

Interactionist perspective

A sociological approach that generalizes about everyday forms of social interaction in order to explain society as a whole. The *interactionist perspective* is primarily concerned with the fundamental or everyday forms of interaction, including symbols and nonverbal communication. It is a sociological framework for viewing human beings as living in a world of meaningful objects. George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) first developed interactionism in the United States and is regarded as the founder of the interactionist perspective

Interactionist View of A Sidewalk Etiquette

Erving Goffman (*Relations in Public*. New York: Basic Books, 1971, pp. 9-18) offers a new look at sidewalk behavior, drawing on the interactionist approach.

When we sit behind the wheel of a car and begin driving, we are confronted immediately with many rules that govern our behavior. Society provides us with reminders of these rules—traffic lights, stop signs, speed-limit signs, white lines marking lanes, and, ultimately, police officers. Interestingly, pedestrians also abide by a certain mutual understanding of proper behavior in traffic. We may not have read a book of "rules of the sidewalk" or been formally taught them, and we do not need to worry about getting a ticket for "walking too fast." Nevertheless, we have learned certain social standards for pedestrian behavior that are part of our culture.

Traffic on the sidewalk sorts itself into two sides going in opposite directions. The dividing line is near the middle of the sidewalk, yet it can shift quickly when traffic bunches in one direction. As in vehicular traffic in the United States, pedestrian movement tends to stay to the right side of the dividing line. Those who are walking more slowly generally stay nearer the buildings, while those in a hurry are nearer the curb.

The workability of such lane rules and of rules for passing is based on two subtle practices, "externalization" and "scanning." When we externalize, we use body gestures to show people the direction in which we are heading. Scanning involves moving our line of sight to observe people coming in our direction and to confirm the forward progress of pedestrians immediately ahead of us. A person's scanning range is usually three or four sidewalk squares if the street is crowded, and more if few walkers are present.

In order to avoid small objects and unpleasant or contaminated spots, we practice "sidestepping." George Orwell (*Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1950, p. 15) observed an interesting example of this practice in Burma. An Indian prisoner was walking between two guards on the way to his execution. He came near a small puddle and sidestepped out of the path for a moment in order to avoid it. This little act points out the often unconscious nature of sidestepping.

If a collision with another pedestrian seems imminent, we attempt to create immediate eye contact. The hope is to quickly indicate a new route and avoid a collision. This is a common practice when people are crossing a street at a busy intersection. It can be argued that, given such pedestrian routing customs, the individual effectively becomes a vehicular unit. He or she is expected to conform to many unstated, yet socially agreed upon, standards.



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