deviations or challenges to the established social reality can lead to significant psychological distress, social exclusion, or cognitive dissonance. The opinions and beliefs that form the bedrock of social reality are constantly transmitted, reinforced, and occasionally negotiated through daily interactions, media consumption, educational processes, and symbolic rituals. Therefore, social reality is less a static entity and more a dynamic process of mutual construction, reflecting the current consensus of the group regarding the interpretation and management of their shared existence.

Theoretical Frameworks for Social Construction

The most influential theoretical framework for understanding social reality stems from the work of sociologists Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, detailed in their seminal 1966 text, *The Social Construction of Reality*. They posited that reality is apprehended as a social product through a continuous dialectical process involving three moments: **externalization**, **objectivation**, and

internalization. Externalization is the process by which humans project their meanings and ideas onto the world. Objectivation occurs when these externalized products attain an apparent reality of their own, becoming external and coercive facts that seem independent of their human creators (e.g., laws or bureaucracies). Finally, internalization is the process through which the individual learns and accepts this objectivated reality as subjectively valid, thus completing the cycle of social construction.

Another crucial perspective is offered by **symbolic interactionism**, championed by thinkers like George Herbert Mead and Erving Goffman. This theory emphasizes that social reality is created and recreated moment-to-moment through face-to-face interaction, particularly through the use of shared symbols, gestures, and language. Symbolic interactionists argue that meaning is not inherent in objects but arises out of the social interaction that people have with one another. For instance, the meaning of a handshake or a salute is purely conventional and derived entirely from the social agreement established through recurring use. This perspective highlights the fluidity and contingency of social reality, suggesting that if the shared meanings attributed to symbols shift, the underlying social reality itself must also change, thereby requiring constant social negotiation.

Furthermore, cognitive psychology contributes to this understanding by examining the mechanisms through which individuals process and solidify social knowledge. Concepts like schemas, prototypes, and heuristics demonstrate how the mind organizes social information into readily accessible categories that are highly influenced by cultural and group norms. When people encounter new information, they tend to filter it through existing social schemas, which are themselves products of the existing social reality. This process ensures cognitive efficiency but also acts as a powerful conservative force, making established beliefs resistant to change, even in the face of contradictory evidence. The collective validation of these cognitive shortcuts reinforces the perceived solidity and truthfulness of the group's social reality, making it difficult for individuals to deviate from established interpretations.

Core Components: Attitudes, Beliefs, and Opinions

The edifice of social reality is built upon a foundation composed primarily of attitudes, beliefs, and opinions, though these concepts possess distinct psychological properties and levels of permanence. **Beliefs** represent the cognitive component--the conviction that something is true or factual, regardless of whether it is objectively verifiable (e.g., "The economy is improving" or "Hard work leads to success"). These are the fundamental assumptions individuals hold about the world, guiding their interpretations of events and decisions. Social reality is heavily dependent on shared fundamental beliefs, which often take the form of cultural myths, historical narratives, or religious doctrines, providing a cohesive worldview for the group and defining what is considered knowledge versus mere conjecture.

Attitudes, conversely, include an affective or emotional component, representing a settled way of thinking or feeling about someone or something, typically reflected in a person's behavior. An attitude is an evaluation--it carries a positive or negative valence. While a belief is simply a statement accepted as true, an attitude is a disposition toward action based on that belief (e.g., believing that immigrants take jobs is a belief; feeling hostile toward immigrants is an attitude). Social reality necessitates the alignment of attitudes, particularly toward significant social objects like authority figures, competing groups, or major societal goals. Deviant attitudes pose a direct threat to group cohesion and are often met with strong social sanctions, as they signal a potential break from the shared evaluative framework.

Opinions are generally considered the most superficial and transient component, representing specific judgments or viewpoints regarding a particular issue or policy, often expressed verbally. While opinions are influenced by underlying beliefs and attitudes, they are often more subject to immediate context, informational input, and persuasive attempts. The dynamics of public opinion polling, for example, reveal the shifting surface of social reality, tracking moment-to-moment reactions to current events. However, when opinions are aggregated and validated across a large portion of the society, they solidify into a powerful force, often driving political action and institutional change. The continuous cycle where shared opinions reinforce underlying beliefs demonstrates the interconnectedness of these three components in sustaining the overall social structure.

The Interplay of Language, Symbols, and Meaning

Language serves as the primary mechanism through which social reality is articulated, transmitted, and solidified. Without a shared linguistic framework, the complex collective understandings that define a society would be impossible to maintain or transmit across generations. Language does more than just describe reality; it actively structures perception. The concepts and categories embedded within a society's lexicon--including terms for kinship, status, emotion, and morality--direct attention and provide templates for interpreting experience. For instance, cultures that possess numerous distinct words for different types of snow maintain a social reality in which those distinctions are highly salient and relevant, whereas a culture with only one word for snow does not encode that level of detail into its shared reality, thereby limiting cognitive focus.

Beyond formal language, **symbolic systems** are integral to the objectivation of social reality. Symbols--such as flags, religious icons, corporate logos, or gestures--condense complex meanings into easily recognizable forms. These symbols allow for efficient communication and emotional resonance, quickly evoking shared attitudes and beliefs without the need for detailed explanation. The power of a symbol lies in the fact that its meaning is arbitrary but collectively agreed upon; the symbol itself has no intrinsic meaning outside of the social agreement. Rituals, which involve the repetitive, structured use of symbols, are crucial in periodically re-affirming the

validity and emotional salience of the underlying social reality, thereby reinforcing group identity and solidarity in profound ways.

The negotiation of meaning is central to the daily construction of social reality. When individuals interact, they engage in subtle processes of definition and redefinition, testing the boundaries of shared understanding. Miscommunication or differing interpretations of symbols can highlight potential cracks in the existing social reality. Mass media and digital communication channels have profoundly altered this dynamic, allowing for the rapid dissemination of symbols and narratives across vast geographical distances, leading to the formation of globalized social realities. However, they also facilitate the formation of isolated "echo chambers" or subcultures, where specialized linguistic and symbolic codes create distinct, sometimes conflicting, miniature social realities that challenge the broader societal consensus, leading to fragmentation.

Mechanisms of Maintenance and Legitimization

Social reality, once established, requires continuous maintenance to prevent fragmentation and decay, especially as new generations emerge and objective circumstances change. One primary maintenance mechanism is **habituation**, whereby repeated actions become channeled into routine patterns, reducing the need for constant cognitive effort or decision-making. When these habits are mutually shared across a group, they form the basis for institutionalization. Institutions--such as the legal system, economic markets, or family structures--are essentially collections of highly formalized, habituated actions and roles that are accepted as stable and necessary components of the social fabric. Institutions provide predictability and stability, anchoring the social reality in concrete, observable practice that is resistant to individual whims.

The process of **legitimization** is essential for justifying the institutional order and making the established social reality acceptable and morally correct. Legitimization occurs at various levels, starting with simple explanations for why things are done a certain way (e.g., explaining a traffic rule) and escalating to complex symbolic universes, such as religious or philosophical systems. These symbolic universes integrate all institutional processes into a meaningful whole, providing ultimate explanations for existence, suffering, and social hierarchy. By providing a comprehensive sense of order and purpose, legitimization transforms arbitrary social facts into seemingly inevitable and morally mandated truths, thereby ensuring voluntary adherence.

Socialization is the central process through which maintenance is achieved across generations. Primary socialization, occurring typically within the family, ensures that the initial, fundamental beliefs and attitudes of the society are deeply internalized by the child, often perceived as the only natural way of seeing the world. Secondary socialization, which occurs in later life through schools, workplaces, and peer groups, teaches the specialized knowledge and role-specific behaviors required by various institutions. Effective socialization guarantees that the new members of society

accept the established social reality as the only natural and possible way of life. When socialization fails or is inconsistent, the resulting conflicts and ambiguities can introduce destabilizing elements into the existing social reality, paving the way for social movements or counter-realities that seek to redefine the consensus.

Social Reality, Power, and Ideology

The construction and maintenance of social reality are intrinsically linked to issues of **power** and control. While social reality is ostensibly a collective phenomenon, not all groups possess equal influence in defining the consensus. Dominant groups often hold the resources--economic, political, or media control--necessary to disseminate and enforce their interpretations of reality, ensuring that their definitions become the societal standard. This is where the concept of **ideology** becomes critical. Ideology refers to a system of ideas and ideals, often masked as universal truths, that justifies the interests and privileges of the ruling class or dominant segment of society, thereby maintaining hierarchical structures.

Ideology functions by making the current social arrangements appear natural, inevitable, and universally beneficial, thereby obscuring the power relations embedded within the social reality. For example, an ideology emphasizing strict individualism and meritocracy may define economic inequality not as a failure of systemic structure but as a reflection of individual differences in effort and talent. This definition reinforces the existing status quo and discourages systemic critique. Critical theorists, like those associated with the Frankfurt School, argue that much of modern social reality is a product of ideological manipulation, used to generate consent and maintain social control by shaping what people believe to be possible or true, often leading to false consciousness.

Challenges to the dominant social reality often emerge from marginalized groups who construct counter-realities. These subaltern realities offer alternative interpretations of history, morality, and social structure, providing a basis for resistance and collective action. However, attempts to impose a counter-reality face significant resistance from the established institutional structures designed to maintain the status quo. The historical negotiation between dominant ideology and competing counter-ideologies demonstrates that social reality is perpetually contested terrain, where the struggle for power is often waged through the definition and control of collective meaning. The success of any social movement relies heavily on its ability to redefine the operative social reality for a sufficient number of people, thereby shifting the collective consensus.

Psychological Consequences and Individual Adaptation

The rigorous demands of social reality impose significant psychological constraints on the individual, requiring constant adaptation and cognitive alignment to ensure seamless integration. One key consequence is the mechanism of **social conformity**, where individuals adjust their

attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors to align with group norms, often even when those norms contradict their private judgment or objective evidence. Famous experiments, such as those conducted by Solomon Asch, demonstrate the profound pressure to conform to the established social reality, illustrating that maintaining social acceptance often overrides the desire for factual accuracy. This conformity ensures the stability of the social reality but highlights the vulnerability of independent thought and critical reasoning.

When an individual's private experience or objective knowledge clashes sharply with the internalized social reality, they experience **cognitive dissonance**. This uncomfortable psychological state motivates the individual to resolve the conflict, usually not by abandoning the social reality (which is often too costly in terms of social standing or mental effort) but by rationalizing the discrepancy, selectively ignoring contradictory evidence, or adjusting their memory. This process of psychological defense mechanisms demonstrates the deep protective function social reality serves for the individual psyche, acting as a stable interpretive framework that resists disruption and maintains internal consistency with the external social environment.

Ultimately, the internalization of social reality is inseparable from the formation of **personal identity**. An individual's sense of self--their roles, values, and perceived competence--is derived from the definitions and evaluations provided by the social group. Being a "good citizen," a "successful professional," or a "devoted parent" are all socially constructed roles embedded within a specific social reality, providing scripts for behavior and self-evaluation. The ability to successfully navigate and adopt these defined roles ensures social integration and psychological well-being. Therefore, the psychological health of the individual is deeply intertwined with the coherence, stability, and acceptability of the social reality in which they are embedded, making the study of collective beliefs paramount in understanding individual behavior and cognitive function.