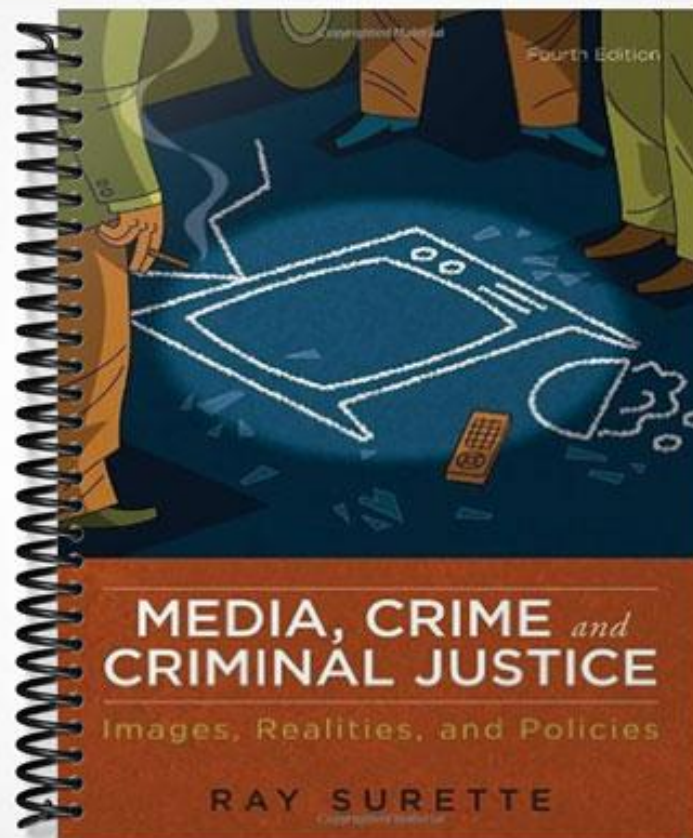


SOLUTIONS MANUAL



MEDIA, CRIME *and* CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Images, Realities, and Policies

RAY SURETTE

Chapter 2

Social Constructionism

Chapter Objectives

After reading Chapter 2, students should be able to:

1. have a theoretical foundation for exploring media, crime, and justice
2. understand the primary concepts of social constructionism
3. know how to use social constructionism to follow developments in criminal justice policy

Chapter Outline

- I. The Social Construction of Crime and Justice
 - a. Social Constructionism: people create reality through shared ideas, interpretations, and knowledge
 - i. Socially constructed reality may or may not objectively measure conditions in the world
 - ii. Social constructionism can result in negative consequences
 1. Example: Amadou Diallo
 - a. Unarmed man shot 41 times by police
 - b. Police socially constructed him (after applying stereotypes and cultural narratives) as a gun-wielding threat
 2. Walter Lippmann remarked in *Public Opinion* (1922): “For the most part we do not first see, and then define. We define first and then see...”
 - iii. Understanding the social construction of reality process and the concepts of social constructionism helps to understand the impact of media on crime and justice
 1. Social constructionism is strongly influenced by shifting cultural trends and social forces
 - a. Changes in opinion may be independent of changes in physical situations
 - b. Regarding crime, for example, social behaviors can be criminalized or decriminalized independent of changes in victimization or offense rates
- II. The Sources of Social Knowledge
 - a. Social constructionists seek to understand:
 - i. the process through which agreement is constructed
 - ii. the forces and conditions that influence when an accepted construction changes
 - b. People acquire social knowledge from four sources
 - i. Personal experiences
 - ii. Significant others (peers, family, friends)

- iii. Other social groups and institutions (schools, unions, churches, government agencies)
- iv. The media
- c. Three Kinds of Reality
 - i. Experienced Reality: one's directly experienced world--all the events that have happened to you
 - 1. Relatively limited
 - 2. Has a powerful influence on an individual's constructed reality
 - a. Nearly twice as many citizens in LA credited direct and conversational reality sources as more important than media sources in forming their views of police
 - b. Personal victimization is the most powerful source for defining one's view of how serious a particular crime is
 - i. Personal victimization is:
 - 1. comparatively rare
 - 2. concentrated in high-risk groups of citizens (lower income and minority persons)
 - ii. Symbolic Reality: all the events you did not witness but believe occurred; all the facts about the world you did not personally collect but believe to be true; all the things you believe to exist but have not seen
 - 1. Comprised from the remaining three sources of knowledge—other people, institutions, and the media
 - 2. Constitutes most of our knowledge
 - a. In the U.S., media, in particular, dominates our formation of symbolic reality
 - i. Creates a cause for concern
 - ii. What we see as crime and justice is largely defined, described, and delimited by media content
 - iii. Socially Constructed Reality: what we individually believe the world to be
 - 1. The combined knowledge of personal experience and symbolic reality mixes to construct our own "world"
 - 2. Subjective reality differs between individuals or groups
 - 3. Individuals with access to similar knowledge and who frequently interact with one another tend to negotiate and construct similar social realities
 - 4. The media comprise the most important element in defining crime and justice reality for most people
 - iv. The Social Construction Process and the Media (See Figure 2.1)
 - 1. Four Stages of Social Constructionism
 - a. Stage 1: the physical world without interpretation
 - i. Provides the boundaries that the other stages must work within
 - ii. Competing constructions cannot maintain credibility if they run counter to the physical reality of the world
 - b. Stage 2: competing constructions emerge

- i. Descriptions are frequently of social conditions
 - ii. Offer different explanations of why the physical world is as purported to be
 - iii. Competing constructions often argue for a set of public and individual policies that should be supported and pursued
 - 1. Example: “In order to get crime under control, we must impose longer prison sentences.”
- c. Stage 3: media act as filters
 - i. Persons forwarding constructions compete for media attention
 - ii. Media favor positions that are:
 - 1. dramatic
 - 2. sponsored by powerful groups
 - 3. related to preestablished cultural themes
 - iii. It is difficult for those outside the mainstream to access the media and promote their constructions
 - 1. Some constructions never get on the playing field
- d. Stage 4: the emergence of a dominant social construction
 - i. Media play an important role in the construction that eventually prevails
 - ii. The winning dominant construction directs public policy
 - 1. For crime and justice, this socially constructed reality will define:
 - a. the conditions, trends, and factors accepted as causes of crime
 - b. the behaviors that are seen as criminal
 - c. the criminal justice policies accepted as reasonable and likely to be successful

III. The Concepts of Social Constructionism

- a. Claims Makers and Claims
 - i. Claims makers: the promoters, activists, professional experts, and spokespersons involved in forwarding specific claims about a social condition
 - 1. Social problems can be constructed in many different ways
 - a. Example: Crime can be constructed as a:
 - i. social problem
 - ii. individual problem
 - iii. racial problem
 - iv. sexual problem

- v. economic problem
 - vi. criminal justice problem
 - vii. technological problem
2. Each construction implies different policy courses and solutions
- ii. Claims
1. Factual claims: statements that purport to describe the world
 - a. Promoted as objective “facts”
 - b. Made to categorize or type an event
 2. Interpretative claims: statements that focus on the meaning of events
 - a. Do one of two things:
 - i. offer an explanation of why a set of factual claims is as described
 - ii. offer a course action—a public policy—that needs to be followed to address the conditions or events described in the factual claims
 3. Linkage: involves the association of the subject of the social construction effort with other previously constructed issues
 - a. Strategy used to get a social construction accepted by the public
 - b. Example: drugs are linked to crime
 - i. Leads to the argument that certain drugs should be criminalized or other types of crime will increase
 - ii. The social importance of drug abuse is heightened
 - c. Crime-and-justice issues are often linked to the endangerment of:
 - i. health
 - ii. welfare
 - iii. families
 - iv. communities
- iii. Frames: prepackaged constructions; a fully developed social construction template that allows its users to categorize, label, and deal with a wide range of world events
1. Used by claims makers to further enhance the likelihood that their claim will advance
 - a. For a construction to be successful, its claims must be accepted
 2. Include factual and interpretative claims and associated policies
 3. Regarding crime and justice, preexisting frames make the processing, labeling, and understanding of crimes easier for the person holding that frame’s view of reality
 - a. Crimes can be cognitively dealt with and quickly tied to a policy position
 4. Five frames by criminologist Theodore Sasson (See Table 2.1)
 - a. All five compete today in the U.S.
 - b. All five frames accomplish the following:

- i. offer explanations of crime
 - ii. point to specific causes
 - iii. come with accompanying policies
- c. Faulty Criminal Justice System Frame
 - i. Crime results from a lack of “law and order”
 - ii. The only way to ensure public safety is to increase the swiftness, certainty, and severity of punishment
 - iii. Symbolically represented by the convicted, repeat rapist or by the image of inmates passing through a revolving door or prison
- d. Blocked Opportunities Frame
 - i. Crime is depicted as a consequence of inequality and discrimination, especially in the following areas:
 - 1. unemployment
 - 2. poverty
 - 3. education
 - ii. To reduce crime, government must ameliorate the social conditions that cause it
 - iii. Symbolically portrayed through references to dead-end jobs held by inner-city youth, such as flipping burgers at McDonald’s
- e. Social Breakdown Frame
 - i. Depicts crime as a consequence of:
 - 1. family and community disintegration
 - 2. skyrocketing rates of divorce
 - 3. out-of-wedlock births
 - ii. Conservative version: attributes family and community breakdown to “permissiveness”
 - iii. Liberal version: attributes family and community breakdown to:
 - 1. unemployment
 - 2. racial discrimination
 - 3. the loss of jobs and income
- f. Racist System Frame
 - i. Focuses on the criminal justice system rather than on crime
 - ii. Depicts the courts and police as racist agents of oppression
 - 1. Police resources are seen as dedicated more to the protection of white neighborhoods than to reducing crime in minority communities
 - 2. In radical versions of this frame, the basic purpose of the criminal justice system is to suppress a potentially rebellious underclass

- g. Violent Media Frame
 - i. Depicts crime and social violence as a consequence of violence on television, in the movies, in popular music and in video games
 - ii. Media violence is seen as at least a partial explanation of violent crime by nearly all Americans
 - iii. “By the time the average child reaches age 18, he will have witnessed some 18,000 murders and countless highly detailed incidents of robbery, arson, bombings, shootings, beatings, forgery, smuggling, and torture”
 - iv. To reduce violence in society, this frame directs us first to reduce it in the mass media
- h. How Frames Influence Crime-and-Justice Policy
 - i. All frames are supported by some portion of the public
 - ii. Frames are not mutually exclusive
 - iii. People often simultaneously support more than one frame
 - iv. Crime-and-justice claims makers can guarantee a level of support if they can fit their social construction within one of these frames
 - v. Many crime-and-justice events can be differently constructed using different frames
 - 1. Examples:
 - a. O.J. Simpson murder trial
 - I. Guilty = Faulty Criminal Justice System Frame
 - II. Innocent = Racist System Frame
 - b. 1999 Columbine High School shootings
 - I. Social Breakdown Frame
 - II. Violent Media Frame
 - III. Faulty Criminal Justice System Frame
 - vi. The five frames jockey with one another for:
 - 1. influence over how criminality is understood in society
 - 2. which criminal justice policies enjoy public support
 - 3. how new crimes and criminals are conceived
 - vii. The media can boost frames ahead of one another
- iv. Narratives: preestablished social constructions social constructions found throughout crime-and-justice media (See Table 2.2 for examples)

1. Crime-and-justice mini-portraits that the public already recognizes
2. Outline the recurring crime-and-justice types and situations that regularly appear in the media
 - a. Examples:
 - i. the “naïve innocent”
 - ii. the “masculine, heroic crime-fighter”
 - iii. the “innately evil predatory criminal”: longest running criminal narrative
3. Narratives can be utilized to do the following:
 - a. quickly establish the characteristics of a criminal, a victim, or a crime-fighter
 - b. as support examples for larger crime-and-justice frames
4. Consequences of narratives
 - a. Frequently linked to the faulty system frame because they infer a simplified single-cause explanation of crime
 - i. They give a sense of predictability and understanding to even the most senseless criminality
 - ii. Their use reduces the need to explain cause and effect
- v. Symbolic Crimes: crimes and other criminal justice events that are selected and highlighted by claims makers as perfect examples of why their crime-and-justice construction should be accepted
 1. Trumpeted to convince people of the existence of a pressing crime-and-justice problem and a desperately needed criminal justice policy
 2. Examples:
 - a. the beating of Rodney King
 - b. the kidnapping and murder of Polly Klaas
 - c. the murder trial of O.J. Simpson
 - d. the Columbine school shootings
 - e. the September 11th World Trade Center bombings
 3. The formula for using symbolic crimes in crime-and-justice social construction:
 - a. Step 1: Find the worst crime you can
 - b. Step 2: Link your construction to your symbolic crime
 - c. Step 3: Success equals an increased importance of your issue and public acceptance of your construction
 4. An effective symbolic crime can be the difference between winning and losing a social construction competition
 - a. Winning a social construction competition = Gaining ownership of social problems and issues
- vi. Ownership: the identification of a particular social condition with a particular set of claims makers who come to dominate the social construction of that issue

1. Claims makers own an issue when they are sought out by the media and others for their opinion regarding the issue
2. Law enforcement agencies have proprietary ownership of crime

IV. The Social Construction Process in Action

- a. Social Construction of Road Rage
 - i. An example of a media-created crime
 - ii. Joel Best found that the media sought not only to describe but to explain and interpret the problem
- b. Reconstruction of Driving Under the Influence
 - i. Media can also influence the crime construction process by raising the perception of a crime's seriousness
 1. Prior to the 1980s, DUI was socially constructed primarily as an individual rehabilitation problem
 - a. Lawmakers wanted to lessen the penalties for DUI
 - b. The imposition of stiff penalties such as license revocation would interfere with the offender's ability to work
 2. Beginning in the 1980s, new claims makers such as MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) attacked this dominant social construction of the drunk driver
 - a. The drunk driver is now characterized as a "killer drunk" and one of society's pressing problems
 - b. Support has grown for much stricter DUI laws and their enforcement and prosecution
- c. Competing Constructions of the Arrest of Rodney King
 - i. The arrest of Rodney King provides an example of the social construction competition process in which different constructed realities strove to become the dominant view
 1. Three different constructions of the cause and meaning of the event competed
 - a. Construction A: King resisted arrest and the beating was justified
 - b. Construction B: the beating was unjustified but was an isolated incident of unwarranted police violence carried out by a few rogue police officers
 - c. Construction C: the beating is unjustified and seen as an example of an endemic problem of unwarranted and consistent police violence toward minorities
 - i. Fitted within the racist system
 - ii. Indicates the need to revamp the administration and training of the department and make extensive organizational changes
 - iii. In the end, this construction won the construction competition

V. Social Constructionism and Crime and Justice

- a. Social constructionism encourages a particular set of social attitudes and perceptions about crime and justice and changes how serious some crimes are viewed by the public
 - i. Three engines of social construction of reality (See Figure 2.3)
 1. Conversational reality: personal experience and information received directly from people close to us
 - a. The most influential social construction engine
 2. Media, comprised of news, entertainment, advertisement, and increasingly infotainment, create a more pervasive, broadly distributed information engine in the social construction process
 3. The third social construction engine is knowledge supplied by the various institutions, organizations, and agencies that collect and disseminate statistics, information, and claims about the world
 - ii. The single most important insight to be gained from a social constructionism perspective is recognition of the social construction competition that is constantly being waged
 - i. We must recognize the process to thoughtfully evaluate the criminal justice policies that result
 - ii. Winning one social construction contest puts you on the inside track for winning future contests in the same manner
 1. If punitive criminal justice policy and predatory criminality totally dominate media content, entire frames and alternate ideas about crime and justice will disappear from serious public consideration

Chapter Key Terms

social constructionism [34]
experienced reality [35]
symbolic reality [35]
socially constructed reality [36]
claims makers [39]
factual claims [40]

interpretative claims [40]
linkage [41]
frames [42]
narratives [45]
ownership [49]
conversational reality [54]

Helpful and Interesting Internet Sites

The following sites are interesting sources for this chapter. Please review them before recommending them to your students.

Crime Mysteries

<http://www.mysterynet.com/tv//>

<http://www.mysterynet.com/timeline/>

<http://www.magicdragon.com/UltimateMystery/tv.html>