

UC Santa Cruz

What is Social Construction?

By Laura Flores

Social construction is something you might not be aware of. You are somewhat living in segregation depending on what gender, race and class you are. Race, class and gender don't really mean anything. They only have a meaning because society *gives* them a meaning. Social construction is how society groups people and how it privileges certain groups over others. For example, you are a woman or a man because society *tells* you that you are, not because you choose to be. Simple as that. Just like it tells you what race you're classified as and what social class you belong in. It is all just a social process that makes us differentiate between what's "normal" and what's not "normal."

According to the author of "Night To His Day: The Social Construction of Gender," Judith Lorber, the social construction of gender begins "with the assignment to a sex category on the basis of what the genitalia look like at birth" (55). When a baby is born, the first thing a doctor does is look at the baby's genitalia in order to determine whether it will be a boy or a girl; this is the beginning of the gender process of social construction. After they are classified as boy or girl, parents become part of this societal process as they start dressing them with colors that identify their gender. The "normal" thing to do in this case would be for baby girls to be dressed in pink and baby boys to be dressed in blue. It is just not normal to dress your baby boy in pink or your baby girl in blue, right? The reason for this is because society has made colors become a symbol to distinguish boys from girls. After this, as children grow up they start learning how they are supposed to act by observing and imitating the people of the same gender as them; girls should act like their mommy and boys should act like their daddy. Each gender is expected to dress and act in a certain way, but these behaviors then lead to stereotypes.

Allan G. Johnson, the author of "Patriarchy," states some of the very common stereotypes or "qualities" of men: "control, strength, *efficiency*, competitiveness, toughness, coolness under pressure" (160). These are just *some* of the many stereotypes of men regarding how they should "normally" act and try to portray themselves. Stereotypes for women have also come into place. Johnson lists some common stereotypes that society gives women as well: "*inefficiency*, cooperation, mutuality, equality, sharing compassion, caring,...emotional expressiveness" (Johnson 160). Later on in the passage, Johnson states something very interesting: "Power looks sexy on men, not on women" (Johnson 160). The stereotype of "efficiency" for men and "inefficiency" for women gives a double meaning to this quote. Since women are inefficient, in other words unskilled, compared to men, it is evident that society's opinion on gender describes that men should have the power. This quote is one more thing that is contributing to the social construction of gender by making men seem like they have more power and privilege over women.

Privilege doesn't just fall into the social construction of gender, but also that of class difference. Sandra K. Hoyt, the author of "Mentoring With Class," defines social class as an "economic structure" (189). There are three different types of social classes: upper, middle, and lower class. Everyone in this society is categorized within this economic structure based on their financial status. The upper class is known as the "rich," the middle class as the "norm," and the lower class as the "poor." The upper class is usually thought to have higher privileges than the lower class. For example, in terms of education, the students that belong in the upper class have a higher chance to be successful in life because they come from wealthy families that can provide them with a private education system. In contrast, the lower class students have to learn how to deal with what's provided for them. If the public system is not preparing them well enough just like a private schooling system would, then there's nothing much to do. Let's also take into consideration that the social construction of class difference isn't only necessarily identified by society depending on financial status. Race also helps us get an idea of which social class people belong in.

Racial formation is another term for the social construction of race. The authors of "Racial Formation in the United States," Omi and Winant, define racial formation as "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (55). By saying that racial formation is a "sociohistorical process" they are saying that race was formed and given a meaning by society because of the many critical events that have happened in history over time. They also state that "race is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies" (Omi and Winant 55). In other words, people are characterized and identified by only their appearance more specifically, skin pigmentation. There are standards, stereotypes and expectations that follow these physical characteristics.

This goes back to my previous example of how not only financial status helps us identify what social class someone is in. Someone might just make assumptions of what race you are just by saying the class you belong to. In one of our previous lectures in class, we were discussing the difference between class and how race plays a role in the hierarchy of social class. Our instructor, Chesa, asked us, "if you had to imagine the upper class, how would you describe it?" We all sat and thought about it for a second, and the first two things that were said out loud were the words "rich" and "white." She asked us once again, but this time it was to think about the middle class and most people described it as the "normal." Normal to us was a white fenced house, a typical family of three and a nice car. Now, when she asked how we see a working (lower) class, people said "people of color" and people living in "apartments." It was surprising to see how everyone was in consensus with all that was being said. We all knew which race usually was associated with each social class as well as the typical stereotypes of class, race and gender. This concludes that we are apparently all participants of this social construction.

This social construction in this society is segregating us depending on our physical appearance and our material possessions. We are seen differently because of where we live, where we come from and how we look. Women are weak, therefore men, who are strong and controlling, should be the ones in power. If you live in an apartment, then you must be from the lower class, but if you live in a house then you must be either middle or upper class. If you go to a private school then you must be rich, but if you go to a public school then most certainly you're poor or low income. This is all what society has inculcated in us, but we also have fault that we have been caught up on this whole idea of stereotypes and standards that we are supposed to follow because after all, we believe what we want to believe.

Sources

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