Chapter 5
What I Think I Heard You Say: Learning How to Improve Challenging Social and Political Interactions

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ABSTRACT
The United States is a diverse country which includes a vast tapestry rich in cultures, ethnicities, languages, and religions. The robust diversity is what defines the nation, its character, its identity, and its strength. This rich tapestry of diversity also provides the nation with a unique status among all nations and is viewed as a nation of immigrants. One aspect of such diversity is the complicated nature of social interactions between and among people who have different perceptions about the world. Often one’s perception effects behavior in social interactions having positive or negative results. Using two theories, Symbolic Interaction and Cognitive, this chapter guides the reader to understanding the complicated relationships that arise when one interacts with and among others who may not perceive the world in the same manner.

INTRODUCTION
The world is a challenge place at times. Political, economic, and social factors, singularly and collectively, contribute to the challenges we encounter as we interact and socialize with others. Currently, simple conversations and differences of opinions regarding the topics mentioned can turn into ugly, argumentative, and on the rare occasion, become a physical confrontation.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-3843-1.ch005

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Social interactions with others can become stressful and touchy when we perceive that others “just don’t get it”. Using two theories, Symbolic Interaction and Cognitive, this chapter guides readers to understanding the complicated relationships that sometimes arise when one interacts with and among others who may not perceive the world in the same manner. Part of the complication is between oneself, one’s perceptions, and the contentious social interactions with others. Using parables and case examples the chapter offers detailed suggestions regarding how self-awareness can provide an avenue to easing tension in challenging social interactions.

**Social Interaction Theory**

A theory is a set of building blocks that explains a phenomenon. There are explanatory theories and change theories. Symbolic Interaction Theory is an explanatory theory and explains how people deal with the world. In contrast, Cognitive Theory is a change theory and facilitates, predicts, or explains the outcome of how people respond to a given situation, or how we arrive at a decision.

Symbolic Interaction Theory posits that the self and identity develop by using shared symbols that emerge through daily interactions with others in a shared community or society and that individual’s identities change based on the continual social interactions within society (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1937). A major concept of this theory is that the self is viewed as a social being that experiences constant growth and change as it “the self” interacts within the environment (Sechrest-Ehrhardt, 2012). As we mature and start developing a sense of self we begin to figure out our role in society. Symbolic Interaction suggests that much of our learning about who we are and where we fit in the bigger scheme of things is a result of putting ourselves in “the role of the other” (Charon, 2004, p. 114). This suggestion is extremely important as it proposes that as we begin to learn about ourselves and at the same time taking on the role of “other” helps us to understand how that other person may perceives us. Charon (2004) suggests, “if we want to influence or teach others we need to understand “where they are at” so that what we do makes sense to them” (p. 114). When people take the role of the other they engage in an active process where they can understand and actively form their actions per their definitions of what they perceive others are thinking or doing.

At this point, I am guessing that you might be thinking, “This is a confusing concept” and asking, “How is it going to help me form better relationships so
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