

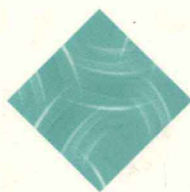
SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

AN INTRODUCTION,

AN INTERPRETATION,

AN INTEGRATION

Sixth Edition



JOEL M. CHARON

SIXTH EDITION

Symbolic Interactionism

An Introduction, An Interpretation, An Integration

Joel M. Charon

*Moorhead State University
Moorhead, Minnesota*

With a chapter on Erving Goffman
by Spencer Cahill

University of South Florida



Prentice Hall

Upper Saddle River, New Jersey 07458

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

CHARON, JOEL M.

Symbolic interactionism: an introduction, an interpretation,
an integration / JOEL M. CHARON — 6th ed. / with a chapter
on Erving Goffman written by Spencer Cahill.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-13-671694-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)

I. Symbolic interactionism I. Title.

HM251.C46 1998

302—dc21 97030940

Editorial director: *Charlyce Jones Owen*

Acquisitions editor: *Nancy Roberts*

Production editor: *Edie Riker*

Cover design: *Rosemarie Votta*

Buyer: *Mary Ann Gloriande*

Marketing manager: *Christopher DeJohn*

This book was set in 10/12 New Baskerville by East End Publishing Services
and was printed and bound by Courier Companies, Inc. The cover was
printed by Phoenix Color Corp.



© 1998, 1995, 1992, 1989, 1985, 1979 by Prentice-Hall, Inc.
Simon & Schuster / A Viacom Company
Upper Saddle River, New Jersey 07458

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Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 0-13-671694-6

Prentice-Hall International (UK) Limited, *London*
Prentice-Hall of Australia Pty. Limited, *Sydney*
Prentice-Hall Canada Inc., *Toronto*
Prentice-Hall Hispanoamericana, S.A., *Mexico*
Prentice-Hall of India Private Limited, *New Delhi*
Prentice-Hall of Japan, Inc., *Tokyo*
Simon & Schuster Asia Pte. Ltd., *Singapore*
Editora Prentice-Hall do Brasil, Ltda., *Rio de Janeiro*

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 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.

In the fourth edition I was very fortunate to include a chapter on Erving Goffman by Spencer Cahill, which proved to be a wonderful addition. Joel Powell's contribution to that fourth edition also proved significant.

Each time I attempt to improve on what I have written before, it brings a certain humility to my work. After revising each edition, I wonder how in the world I could ever have written what I had previously. In the fifth edition I thoroughly revised the chapter on social interaction and the last chapter on applications of the perspective. In this sixth edition, I tried to thoroughly revise the first three chapters, largely as a result of good comments made by reviewers and students from my classes.

I always go through every chapter carefully in order to update it and make the text clearer. Based on my teaching experience, I constantly ask myself how to best present this difficult material to students so they understand it and see its relevance for understanding themselves and their society. I try to be sensitive to other professors who use my books, since they know well what needs to be done. Of course, in the end, I have made the final decisions as to what ended up in this book, and I thank my editors at Prentice Hall for allowing me to do this.

I wish to thank the reviewers of my book: Jerry L. Johnson, Grand Valley State University; Norman Goodman, State University of New York; and Whitney Garcia, University of Maryland. Their comments were encouraging and helped me to be more critical of my own work.

Finally, I would also like to thank certain symbolic interactionists who have been very important to my thinking from afar. I read what they write; I listen to and watch them at meetings; they are important models to me, although they may not know it. They are Howard Becker, Lonnie Athens, Spencer Cahill, Norman Denzin, Gary Fine, Ruth Horowitz, Helena Lopata, John Lofland, Lyn Lofland, David Maines, Bernard Meltzer, and Tamotsu Shibutani. I also admired Carl Couch, and I will miss him.

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

Joel M. Charon
Moorhead State University

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"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 nearby 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 wants to know: "What really happened?" The police, of course, will investigate situations such as this one in order to determine who is telling the truth. Usually they conclude "someone must be lying" or "someone is twisting the truth to fit his or her own selfish needs." It is difficult for the police—and for most of the rest of us—to believe that all may be telling what they believe to be the "truth," and, indeed, each one may actually be capturing part of the truth. ~~If we place ourselves in the positions of the people involved, however, and try very hard to imagine what they were seeing from their particular angle, we might begin to appreciate the powerful role that "perspective" plays as we try to see reality "as it really is."~~ It actually may be that some of these perspectives bring the actor closer to reality than the others, but none of them is able to capture the whole of it. Not a single one of these is omniscient nor all-inclusive.

The story is called "Point of View," and in a sense, that is the very best definition of what a perspective is. ~~A perspective is an angle on reality, a place where the individual stands as he or she looks at and tries to understand reality. An angle will always limit what one sees, since other angles—many of which may also be accurate—cannot be considered at the same time.~~

Human beings always see reality through perspectives. Once we begin to learn perspectives as children we are doomed—or blessed—to use them as our angle of vision. If we recognize this, then we must also admit there is no possible way that any individual can see all aspects of any situation simultaneously. ~~Perspectives force us to pull out certain stimuli from our environment and to totally ignore other stimuli. Perspectives force us to make sense out of that stimuli in one way rather than another.~~ Perspectives sensitize the individual to see parts of reality, they desensitize the individual to other parts, and they guide the individual to make sense of the reality to which he or she is sensitized. Seen in this light, ~~a perspective is an absolutely basic part of everyone's existence, and it acts as a filter through which everything around us is perceived and interpreted.~~ There is no possible way that the individual can encounter reality "in the raw," directly, as it really is, for whatever is seen can be only part of the real situation.

Whatever might have happened in the trial of O.J. Simpson, those involved are going to see it differently, and those observing it from the outside will inevitably disagree about what is and is not true about it. It becomes clearer to me why those in the African-American community will see it differently from me. What they see comes from a perspective that arose out of oppression. For hundreds of years there has been an ongoing discussion about events affecting people in that community. Learning about their own history and seeing how friends and neighbors are treated by many outside the community, including and especially the police and the courts, develop a perspective that causes many individuals who hold it to notice a racist system of justice, to be skeptical of police officers, to wonder about the good intentions of white judges, white middle-class jurors, and white reporters. Does their perspective allow them to see the truth? Sometimes a part of it—

never the full truth. And how about those who come from the perspective of whites outside of that community—will their perspective allow them to see the truth? Sometimes a part of it—never the full truth. Can those of us trying to understand reality benefit from the fact that there are many perspectives that people can use to see the reality of the O.J. Simpson trial? Of course we can. It is important for all of us who seek the truth to understand why some people, because of their perspective, will see the criminal justice system as unjust, while others will think of it as democratic and fair. It is probably both of these, and for the pursuer of truth to understand it well, both perspectives may be important to understand.

~~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.

In this same way, whites who look at the O.J. trial might use words such as evidence, DNA, science, injustice, biased jurors, ruthless lawyers, and abuse to describe what took place in the first trial where he was found not guilty. In the African-American community words such as planted evidence, racist police, and discrimination might be words that were used when people saw the same reality. There is probably some truth in each perspective, and there may be ideas that are downright false. However, if we focus on people's personal life experiences as well as the words they use among one another, we can begin to see why people differ in how they see reality, and it is not simply that one side is correct and the other is wrong.

~~It is also a mistake to believe that individuals have simply one perspective that is important to them.~~ There may have been nine African Americans on the jury, and that perspective may have been important to some of them, but other perspectives also came to be important to them, and sometimes even more important. Being on the jury became a perspective: Each had an occupational

perspective he or she brought, each had a perspective associated with age and gender. It is, therefore, a mistake to claim that this jury was simply made up of nine African Americans and three others; perspectives are very complex, and being African American may not have been as important to people on the jury as it was for those people who were in the wider community and who did not have to see the situation from the perspective of jury member.

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 we might use to see 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."

It is important for me to emphasize that I am *not* saying here that there is no truth at all, or that every opinion about reality is equally correct. Unfortunately, many people do in fact believe this, and many will try to interpret my discussion as a way to support their position. ~~Reality does in fact exist—that is, there is something actually happening out there in the world—but we cannot know it completely or in any perfectly accurate way, because we always see it through filters we are here calling perspectives.~~

NEW PERSPECTIVES MEAN NEW REALITIES

The Autobiography of Malcolm X is a fascinating book and movie about an important leader in the Civil Rights movement during the 1960s. Here is an individual whose life situations caused him to see the reality around him in very different ways. He changed because his truths changed, and his truth changed because each perspective he took on as he interacted with others opened up whole new worlds for him. 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 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

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