The Social Construction of Human Reality: Understanding Leadership Through Sociology

Human beings exhibit remarkably complex patterns of social life. Responsibility and leadership invariably unfold within social spheres, shaped by invisible structures that theories help us recognize and analyze. Understanding these structures – drawing from sociology and interdisciplinary perspectives – provides a crucial foundation for developing leadership skills in our complex world. This article explores three fundamental aspects of human social reality: first, our nature as ultra-social animals; second, the constructed nature of our social environment; and third, how social forces shape our identities. Together, these perspectives reveal why understanding social dynamics is essential for effective leadership.

1. Humans as Ultra-Social Animals

The Evolutionary Foundation: Mängelwesen and Ultra-Social Nature

The question of why humans are so profoundly social has deep evolutionary roots. Arnold Gehlen's (1940) concept of humans as *Mängelwesen* (deficient beings) offers a philosophical starting point: compared to other species, humans are physiologically and morphologically inferior, not perfectly adapted to any specific natural niche. Our survival strategy became culture itself – a "second nature" that we transmit across generations. Michael Tomasello's (2014) research confirms this from a contemporary scientific perspective. His comparative studies of chimpanzees and children demonstrate that humans are the most cooperative animals on Earth. We possess an ultra-social brain architecture, with an enlarged neocortex that is both the product of and the reason for our social nature. This architecture includes mental and emotional capacities that enable large-scale cooperation and cultural transmission (Tomasello, 1999). Language plays a crucial role in this system, facilitating cooperation through shared meaning, time-travel thinking, complex planning, and abstract thoughts.

The Human Brain: Wired for Culture

Mark Pagel's (2012) work emphasizes how profoundly the social environment shapes human development. We are born with exceptionally receptive minds, equipped with remarkable abilities for social learning. Social adaptation has, in many ways, replaced genetic adaptation as our primary survival mechanism. Cultural adaptation can jump from one mind to another, shortcutting the genetic route that requires reproduction and generational change. This ultra-social brain architecture generates ultra-social needs: being connected, maintaining positive emotional relationships, feeling accepted and appreciated, being there for others, feeling needed, and belonging to a group. When these needs are fulfilled, we experience happiness and well-being. When they go unmet – particularly in individualistic societies that emphasize independence and uniqueness – we might face serious problems including loneliness and mental health challenges. The age-old debate between nature and nurture takes on new meaning in this context. Human behavior operates on three levels (Nunez et al., 2007): the universal (what all humans share as a species through genetics), the cultural (what members of specific groups have in common), and the individual (what differentiates each person). Rather than choosing between genetic determinism and environmental shaping, we must recognize that human beings are products of both – with social learning serving as the bridge between them.
Albert Bandura's (1977) social learning theory demonstrates how individuals learn from one another through observation, imitation, and modeling. This cognitive process in social contexts allows us to acquire behaviors, with imitation more likely when we identify with or admire the person we're observing. Behaviors that are regularly rewarded tend to persist, creating patterns that spread through communities. Great apes demonstrate huge capacity for social learning (Geissmann, 2003), including behaviors like food preferences, food acquirement and processing – a transfer of culture. Humans take this capacity to unprecedented levels through our enhanced cognitive and linguistic abilities.

Ubuntu: A Leadership Philosophy of Interconnection

The African philosophy of Ubuntu embodies these insights about our ultra-social nature. Meanwhile Ubuntu is well-known as leadership philosophy (Nelson & Lundin, 2010; Ngomane, 2019). The phrase "I am because we are" captures the fundamental interdependence of human existence. Ubuntu emphasizes community, compassion, respect, and the recognition that individual success is meaningless without collective well-being. Ubuntu comes from within – you have to discover it in your heart first. It begins with seeing each individual as a human being. Key principles include:

- Being authentic to everyone
- Showing trust, respect and loving concern to all people
- Working with each other
- Recognizing that our differences don't matter, our similarities do
- Understanding that the success of the group counts more than individual success
- Accepting the person regardless of the result

2. The Constructed Nature of Social Environment

Social Constructivism

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's (1967) groundbreaking work on social constructivism reveals a profound truth: our world is socially constructed through mental representations embodied in language, institutions, social roles, cultural scripts and so on. We produce and reproduce these constructs, and they crucially influence how we perceive and interpret reality. What we consider right or wrong, our social categories like gender and race, abstract concepts like illness or justice – all of these are products of sociocultural and historical shaping processes. We are not born into an objective reality but into a world already thick with meaning created by those who came before us. Our perception and interpretations are crucially influenced by these social constructs.

The Constructed Nature of Social Groups and Belief Systems

Yuval Noah Harari's (2014) analysis extends this insight. Social groups are very often not really existing entities; they represent our brain's poor attempt to grasp the complex social world. Yet once we treat these categories as real, they become dangerous. Harari traces the evolution of belief systems – from animism to polytheism to monotheism, and the development of systems like capitalism. These belief systems feel immutable and natural, but they are human creations that have emerged at specific historical moments and can be questioned and transformed.

Why This Knowledge Matters

Understanding the constructed nature of social reality is crucial for several reasons. It reveals that categories like gender or nationality, while powerfully real in their effects, are not natural or inevitable. This creates what Judith Butler (2002) calls a "domain of freedom" – the space where conscious reflection allows us to question, resist, and reimagine the norms we've inherited. For leaders, this insight demands responsibility: we must critically examine the concepts and categories that divide us, recognizing that many of our most serious challenges stem from treating constructed divisions as natural and insurmountable.

3. Social Construction of Identity

Habitus: The Internalization of Social Structure

Pierre Bourdieu's (1983) concept of habitus explains how social structures become internalized, shaping how we perceive, think, and act in the world. Through socialization – in families, educational systems, social classes, and cultural contexts – we develop patterns of taste, judgment, and action that feel natural but are actually products of our social position. Habitus functions as "structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures" (Bourdieu, 1977: 72). Our everyday practices and experiences create dispositions that then reproduce social hierarchies. A middle-class student, for example, feels "at home" in academic settings not because of innate ability but because their habitus aligns with academic culture. These preferences and comfort zones come from somewhere – they reflect your upbringing, social class, education, and cultural background. Understanding this helps us recognize when we "clash" with another social world or feel judged.

Consider your own habitus

- What kind of music, food, or clothing do you naturally like – the things that feel "just you"?
- What kinds of places do you feel most comfortable or out of place in (e.g., a classical concert, a football stadium, an art gallery)?
- How were you raised to think about education, success, or "good taste"?
- Where do all these preferences come from?
- Which social fields were you socialized in?

Social Identity Theory

Henri Tajfel and John Turner's (1979) social identity theory demonstrates how people categorize themselves and others into social groups based on characteristics like gender, nationality, or profession. We derive a sense of self from the groups to which we belong, adopting our in-group's identity and comparing it to relevant out-groups (Trepte, 2013). This process serves important psychological functions – providing belonging and self-esteem – but carries serious dangers. It fosters in-group favoritism and can lead to intergroup bias, stereotyping, and discrimination (Welpinghus, 2020). The process of social categorization shapes person perception and impression formation (Quinn et al., 2003; Jhangiani & Tarry, 2022).

Role Theory and Dramaturgical Analysis

Role theory considers most of everyday activity to be acting out of socially defined roles (e.g., student, lecturer, mother, manager). A role is a set of rights, duties, expectations,

norms and behaviors that must be fulfilled – that is, performed. Each role comes with role-specific expectations, and people act in predictable ways based on their social context. Individual behavior is context-specific, based on social role. These role patterns are learned during socialization through observation and imitation – precisely the mechanisms described by social learning theory. Erving Goffman's (1956) dramaturgical analysis treats social interaction as theatrical performance. We are playing our roles according to social expectations. Goffman distinguishes between "front stage" (our public role performance) and "back stage" (our private life). We engage in impression management, trying to cast ourselves in the best light to produce social legitimacy – what he calls "face work." Role management becomes particularly challenging when we must perform contradictory roles simultaneously. How do we balance being a caring parent and a demanding boss? A supportive friend and a critical evaluator?

Performativity: Identity as Action

Judith Butler's (1990, 2002) theory of performativity takes this further. Social constructs and identities – woman, leader, father – do not exist prior to being performed. They are based on repeated imitations of social norms, and through this repetition, they become real. Gender identity, for example, is not an internal essence expressed through behavior but the effect of repeated behaviors: "acting like a guy" creates guy-ness rather than expressing a pre-existing masculine essence. These subconscious repetitions of norms (through imitation) produce social reality. But here's the crucial point: performativity becomes a "domain of freedom" through conscious reflection. When we become aware that we're performing socially constructed roles rather than expressing natural essences, we gain the power to question and potentially transform those performances.

4. Implications for Leadership

This theoretical framework transforms how we understand leadership. If social roles are performed rather than intrinsic, if identities are constructed rather than natural, then leadership itself is a domain of freedom where we can consciously choose how to enact

Several key insights emerge

Understanding social needs: Recognizing humans as ultra-social animals with fundamental needs for connection, belonging, and contribution changes how we approach leadership and team dynamics.
Questioning constructed categories: Awareness that social categories are constructed rather than natural allows us to challenge divisions and hierarchies that serve no useful purpose.
Recognizing habitus: Understanding that our own preferences, judgments, and comfort zones reflect our socialization rather than universal truths creates humility and openness.
Managing roles consciously: Seeing leadership as a performance we can shape rather than a fixed identity creates space for intentional, ethical leadership practices.
Building inclusive communities: Understanding social identity theory helps us recognize and counteract in-group favoritism and bias.

our roles. Social roles do not exist a priori – they are human-made (and often unspoken concepts). It is our responsibility to question these concepts and rethink them. This includes rethinking leadership roles: How do you want to perform a leadership role? Traditional leadership models often rely on constructed categories and hierarchies that may be outdated or harmful. The knowledge that these structures are human-made rather than natural creates responsibility: we must question inherited concepts of leadership and reimagine them for our contemporary context.

Practical Applications

For those developing leadership skills, several practices emerge:

- **Reflect on your habitus**: Understand that your tastes, comfort zones, and automatic judgments reflect your socialization, not universal truths.
- **Practice critical awareness**: Constantly question which aspects of your leadership performance reinforce problematic social structures and which create space for transformation.
- **Acknowledge social construction**: Recognize that your way of being in the world is one possibility among many, shaped by specific social and historical contexts.
- **Foster authentic connection**: Remember that beneath constructed differences lie universal human needs for belonging, recognition, and contribution.
- **Embrace Ubuntu principles**: Lead with the understanding that individual success is meaningful only in the context of collective well-being.

Conclusion

Understanding the social construction of human reality is not merely an academic exercise. It provides essential knowledge for navigating our complex, interconnected world. We are ultra-social animals with ultra-social needs, living in socially constructed realities, performing socially scripted identities. This knowledge creates both humility and possibility. Humility comes from recognizing that what feels natural or obvious is often culturally specific and historically contingent. Possibility emerges from understanding that if our social world is constructed, it can be reconstructed – more justly, more inclusively, more sustainably. Theories make structures of reality visible – giving us a chance to analyze and reflect on them. This reflection is the basis for responsible action. For leaders, this means accepting responsibility for the concepts and categories we perpetuate, the roles we perform, and the social realities we help create. It means questioning divisions that serve no purpose beyond maintaining unjust hierarchies. It means remembering that we are, fundamentally, social beings whose flourishing depends on the flourishing of others. As Ubuntu teaches us: "I am because we are." The knowledge from sociology, anthropology, and related disciplines reveals that our most serious global challenges stem from treating human-made constructions as natural and inevitable. Climate change, political instability, social inequality – these problems cannot be solved within the narrow confines of constructed divisions like nationality or ethnicity. Our evolution as ultra-social animals has prepared us for cooperation at unprecedented scales. The question is whether we will use our capacity for conscious reflection – our "domain of freedom" – to reimagine and reconstruct social reality in ways that serve our collective well-being. This is not optional knowledge but essential wisdom for leadership in the 21st century.

References

Bandura, A. (1977). Social learning theory. *Englewood Cliffs*.

Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1967). *The social construction of reality*. Anchor books.

Bourdieu, P. (1983). *La distinction*.

Butler, J. (2002). *Gender trouble*. Routledge.

Dunbar, R. I. M. (1993). Coevolution of neocortical size, group size and language in humans. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *16*(4), 681–694.

Gehlen, A. (1940). *Der Mensch: Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt*. Junker und Dünnhaupt.

Geissmann, T. (2003). *Vergleichende Primatologie: Mit 22 Tabellen*. Springer.

Goffman, E. (1956). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. University of Edinburgh.

Goffman, E. (2019). *Wir alle spielen Theater. Die Selbstdarstellung im Alltag* (18. Aufl.). Piper. https://katalog.ub.uni-freiburg.de/link?kid=1663421900

Harari, Y. N. (2014). A brief history of humankind. *Publish in agreement with The Deborah Harris Agency and the Grayhawk Agency*.

Jhangiani, D. R., & Tarry, D. H. (2022). 5.1 Initial Impression Formation. In *Principles of Social Psychology*. BCcampus.

Kuhlmann, N. (2016). *A Concept and Its Practices" A New Perspective on the Concept" Responsibility*. JSTOR.

Nelson, B., & Lundin, S. (2010). *Ubuntu!: An inspiring story about an African tradition of teamwork and collaboration*. Crown Currency.

Ngomane, N. M. (2019). *Everyday ubuntu: Living better together, the African way*. Random House.

Nunez, C., Mahdi, R. N., & Popma, L. (2007). *Intercultural sensitivity: From denial to intercultural competence*. Van Gorcum.

Nzimakwe, T. I. (2014). *Practising Ubuntu and leadership for good governance: The South African and continental dialogue*. https://repository.up.ac.za/handle/2263/58143

Pagel, M. (2012). *Wired for Culture: Origins of the Human Social Mind*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Quinn, K. A., Macrae, C. N., & Bodenhausen, G. (2003). Stereotyping and impression formation: How categorical thinking shapes person perception. In *The SAGE Handbook of Social Psychology: Concise Student Edition* (S. 68–92). SAGE Publications Ltd.

Tomasello, M. (1999). The Human Adaptation for Culture. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, *28*(1), 509–529.

Tomasello, M. (2014). The ultra-social animal. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *44*(3), 187–194.

Turner, J. C., Brown, R. J., & Tajfel, H. (1979). Social comparison and group interest in ingroup favouritism. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *9*(2), 187–204.

Welpinghus, A. (2020). *Stereotype: »So sind die eben!«*. Spektrum der Wissenschaft. https://www.spektrum.de/magazin/wie-stereotype-wirken/1791251