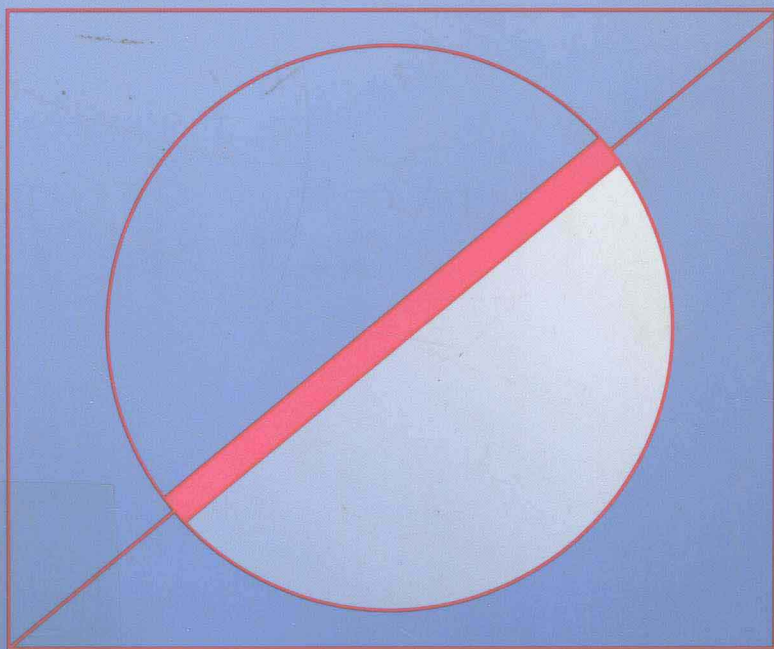


SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

**AN INTRODUCTION,
AN INTERPRETATION,
AN INTEGRATION**

FOURTH EDITION



Joel M. Charon

Symbolic Interactionism:

An Introduction,
An Interpretation,
An Integration

4th Edition

JOEL M. CHARON
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*With a chapter on Erving Goffman
written by Spencer Cahill,
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Preface

The first edition of this book was an attempt to fulfill a promise I made to myself in graduate school: to write a clear, organized, and interesting introduction to symbolic interactionism. It was meant to integrate that perspective, to be as accurate as possible, and to help the reader apply the ideas to real life.

Since that first edition symbolic interactionism has become increasingly important to the discipline of sociology. Its criticisms of traditional sociology have been considered and have made an impact. Its research studies have increasingly become a part of sociology. Its practitioners are some of the leading officers, journal editors, and researchers in the discipline.

This edition is another attempt to refine the ideas, and to point out further relationships between the various ideas. Chapters 9, 10, and 11 (action, interaction, and society) are more clearly written, more up to date, and more integrative of the whole perspective. One of my colleagues, Joel Powell, helped me understand and appreciate some of the work contributed by social psychologists from the University of Iowa, and some of that has been integrated into Chapter 11.

Probably the most innovative contribution to this fourth edition was made by Spencer Cahill. A year ago I asked Spencer if he would contribute a chapter on Erving Goffman. As you will see, his chapter is an enthusiastic

and insightful summary of Goffman's work, and it fits nicely into the whole framework of this book.

The last chapter has also been redone. Two reviewers helped me a great deal. They suggested that I should give more examples of how this perspective can be applied to real situations. They also suggested that I try to apply it to understanding gender and ethnic group relations. Both suggestions helped me improve the final chapter.

I sincerely hope that symbolic interactionists will find this edition true to their ideas, and will find it to be a good representative of the work they are doing. I hope that instructors will find this book easy to teach with, and useful in showing students the relevance of both symbolic interactionism and sociology for understanding the human being. Finally, I hope that students will find a perspective in this book that is exciting, enlightening, and relevant to understanding their lives.

I wish to thank the reviewers of my book: Ronny E. Turner, Colorado State University; Kathleen M. Waggoner, Iowa State University; James M. Bruce, Mount Holyoke College; and Michael Schwalbe, North Carolina State University. Their comments were encouraging and pointed me in new directions.

I dedicate this book to my wife, Susan, who continues to be my best friend and greatest supporter.

Joel M. Charon

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chapter 1

The Nature of “Perspective”

Teachers and authors throughout my educational career have warned me that truth is very difficult to find indeed. The more I understood, of course, the more I realized they were right. A new dimension to the problem of truth opened up, however, as I was introduced to the concept of *perspective*. Once taken literally, the concept of perspective must lead one to the conclusion that, for human beings, truth about physical reality is impossible in any absolute sense.

Many years ago, I read the following story by A. Averchenko. It underlines the difficulty the human has in knowing what is really happening “out there.” I interpreted it as an illustration of bias in perception. I explained to others that here was a good example of how people take a single situation and twist it to meet their needs. Underlying my interpretation of the story was the belief that people tend to be closed-minded, narrow, and less than truthful.

“Men are comic,” she said, smiling dreamily. Not knowing whether this indicated praise or blame, I answered noncommittally: “Quite true.”

“Really, my husband’s a regular Othello. Sometimes I’m sorry I married him.” I looked helplessly at her. “Until you explain—” I began.

“Oh, I forgot that you haven’t heard. About three weeks ago, I was walking home with my husband through the square. I had a large black hat on, which suits me awfully well, and my cheeks were quite pink from walking. As we

passed under a street light, a pale, dark-haired fellow standing near by glanced at me and suddenly took my husband by his sleeve."

"'Would you oblige me with a light,' he says. Alexander pulled his arm away, stooped down, and quicker than lightning, banged him on the head with a brick. He fell like a log. Awful!"

"Why, what on earth made your husband get jealous all of a sudden?" She shrugged her shoulders. "I told you men are very comic."

Bidding her farewell, I went out, and at the corner came across her husband.

"Hello, old chap," I said. "They tell me you've been breaking people's heads."

He burst out laughing. "So, you've been talking to my wife. It was jolly lucky that brick came so pat into my hand. Otherwise, just think: I had about fifteen hundred rubles in my pocket, and my wife was wearing her diamond earrings."

"Do you think he wanted to rob you?"

"A man accosts you in a deserted spot, asks for a light and gets hold of your arm. What more do you want?"

Perplexed, I left him and walked on.

"There's no catching you today," I heard a voice from behind.

I looked around and saw a friend I hadn't set eyes upon for three weeks.

"Lord!" I exclaimed. "What on earth has happened to you?"

He smiled faintly and asked in turn: "Do you know whether any lunatics have been at large lately? I was attacked by one three weeks ago. I left the hospital only today."

With sudden interest, I asked: "Three weeks ago? Were you sitting in the square?"

"Yes, I was. The most absurd thing. I was sitting in the square, dying for a smoke. No matches! After ten minutes or so, a gentleman passes with some old hag. He was smoking. I go up to him, touch him on the sleeve and ask in my most polite manner: 'Can you oblige me with a light?' And what do you think? The madman stoops down, picks up something, and the next moment I am lying on the ground with a broken head, unconscious. You probably read about it in the newspapers."

I looked at him and asked earnestly: "Do you really believe you met up with a lunatic?"

"I am sure of it."

Anyhow, afterwards I was eagerly digging in old back numbers of the local paper. At last I found what I was looking for: A short note in the accident column.

UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF DRINK

"Yesterday morning, the keepers of the square found on a bench a young man whose papers show him to be of good family. He had evidently fallen to the ground while in a state of extreme intoxication, and had broken his head on a nearby brick. The distress of the prodigal's parents is indescribable."

The seeker of truth naturally asks, "What really happened?" The police, of course, investigate situations such as this one in order to determine who is *telling the truth*. "Someone must be lying" or "Someone is twisting the truth to fit his or her own needs." It is difficult for most of us to accept the view that all may be telling the "truth." We might see things differently if we imagine

that each one of the individuals (including the interviewer) comes to the situation with a different *perspective*, and therefore sees a *different reality*. Although some of these perspectives may be closer to "physical reality" than others, all of them probably capture at least part of that reality, and none of them is able to capture the whole of it. These perspectives are neither omniscient nor all-inclusive.

The story is called "Point of View," and in a sense, a perspective is a point of view, placing observers at various angles in relation to events and influencing them to see these events from these angles. By its very nature, then, a point of view, or perspective, limits what the observer sees by allowing only one side of what is "out there" to be seen.

There is no way that any individual can see all aspects of any situation simultaneously. One must pull out certain stimuli and totally ignore other stimuli. One must also put the stimuli pulled out into a larger context so that what is seen makes sense. That is what perspectives do: They *sensitize* the individual to parts of physical reality, they *desensitize* the individual to other parts, and they help the individual *make sense* of the physical reality to which there is sensitization. Seen in this light, a perspective is absolutely basic to the human being's everyday existence because it is needed to make sense out of what is seen. Yet, because of perspective, the human being cannot encounter physical reality "in the raw," directly, for whatever is seen can only be *part* of the "real situation."

Perspectives are made up of words—it is these words that are used by the observer to make sense out of situations. In a way, the best definition of perspective is a *conceptual framework*, which emphasizes that perspectives are really interrelated sets of words used to order physical reality. The words we use cause us to make assumptions and value judgments about what we are seeing (and not seeing).

Reality, for the individual, depends on the words used to look at situations. If we examine the story by Averchenko in this light, it becomes obvious that the differences between actors' viewpoints depend on the words they used to *see*. The woman uses "Othello," "married," "black hat" ("which suits me"), "pale, dark-haired fellow," all of which reveal that in that situation she was "seeing" according to a perspective associated with a woman concerned with her attractiveness. Her husband, fearful of his money, uses these words: "fifteen hundred rubles," "diamond earrings," "accosts," "deserted," "gets hold of your arm." In both cases, and in other cases too, certain aspects of the situation were pulled out, emphasized, and integrated, according to each person's *perspective*, or conceptual framework. And in each case, the conceptual framework led to various value judgments and assumptions by the actor in the situation.

A college education, in many ways, is an introduction to a variety of perspectives, each telling us something about what is going on around us. Sociology, psychology, history, humanities, art, George Orwell, Machiavelli,

Freud, James Joyce, and Malcolm X—each represents a perspective that we might adopt as our own, integrate with others we have or forget entirely after our final exam. Each perspective is a different approach to "reality," and each, therefore, tells us something but cannot include everything.

It seems that the most difficult aspect of "perspective" to grasp is that perspectives cannot capture the whole physical reality. It is probably because we want so desperately to know that what we believe is true that we cannot face the fact that whatever we know must be seen only as a truth gained from a certain *perspective*. We cannot, for example, even agree totally on what a simple object is. One day in the middle of winter, I went outside and picked up something from the ground and brought it to class. I asked, "What is this?" The answers were snow, a snowball, ice crystals, frozen water, something you are showing us to make some point, something little boys use to frighten little girls, the beginning of the world's biggest snowman, molecules, dirty snow, a very interesting shape to draw, the symbol of cold weather. Of course, my response was, "What is this really?" And, of course, the response by them was that it is all of these things, and probably many, many more things. Indeed, whatever that physical reality was is interpreted by people in many ways, depending entirely on the perspective they use to see it. No one of these perspectives could ever claim to have grasped the true essence of that which was brought in from outside. And even if we might try to claim that all of these perspectives together capture the object completely, we would be missing the point: Perspectives are almost infinite; thus, we can never claim to have found all the possible perspectives on anything.

Human beings are limited by their perspectives; they cannot see outside of their perspectives. Yet perspectives are vitally important: They make it possible for human beings to make sense out of what is "out there."

Perspectives must be judged by individuals according to their usefulness in interpreting situations that arise. Perspectives should not be thought of as true or false (as we might be tempted to do) but as helpful or useless in understanding. We accept or reject various perspectives in our education based on whether or not they make sense to us; that is, do they help us understand people or situations we encounter? The more useful a perspective is, the more apt we are to regard it as truth, but truths today have a habit of becoming "just *their* opinion" tomorrow, and we find ourselves giving up older perspectives for newer, more useful ones.

NEW PERSPECTIVES MEAN NEW REALITIES

Many are familiar with *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Malcolm X was an important leader in the Civil Rights movement during the 1960s. He is a good example of an individual whose life situations brought about very

definite changes in perspectives and thus opened up whole new worlds for him. With each perspective came a new reality. In seventh grade, for instance, he was elected class president, and in looking back, he reports:

And I was proud: I'm not going to say I wasn't. In fact, by then, I didn't really have much feeling about being a Negro, because I was trying so hard, in every way I could, to be white. . . . I remember one thing that marred this time for me: the movie "Gone With the Wind." When it played in Mason, I was the only Negro in the theater, and when Butterfly McQueen went into her act, I felt like crawling under the rug. (Malcolm X and Haley, 1965:31-32)*

Malcolm remembers his perspective changing in school:

It was then that I began to change—inside. I drew away from white people. I came to class, and I answered when called upon. It became a physical strain simply to sit in Mr. Ostrowski's class. Where "nigger" had slipped off my back before, wherever I heard it now, I stopped and looked at whoever said it. And they looked surprised that I did. (p. 37)

Then in New York:

"Man, you can't tell him nothing!" they'd exclaim. And they couldn't. At home in Roxbury, they would see me parading with Sophia, dressed in my wild zoot suits. Then I'd come to work, loud and wild and half-high on liquor or reefers, and I'd stay that way, jamming sandwiches at people until we got to New York. Off the train, I'd go through the Grand Central Station afternoon rush-hour crowd, and many white people simply stopped in their tracks to watch me pass. The drape and the cut of a zoot suit showed to the best advantage if you were tall—and I was over six feet. My conk was fire-red. I was really a clown, but my ignorance made me think I was "sharp." My knob-toed, orange-colored "kick-up" shoes were nothing but Florsheims, the ghetto's Cadillac of shoes in those days. . . . And then, between Small's Paradise, the Braddock Hotel, and other places—as much as my twenty- or twenty-five dollar pay would allow, I drank liquor, smoked marijuana, painted the Big Apple red with increasing numbers of friends, and finally in Mrs. Fisher's rooming house I got a few hours of sleep before the "Yankee Clipper" rolled again. (p. 79)

Malcolm has been seeing the world from the perspective of zoot suits, reefers, conk, Cadillac of shoes, but he is suddenly exposed to a new perspective, which opens up a new world to him:

When Reginald left, he left me rocking with some of the first serious thoughts I had ever had in my life: that the white man was fast losing his power to oppress

*From *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* by Malcolm X, with the assistance of Alex Haley. Copyright © 1964 by Alex Haley and Malcolm X. Copyright © 1965 by Alex Haley and Betty Shabazz. Reprinted by permission of Random House, Inc., New York, and the Hutchinson Publishing, Random Century Group Ltd., London.

and exploit the dark world; that the dark world was starting to rise to rule the world again, as it had before; that the white man's world was on the way down, it was on the way out. (p. 162)

Because of this new perspective, Malcolm X becomes sensitive to things in his world he never really saw before. His past takes on a new meaning, and the many situations that took place between blacks and whites in his past are seen differently. He joins the Black Muslims, and he becomes a great leader in that movement. At the height of his activity in that movement, the words he preaches reflect his perspective:

No *sane* black man really wants integration! No *sane* white man really wants integration. No *sane* black man really believes that the white man ever will give the black man anything more than token integration. No! The Honorable Elijah Muhammed teaches that for the black man in America the only solution is complete *separation* from the white man! (p. 248)

And, finally, Malcolm's perspective changes once more, as a result of a pilgrimage he makes to Mecca. As his perspective changes, the world around him becomes transformed:

It was in the Holy World that my attitude was changed, by what I experienced there, and by what I witnessed there, in terms of brotherhood—not just brotherhood toward me, but brotherhood between all men, of all nationalities and complexions, who were there. And now that I am back in America, my attitude here concerning white people has to be governed by what my black brothers and I experience here, and what we witness here—in terms of brotherhood. The *problem* here in America is that we meet such a small minority of individual so-called "good," or "brotherly" white people. . . . (p. 368)

Malcolm X's autobiography is an excellent description of an individual undergoing profound changes in *perspective*. His story is not unique, but what is happening is probably more obvious to us in his story than it would be in many others.

Not only do we all undergo *basic* change in our perspectives many times throughout our lives, but our perspectives change from situation to situation, often many times during the same day. Few of us have one perspective that we can apply to every situation we encounter. Perspectives are situational: In the classroom my perspective is that of teacher/sociologist; in my home it becomes father or husband; on a fishing trip it changes to "seasoned fisherman." Each situation calls forth a different role, which means a different perspective. Some roles we play may have more than one perspective we can use (there are many different *student* perspectives we might draw on depending on the situation we encounter), and some perspectives may apply to more than one role we play (e.g., a Christian may apply his or her perspective as a Christian to a number of roles). Perspectives are a complex matter.

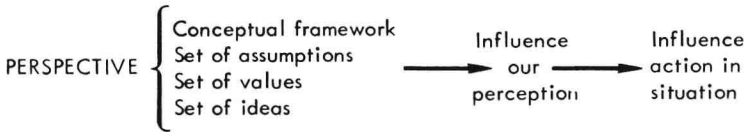


FIGURE 1-1

Perspectives are not perceptions but are guides to our perceptions; they influence what we see and how we interpret what we see. They are our "eyeglasses" we put on to see. Figure 1-1 summarizes the meaning of perspective.

A perspective, then, by its very nature, is a **bias**; it contains assumptions, value judgments, and ideas; it orders the world; it divides it up in a certain way; and as a result it influences our action in the world. A father and his son see each other from at least two perspectives (one the father's, and the other the son's) and thus define a situation that affects them both (e.g., the use of the car) in two very different ways. Neither is necessarily wrong or in error, although they may certainly disagree. A candidate for president of the United States may see the society as in need of change and promise all kinds of possibilities, but once that person is in office, his or her perspective will change and his or her behavior will be affected. It is not, as may appear to us, that the new president is dishonest, but rather that the definition of the situation has changed because that person now sees the world from the perspective of president, not candidate.

IS THERE A "BEST" PERSPECTIVE?

Are all perspectives equally "good," or can one argue that one perspective is "better" than another? Is, for example, a son's perspective "better" than his father's? Is an artist's perspective "better" than a scientist's?

Whenever any two things (such as perspectives) are compared, there has to be agreement on criteria for comparison. So, for example, Martha is "better" than Marsha if we agree that the criterion is IQ and can agree on how it should be measured. One painting is "better" than another if we use "capturing physical reality" as a criterion for comparison and can agree on how to measure "capturing physical reality."

Some perspectives are therefore "better" than others. All are not equal. To judge which is "better," however, a standard of comparison must be established. Some people, for example, would argue that the best perspective is the one that conforms closest to Holy Scripture or the one that comes closest to the "American creed." Thus, atheism is not a good perspective in the first case, and for most of us, a racist perspective is not good in the second case.

Most of us are probably interested in using perspectives that *accurately describe* what is “really” happening in the world around us. Certainly, in the world of scholarship accurate description is one of the most important measurements of a “good perspective.” A good perspective gives us insight, clearly describes reality, helps us find the truth. Most scientists, natural and social, make a claim that their perspectives are better than common-sense ones because there is a disciplined control of personal bias. The fruits of science do indeed support the fact that the scientific perspective is superior to the vast majority of perspectives that deal with the natural and social worlds. If given a choice between a scientific perspective and a nonscientific perspective examining exactly the same question, it would be unusual for me to opt for the latter, because it is clear to me that scientific perspectives are usually more reliable than nonscientific ones in accurately answering questions about the natural and social world. It depends a great deal, however, on the nature of the question asked.

Science is far from accurate in answering a number of important questions, and scientists are unable to deal with whole layers of reality that other perspectives deal with. Even in the natural and social worlds that the scientist does examine, there are realities that go unnoticed and are not even looked for, realities too difficult to examine scientifically. To claim that the perspective of science is better than any other because it is more accurate is not a just claim for all questions.

The problem of the “best” perspective is confounded when we try to determine the most accurate scientific perspective. Although scientists share a scientific perspective, they differ in what they focus on in reality, and it would be very difficult to establish criteria for judging which one of the sciences captures reality the best. This could be done, but probably to no good purpose. It is best to understand scientific perspectives as each focusing on a different aspect of the natural and social world, each helping us more clearly understand that aspect. Comparing scientific perspectives—indeed, comparing all perspectives—is a difficult task, but it is not impossible if criteria are *carefully* established.

SUMMARY

It may be beneficial to summarize this chapter by simply restating the basic points and by listing some examples of perspectives:

1. Perspectives are points of view—eyeglasses, sensitizers—that guide our perceptions of reality.
2. Perspectives can further be described as conceptual frameworks, a set of assumptions, values, and beliefs used to organize our perceptions and control our behavior.