

REALITY: REAL OR CONVENTIONAL?

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The process of constructing reality, that is what passes for reality, is explored, the work of Berger and Luckmann¹ serving as a framework. It is concluded that once a structure of belief is internalized, it is very resistant to change, regardless of the empirical evidence for or against that structure. The same problem is found with patterns of belief in science.

One involved in research, publication and public discussion about the theory of evolution often notes that dissonant information does not seem to affect the essential evolutionary belief structure of most persons. While presenting a position paper to a school district in an affluent suburb of Toledo, the writer was struck with the fact that most persons on the curriculum committee did not, either because they did not have the knowledge or preferred not to discuss the issue, try to deal directly with the empirical evidence presented. Most could not answer or explain the objections to evolution which were discussed, and preferred to argue against a more balanced treatment of origins by defensive rationalization or private "logic" (not empirical data) against either irrelevant issues, or the two-model approach in general. Presentation of such arguments as the absence of vestigial and nascent organs, the inadequacy of the fossil record, the difficulties in classical natural selection to account for new species, the absence of transitional forms (in both living forms and in the now "nearly complete" fossil record) and the inadequacy of mutations to explain the origin of new organs and structures had little effect on the position of most participants. One biology teacher remarked that she was aware of these difficulties and, although she still classified herself as an evolutionist, preferred completely to avoid discussion of evolution in her classes and elsewhere. If the subject was alluded to, she stated that she stressed in her biology classes that evolution was a theory, even though she herself did not believe it was a theory but rather a fact.

The Social Construction of Reality

This and similar experiences caused the author to explore the question: "why do people hold on to certain beliefs in the face of large amounts of contrary empirical evidence?" Much has been written on this topic, especially relative to why people tenaciously hold on to empirically discredited belief structures such as astrology, reincarnation, and homeopathy (a 19th century medical theory based on the belief that the smaller a dose of a drug, the more effective it is in treating an illness, and that "like is treated by like", i.e., cancer is treated by giving the person a drug that causes cancer, heart disease a drug that causes heart problems, etc.) in spite of the overwhelming empirical evidence against these belief structures or sets of beliefs or philosophies. There are specific reasons why certain belief structures are accepted. For instance in astrology, we tend to

remember the predictions which come true, or we psychologically "fit" our personality to an astrology reading. Moreover, there are general reasons why people tend to hold onto out-moded beliefs and world-views. The research has found that one learns belief structures and a personal social construction of reality which, in turn, influence one's entire view of the world (or one's world-view). The social construction of reality means that it is very difficult accurately to define many aspects of reality; and these gaps must be filled in for a rational, unified explanation of some aspect of reality to exist. This results in a view of some aspect of reality which is based on some facts, but by necessity ignores others; and once the belief system is developed, it colors how the world and both facts that agree and disagree are interpreted. Once a belief structure is developed, some facts or data are overstressed, others modified, and still others discarded or ignored.

Berger and Luckmann¹ have delineated the process by which reality is (as they call it) socially constructed as follows:

1. **Externalization** occurs when people, or societies, produce cultural products, such as ideas, books, movies, cliches, words, etc.; and in time these cultural products, especially values and systems of belief such as "science," define reality. People "produce" their own reality, then these constructs define and shape true reality. If evolution is pictured as an historical reality in most movies, books, magazines, plays, TV programs, cartoons, and in conversation, school and elsewhere, it will be viewed by most people as historical reality, regardless of whether it is true or false.
2. **Objectivization** occurs when these external products take on a reality of their own, i.e., they become independent of the people who originate them. One begins to see the external world in a certain way, usually not realizing that the cultural-products that cause one to take on a certain world view are all products of a person's or group of people's conclusions, ideas, value structures, etc., and are not necessarily accurate pictures of outside reality. As Berger, *et al.*, conclude, people deal with these cultural products as if the reality they convey had an objective physical existence like land or water. These ideas thus become another part of a person's view of reality which is taken for granted and which, once internalized, influence one's view of the rest of the world. Dissonant ideas are altered or rationalized so as to fit into one's view of reality; and one's view of reality is usually not changed unless one is exposed to a tremendous amount of dissonant information from sources which are seen as valid and which challenge one's previous view or position. For this to happen, one must usual-

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ly seek out this information on one's own with somewhat of an "open mind." Even then it usually takes a long time, often several years, significantly to alter one's world view in some area. So such changes are not very common.

3. **Internalization** occurs when people learn and accept (or internalize and believe) the supposedly objective facts about reality and make them part of their own world view. People who are socialized in similar subcultures, socio-economic classes, etc., share similar perceptions of reality. Further, most people rarely question either the origin of their view of the world or the process by which they adopted these beliefs in the first place. They usually have no reason to question their world view, and avoid situations which force them to question it.

These considerations form the basis for such clichés as "one sees the world through rose-colored (or some other colored) glasses" and "truth (or beauty, or some other quality) is in the eye of the beholder"; all of which emphasize the fact that a person's individual view of the world is extremely important in both understanding and interpreting outside "reality." People are socialized to accept a certain view of reality. The type and effectiveness of this socialization depends upon their environment, intelligence, and curiosity in examining the view of reality presented to them, and the amount of reading, discussing, etc. about this topic in which they engage. Many people assume that their own view of reality is the same as or similar to everyone else's. This, though, is often not the case; but, as Robertson states; "the 'reality' that we encounter is merely the interpretation we place on the evidence of our sense, and people in different cultures may interpret that reality very differently."²

The Process of Socialization

Actually, there are marked differences in the social construction of reality between not only cultures, but between individuals as well. One's view of reality is heavily influenced by the socialization to which one is exposed. Socialization is both an overt and covert attempt to influence one's belief structure, norms, values, folkways, mores, and ethnic or individual social construction of reality. Socialization and indoctrination are very similar, except that indoctrination is probably more directed and deliberate. Also, one who has learned values, etc. that we disagree with, we often would label "indoctrinated," and one who has not learned behavior that we feel is important, such as conforming to the laws of the land, we would label "unsocialized" or "not-socialized" (or asocial). Schools are probably one of the most important socializing institutions; and according to Robertson "... the schools in every society also engage in outright indoctrination in values. We may find this fact more readily apparent in societies other than our own—until we consider the content of civics classes or the daily ritual of the Pledge of Allegiance."³ Of course, schools indoctrinate those under their influence in many other areas, including values towards life, moral values, and especially in the area of values and beliefs regarding origins. Indoctrina-

tion occurs not only through school activities and rituals, but also through school textbooks, library books, and the school's "hidden curriculum" or the information conveyed indirectly in class discussions, lectures by teachers and the school textbooks. For example, most textbooks, except those on biology, do not implicitly teach the evolution of man; but evolutionary ideas are often alluded to, or implicitly taught indirectly. When psychology books refer to "man's animal past" or sociology books to the value that "all values are relative, and there are no absolutes" a certain point of view and information regarding man's past are conveyed to the student.

Another factor which reinforces these belief structures is what Irvin Jenis calls *group-think* or a decision-making process in which persons tend to ignore information or alternatives that they feel, correctly or incorrectly, do not agree with the group's assumption. Thus, if one believes that the group believes that evolution is empirically supported, this will mitigate against acceptance of criticism. This is partly why Lamarkian and Lysenkoian biology persisted for so long in spite of the wealth of empirical evidence against each theory.

The famous study by Theodore Newcomb in 1958 at Bennington College found that the longer the students stayed at the college, the more liberal they became, and when they left the college, the longer they lived in the real world the more conservative they became (although few became as conservative as they were before they entered college).

Once a person has been socialized to believe a certain position, it is very hard for that person objectively to evaluate other positions. Their position is reality, and other positions, if they are aware of them, are wrong, foolish, or ununderstandable. As Robertson noted "if members of a society believe that the earth is flat, that Jupiter rules the heavens, that illness is caused by witches or that there are such things as x-rays, then the supposed flatness of the earth, the rule of Jupiter, the presence of witches, and the existence of x-rays will be come as much as part of reality to people in that society as any other feature of their world."⁴ Thus, how one views the world and what one accepts as real is to some degree influenced by the indoctrination one has been exposed to—and once one develops a particular world view, it is very resistant to change. Most people generally resist changing their view, especially if it has been held for a long time and the person has been exposed to consistent indoctrination for many years. Even a large amount of empirical evidence is resisted.

This mechanism is operative in all of us—no one is exempt. The most we can do is be aware of it and try to investigate a matter thoroughly before we arrive at a conclusion—and be keenly aware of the fact that our defenses will mitigate for rejecting without careful examination a new hypothesis if it is contrary to our basic belief structure. Knowledge of this process should caution us to withhold judgment until we have thoroughly examined a matter. And this probably means withholding judgment on many if not most, matters. Few of us can be thoroughly read in more than one or two areas.

The author's own first reaction to information which
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