

Levels of Reality

External physical reality refers to those things that can be determined empirically by objective or, in our Western tradition, "scientific" tests. For example, if two people are arguing about whether or not a piece of glass will break, they can hit it with a hammer and find out (Festinger, 1957). If two managers are arguing over which product to introduce, they can agree to define a test market and establish criteria by which to resolve the issue. On the other hand, if two managers are arguing over which of two political campaigns to support, both would have to agree that there are no physical criteria by which to resolve their conflict.

Different cultures have different assumptions about what constitutes external physical reality. For example, many of us would not regard the spirit world or extra-sensory perception as having a physical reality basis, but in other cultures such phenomena might be regarded as very real. Vivid examples of how ambiguous the borderline can be are provided in Casaneda's (1968, 1972) descriptions of his experiences with the Indian shaman Don Juan and in the controversies that surround research on extra-sensory perception. At its core, physical reality is obvious; at its boundaries, it becomes very much a matter of macrocultural consensus, which raises the issue of "social reality."

Social reality refers to those things that members of a group regard as matters of consensus, that are not externally, empirically testable. The nature of human nature—the correct way for humans to relate to nature and to each other, the distribution of power and the entire political process, assumptions about the meaning of life, ideology, religion, group boundaries, and culture—these are obviously matters of consensus, not empirically determinable. How a group defines itself and the values it chooses to live by obviously cannot be tested in terms of our traditional notions of empirical scientific testing but certainly can be strongly held and shared unanimously. If people believe in something and define it as real, it becomes real for that group.