
UNIT 6 LUCKMANN AND BERGER: SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY*

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6.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this Unit, you should be able to:

- Explain the theoretical underpinnings of social construction;
- Define the concept of social construction of reality and understand how the interaction process creates our lived reality;
- Grasp the ways in which ‘personal’ identity is shaped by cultural constructions.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann are highly applauded social theorists who have had lasting influence on the theorisation of reality and the ways in which it is being constructed and sustained socially through the process of human interaction. In this unit we discuss Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s ideas on how social reality is constructed, through their path breaking work *The Social Construction of Reality: A treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (1966). The book was declared as one of the most important sociological books of the 20th century by the International Sociological Association. The central contribution of this book is the ability to bridge the gap between subjective reality and objective

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social structures. Berger and Luckmann argue that people through their interaction in social system create, over a period of time, concepts knowledge of social reality: These concepts or understanding of reality help navigate their social roles. When these roles are made available to other members of society to enter into and play out, the reciprocal interactions are said to be institutionalised and established into enduring patterns. In the process, meaning is fixed in society. Knowledge and people's conceptions (and beliefs) of what reality is become embedded in the institutional fabric of society. Reality is therefore said to be socially constructed. For example, conceptions around motherhood or role of mother may be embedded into society over a time. The fact that such a conception is socially constructed is revealed to us as ideas around motherhood also change with changing times.

In this unit we look at this social construction of reality through various conceptual elements. But before that we take a brief look at Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman's life and the influences on their work.

6.2 THE STUDY OF SOCIAL REALITY

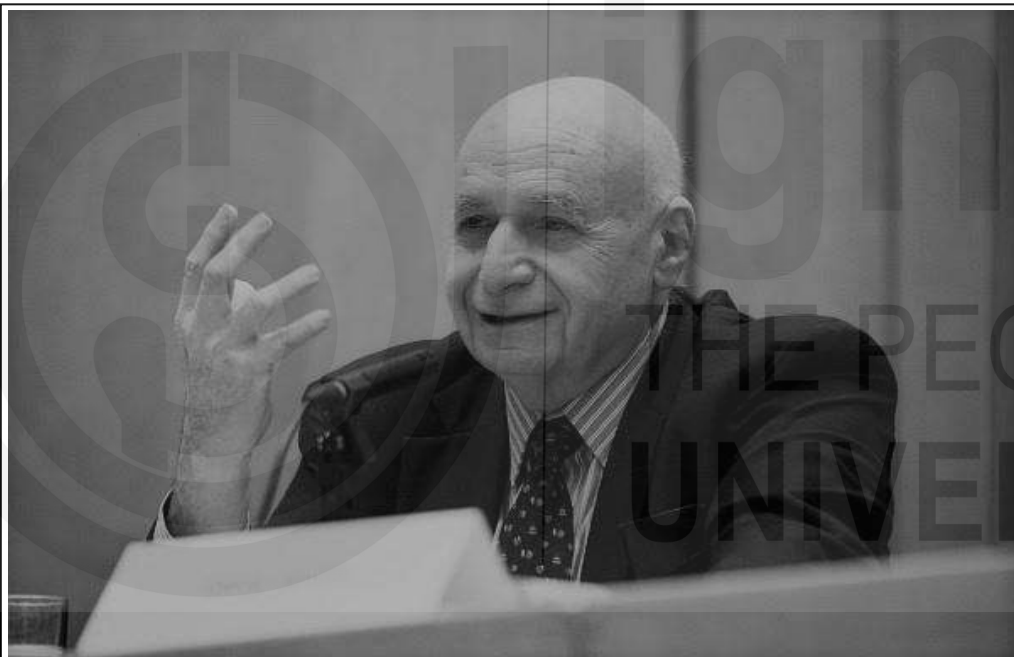
The study of social reality has been one of the primary concerns of sociological learning. The concept has been addressed in a number of ways by various scholars but however a general agreement has been that reality is different for each individual. Before proceeding further let us understand this significant concept and also its nature and character. Our reality is a complicated negotiation in everyday life. What is real depends on what is socially acceptable in the eyes of all. While we participate in the construction of reality, it's not entirely a product of our own doing only. Thus, social reality is defined as that part of social phenomena or fact that is peculiar to a particular society such as social class, religion, caste and so on and that is defined by the experiences, customs and beliefs of its societal members. Therefore, what we see as social reality is in fact a gamut of human experiences *vis a vis* their cultural content. How we were raised and what we were raised to believe affect how we present ourselves, how we perceive others, and how others perceive us. In short, our perceptions of reality are coated by our beliefs and backgrounds. Social realities thus bear a complex character because of its multiple layers of meanings and existence in different social contexts. In other words, one particular fact is interpreted and understood in a multiple way by us. Therefore, we have many societies, cultures. Social realities not only vary among different societies and cultures but also it varies across time and generations. Owing to its character as a non-monolithic entity, it always receives theoretical attention from scholars interested in the study of society.

6.3 BURGER AND LUCKMANN: LIFE AND TIMES

In this section we take brief look at how various events and life's journeys might have had a bearing on Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's life. Both were accidental sociologist who did not set out to become sociologist but nevertheless made one of the most important contributions to understanding of reality and how social reality is human construction. In the sub sections below we give you a brief biographical sketch of the scholars whose work the Social Construction of reality is the primary focus of this unit.

6.3.1 Peter Burger (1929-2017)

Peter Ludwig Berger was born in Vienna in 1929, Austria. His parents Goerge William and Jelka were Jewish converts to Christianity. After the Nazi takeover of Austria in 1938, Berger family emigrated to Palestine, then under British rule, to escape the Nazi regime and persecution of Jews. Following the German



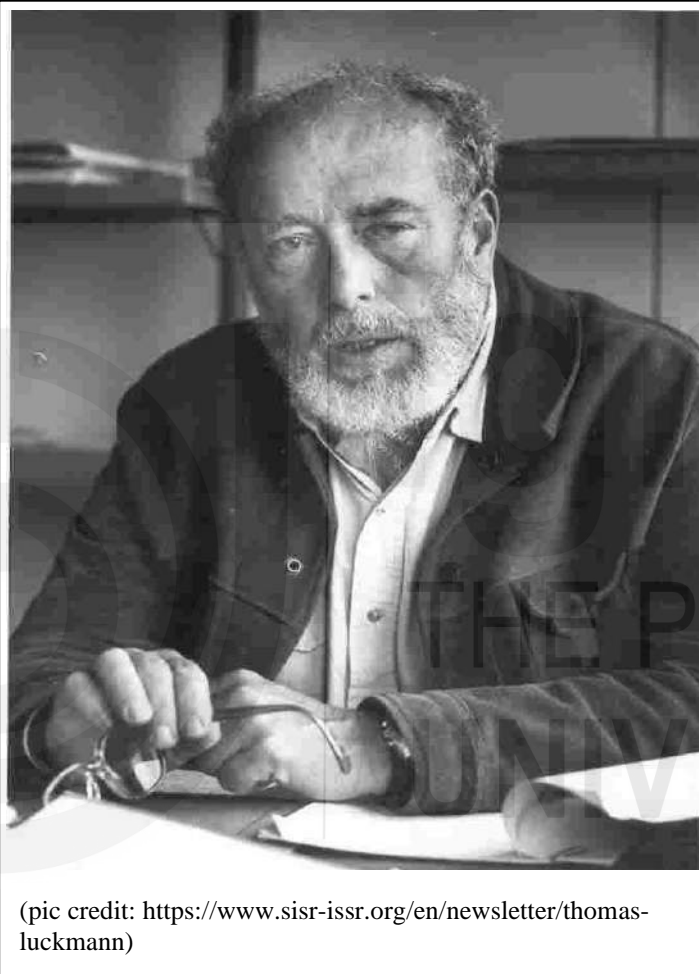
(pic credit: wikipedia)

bombings of Haifa, the family moved to Mount Caramel. Here Berger developed a lifelong interest in religion, which subsequently led him to study religion. In 1947 Berger and his family emigrated again, this time to the United States, where they settled in New York City. Berger attended Wagner College for his Bachelor of Arts and received his MA and PhD from the New School for Social Research in New York in 1954. Berger, in his memoir, *Adventures of an Accidental Sociologist: How to Explain the World Without Becoming a Bore* (2011) writes that he enrolled for Phd so that he may learn about American Society and to learn under Alfred Schütz. He was not envisioning becoming a sociologist and calls himself as an "accidental sociologist". His interest in religion led him to work at the Evangelische Akademie in Bad Boll, West Germany in 1955 and 1956, and later as an associate professor at Hartford Theological Seminary from 1958 to 1963. The next career stints were professorships at the New School for Social

Research, Rutgers University, and Boston College. Since 1981 Berger was the University Professor of Sociology and Theology at Boston University. He retired from BU in 2009. In 1985 he founded the Institute for the Study of Economic Culture, which later transformed into the Institute on Culture, Religion and World Affairs (CURA), and is now part of the Boston University. He died on June 27, 2017, in his Brookline, Massachusetts, home after a prolonged illness.

6.3.2 Thomas Luckmann (1927 – 2016)

Thomas Luckmann was born in Jesenice in 1927 when Jescnice was part of



(pic credit: <https://www.sisr-issr.org/en/newsletter/thomas-luckmann>)

kingdom of Yugoslavia. Lukmann father was an Austrian and his mother was from Ljubljana, Slovenia So Luckmann grew up in bilingual environment, speaking both Slovene and German. The German occupation of Jesenice forced the family to move to Austria in 1943. Being a resident of Austria he was granted a German citizenship and therefore was also drafted into the German Army as Luftwaffenhelfer or Hitler youth; an auxiliary unit in the army where many

youth, those born in 1926-27, were recruited. Lukmann was 17 when he was conscripted. He sustained minor injuries and was admitted a military hospital in Bavaria during the end of the WWII when United states liberated the region and Luckmann was taken as prisoner of war , he however escaped the prison after three months and eventually settled in Vienna. He studied philosophy and linguistics at the University of Vienna and Innsbruck. And like Berger was exposed to sociology when he moved to United States and studied at New School in New York.

At New School Luckmann was introduced to sociology of religion when his teacher Carl Meyer urged him to do fieldwork about churches in Germany after World War II, his work which was captivating prompted Lukmann to pursue PhD in sociology.

6.4 SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann are highly acclaimed social theorists to have lasting impression on the theorisation of reality and the ways in which it is being constructed and sustained socially through the process of human interaction. Let us now consider the example of a rich and a poor person for whom even if they stay in the same society but reality appears to both of them differently. A wealthy person who owns a pet at home and also feels proud that his care giving is the best one and it is also a right thing to do if one truly loves a pet. He is thus concerned about giving the pet branded organic food, clothes, health care treatments that costs more per week than the weekly earnings of a poor minimum-wage worker. A minimum-wage worker who serves the wealthy man in taking care of the pet might fume that this man's pet eats and lives better than he does. He might wonder and question whether this rich man has any concept of reality as to what is going on in society. For both realities are different as it is conditioned by their social background. Rich man learns from his interaction with others that spending money on one's pet is a good thing whereas the poor man from his experience and back ground learns that spending money on pets is a negative thing. Therefore, how we define everyday situations depends on our interaction experiences.

The book *The Social Construction of Reality* written in 1966 by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann is particularly important here to understand the process of reality construction by humans and human interaction. The book is remarkable on account of the fact that it provided theoretical underpinning for the phenomenological approach. Their analysis moved beyond Schutz's perspective on consciousness and Garfinkel's focus on micro individual's routine life. The social construction of reality bridges the gap between the micro individual practices with larger macro institutional structures of society. Even though the basic theoretical insights of symbolic interactionism is visible in this theory but yet it moves away from the confinements of the micro level interaction to understand the macro level cultural meaning systems as reflected in society's major institutions. They asserted that human beings create meanings that depends on the formation of individual's consciousness and world views plus their sense of psychological security. In other words, "macro-level institutional structures are sustained and reproduced through the routine practices of everyday life whereby they acquire their objective and common-sense status" (Johnson 2008:155)

However, the reality whether to be reproduced as it is or differently all this is determined by the subjective understanding of the individuals. For instance, in a highly differentiated society like ours which is constantly at the verge of change, there is a risk that these structures that appear as stable and independent of our volition may lose their obvious and factual character and reflect inconsistency and conflicting worldviews. When the major institutional structures of society fail to reinforce one another then that lead to an erosion of the subjective

understanding of the 'way the world is'. This inconsistency may lead to prevalence of disorder, chaos and anxiety in everyday life of individuals. Think about multiple experts are airing out their opinion on a particular incidence by giving multiple views. At times they all are in competition with each other as to whose definitions and concepts are going to be beneficial and become operative in social interaction. Thus, the image of reality as reality is being created with the help of human action.

In this context it would be apt to discuss the two categories of reality that Peter Berger and Luckman are refereeing about in their work. Objective reality is defined as the natural world. For example, the moon, the stars, or the ocean. These are phenomena that are basically always present and do not change. Subjective reality is socially constructed reality. For example, a role or status in society, such as a person's job title, becomes real and internalised through interaction and social definition. This is done by the process of socialisation which according to Berger and Luckman is a key concept in the process of maintaining subjective reality. People are not born members of society, they are made members of society (Berger and Luckmann 1966:149). The interaction between people is what makes this to appear as real. Subjective reality is also defined as the subjective interpretation of objective reality. For example, society has determined that the sky is blue. This gives social meaning to an objective phenomenon. Clearly, this is subjective interpretation of objective reality as the colour of sky does appear different in certain circumstances. Many of our subjective interpretations are part of everyday knowledge what we call commonsense. Therefore, in the construction of reality Berger and Luckman argue that commonsense plays a major role. Human beings in their everyday life make use of commonsensical knowledge to construct social reality. Common sense knowledge is shared intersubjective through interaction with other human beings. This becomes very clear in the structure of routine that human beings follow in the course of their daily life.

A main aspect of Berger and Luckmann's thesis thus has been the ways in which macro-level institutional structures are sustained and reproduced through the routine practices of everyday life whereby they acquire their objective and common-sense status (Johnson 2008:155). In other words, there exists a mutual relationship between human action, social institutions and subjective consciousness. To understand the mutual interdependence of social institutions and subjective consciousness Berger and Luckman devised three principal concepts: externalisation, objectification and internalisation. These three interrelated processes thus constitute central to the perspective of social construction of reality. Overall these three processes portray a reciprocal relationship between individuals and society. Individuals create society through the process of externalisation but the objective social reality that is created then shapes individual's development through internalisation and insures that their actions will continue to reproduce the external social world (Johnson 2008 :157).

Check Your Progress 1

Note: Check your answer with those given at the end of the unit.

- 1) When Berger and Luckman said that reality is socially constructed, they meant:
 - a) scientists are guided in their work by social values and interests, so they define and measure phenomena that will support their theories
 - b) people negotiate shared definitions of their situation and live according to these, often forgetting that these social worlds are not fixed and external
 - c) sociologists decide what constitutes social reality and measure only that
 - d) terms like “reality” have no deeper meaning beyond the level of discourse.
- 2) Berger and Luckman coined the term
 - a) social construction
 - b) discourse
 - c) cultural materialism.

6.4.1 Externalisation

Externalisation refers to the ongoing human activity that helps in creating and recreating material and non-material spheres of social world in a continuous basis. In other words, material and non-material culture is being produced and reproduced through human activities. Production of tools, technology and other material artifacts are examples of the material spheres of social world. Whereas the cultural conditions range from development of laws, morals, science, and various belief systems in the non-material realm of the socio-cultural world. Social structures of kinds ranging from friendships and family groups to neighborhoods, formal organisations, and large scale institutional patterns all owe their origin to the human interaction process. In the interaction process what they share is their ideas and definitions of the material, social and symbolic world and also develop stable patterns of relations that are interdependent. This process is called as the externalisation. It “emphasises the intentional and sometimes creative aspects of human beings’ actions” (Johnson 2008: 156).

In the construction of social reality as an external objective reality habits or routinely behaviors play an important part. The authors state,

“All human activity is subject to Habitualisation. Any action that is repeated frequently becomes cast into a pattern, which can then be reproduced with an economy of effort and which, ipso facto, is apprehended by its performer as that pattern. Habitualisation, further, implies that the action in question may be performed again in the future in the same manner and with the same economical effort” (Berger and Luckmann 1966:71).

In other words, everything both social and non-social done by humans can transform to a habit. The process of making coffee in the morning is a perfect example of these types of habits. The person learns the process, repeats the process, and it is done economically every time in the future. Now the further question comes in this direction as to why do they become habitualised? The authors argue that humans are inherently lazy. They are constantly trying to minimise the expenditure of thought on quotidian activities. “habitualisation carries with it the important psychological gain that choices are narrowed...this frees the individual from the burden of “all those decisions” by providing a psychological relief (Berger and Luckman 1966: 54). The main purpose for which we habitualise some of our practices is that the activity to be undertaken in these situations can then be anticipated. Thus, it helps in making our life predictable. Habitualisation is the first step in the process of institutionalisation. Institutionalisation is defined as, “a reciprocal typification of habitualised actions by types of actors” (Berger and Luckmann 1966:72). Put more simply, institutions are made up of reciprocal interaction that becomes typified based on a habitual phenomenon. These typifications of habitualised actions of individuals that built institutions are always shared ones. They are available to all the members of social groups in a specific time and space context. For example, why do we go to hospital? Unless we work there if we go then what is assumed about us? The answers to these questions are always comes from our commonsensically typified understandings. Thus, Institutions always have a historical nature (Berger and Luckmann 1966:72). Institutions cannot just appear out of thin air. They have to be constructed first by a habitual process, which then is shared by members of society. One more example can be cited in this context. The education system in the earlier times was based on family teaching family. Over time, small schools were developed with one teacher and a few students. As more time went on, and as the population increased, bigger schools were built to house more students and teachers until we see what modern schools look like today. The point is that the education system like any other social system did not just develop out of nowhere, indeed, it took interactions between social actors over a long period of time to get what we have today. Apart from the historical character of these institutional structures what is more important is that this must get the acceptability of all. This is what is referred as the process of legitimation; “Legitimation justifies the institutional order by giving a normative dignity to its practical imperatives” (Berger and Luckmann 1966:111). In other words, institutions must have an ongoing process of maintaining themselves. For example, society can be seen as maintaining itself through teaching in schools. Schools teach what is the accepted roles and rules of society, which, in turn, perpetuate the current social systems in place. The legitimate structures of social reality in the form of institutions are never constant it gets changed slowly and gets replaced with other legitimate structures.

6.4.2 Objectification

Once established the outcomes of the creative actions of individuals in the form of institutional structures becomes part and parcel of the external world. It then appears to us as if having its independent existence which we call the process of objectification. It never appears to us that it is a human creation. In other words, the external worlds of artifacts tools, technologies, art, building etc. appear before us as objective phenomena. Even though these material and non-material world is being created by we individuals but it appears to us as natural not created by us. All diverse areas of non-material culture including beliefs, values, rules, norms and customs also appears to us as external in character having an objectified reality. For instance, in working towards baccalaureate degree, students must fulfill all official requirements of the university. These rules are not made by students themselves they exist outside their subjective consciousness and being enforced by other individuals within the university. although all rules are created by human beings but they appear to us as objectified reality which people are expected to follow whether they agree with it or not. Rulemaking and rule enforcing thus form the essential features of the social reality for everyone else. Informal customs for the same matter also appear to us as objectified reality. Objectified reality is often regarded as a reified reality. Let us understand the process of reification in this context that the authors have pointed out in this context.

Activity 1

Record and analyse conversation between different people whom you meet in your daily life to see the 'social construction of women's body' as an objectified reality.

Reification as a process discusses how the social world is treated like objects. The authors state, "Reification is the apprehension of human phenomena as if they were things, that is, in non-human or supra-human terms. Another way of saying this is that reification is the apprehension of the products of human activity as if they were something other than human products – such as facts of nature, results of cosmic law, or manifestations of divine will" (Berger and Luckmann 1966:106). In other words, reification means to make something a 'thing.' A perfect example of this is the polity which has been institutionalized over a period of time. But today it is treated as a 'thing' and pass judgement like good and bad just like a good piece of candy or a bad one. For example, we treat currency or money as an object, quite forgetting that it is a human creation.

After the social world created, the social world becomes more than the external objectified reality. People internalise large parts of it in their subjective consciousness through the socialisation process. This what we call as the process of internalization. The in following paragraph let us discuss its relevance in the context of creation of social reality.

6.4.3 Internalisation

Internalisation is the third of three major processes of the theory of social construction of reality. People are socialised into their culture or sub culture and thus develop a basic understanding of “the way things are” and “the way things should be”. Over years it becomes part and parcel of our subjective consciousness and thus are eventually taken for granted and becomes part of our commonsensical understanding. We never question their existence rather try to mold our behavioural patterns as per the external world and its objectified appearance. The concept of indexical constructions is used aptly by Peter Berger and Luckman to refer to the taken for granted character of the social reality. “The entire social world.... is a set of indexicalities, which are taken for granted. They are rarely called into question” (Collins, R 1988: 277)

Despite intense socialisation efforts, however, no one internalises the total culture. There are variations in how deeply different aspects of it become internalised by different types of people in different contexts. It is internalised in different degree hence social reality appears different for different people based on the experience and interpretation of each one of them.

Signs are of critical importance in constructing reality as it provides legitimation to the social reality. The authors state, “[a] crucially important case of objectivation is signification, that is, the human production of signs. A sign may be distinguished from other objectivations by its explicit intention to serve as an index of subjective meanings” (Berger and Luckmann (1966:50). For example, the pink breast cancer ribbon not only stands for the fight against breast cancer, but it also stands for the unity of women in society. Signs can take many forms in society, but the most important thing to take away is that signs are a tool for constructing and understanding subjective reality that is shared between members of society. Language serves as a significant sign in the process of objectifying the social world. Legitimation is built by and is expressed through language. An understanding of language is therefore essential for any understanding of the reality of everyday life” (Berger and Luckmann 1966:51-52). With its particular structures of grammar and syntax it helps to create a fund of knowledge which is continuously going through an expansion and contraction with creation of different words to express new ideas from time to time. It is a reservoir of knowledge. Language bonds different social meanings and helps individuals in society understand the world around them. It plays a critical role for the creation of complex social institutions. In other words, language as a social reality accumulates knowledge and transmits it to other members of society, which in turn create a socially ordered environment. Therefore, it is a social fact which exercises control or restraint over human members, and yet remains an externalisation, and outside the individual. Thus, social reality can be apprehended by a study of language and its application to varying situations within the societal context.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with those given at the end of the unit.

1) According to Berger and Luckman which of the following contains a list of the three 'moment' through which reality is constructed?

- a) Sourcing, objectifying grounding
- b) Identification, comparison attribution
- c) Externalization, objectification internalization
- d) Categorization, experience, interpretation.

2) According to Berger and Luckmann what are typifications and how are they used in everyday life?

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3) How do Berger and Luckmann define institution?

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4) What is reification?

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6.5 LET US SUM UP

We have learnt from this perspective that social construction of reality is a process of meaning making that involves symbols and symbolic interactions to create our lived reality. This then guide our thinking and actions in accordance with norms and values. These Constructions become concrete overtime and we see them as objective and normal and part of our commonsense. The process of reality construction is a reciprocal process. It means that humans simultaneously shape and are shaped by the worlds they create.

However, humans do not always subscribe wholly to the social order and social reality. In such instances we find that there are various socially available procedures to bring the deviants from the overall ideology back to the common fold. Such is the role of counselors, psychiatrists, shamans, saints and others. This instance makes it clear that socialisation does not work in all cases.

This is a fascinating area of research, and we find that problems of internalising the social structure by its members more in the contemporary societies. Increasing stress on individuality or individual version of reality makes it difficult to witness coherent picture of reality. Plural societies with multiple versions of reality has thus become significant picture of the contemporary societies. However, all plural societies with plural versions of reality will continue to dominate so long as the social structure is capable of taking the strain.

You may also want to watch this video on you tube channel:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oMtudgZ-1qY&t=141s>.

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6.7 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- b)
- a)

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) c)
- 2) typification refers to the fact that the bulk of life-knowledge refers not to the individual or unique qualities of things or persons, but to their typical or broad features. A stereotype is a one-sided, exaggerated and normally prejudicial view of a group which is usually associated with racism or sexism
- 3) Institutionalisation occurs whenever there is a reciprocal typification of habitualised actions by types of actors. Put differently, any such typification is an institution.
- 4) Reification as a process discusses where the social world is treated like objective reality. It is the apprehension of human phenomena as if they are things, having a non-human or supra-human quality of its own.