Reference Groups as Perspectives

Although Hyman coined the term..., the concept of reference group has become one of the central analytic tools in social psychology.... The inconsistency in behavior as a person moves from one social context to another is accounted for in terms of a change in reference groups, the exploits of juvenile delinquents, especially in interstitial areas, are being explained by the expectations of peer-group gangs; modifications in social attitudes are found to be related to changes in associations. The concept has been particularly useful in accounting for the choices made among apparent alternatives, particularly where the selections seem to be contrary to the “best interests” of the actor. Status problems—aspirations of social climbers, conflicts in group loyalty, the dilemmas of marginal men—have also been analyzed in terms of reference groups, as have the differential sensitivity and reaction of various segments of an audience to mass communication. It is recognized that the same generic processes are involved in these phenomenally diverse events, and the increasing popularity of the concept attests to its utility in analysis....

It is the contention of this paper that the restriction of the concept of reference group to the... group whose perspective constitutes the frame of reference of the actor will increase its usefulness in research. Any group or object may be used for comparisons, and one need not assume the role of those with whom he compares his fate.... Under some circumstances, however, group loyalties and aspirations are related to perspectives assumed, and the character of this relationship calls for further exploration. Such a discussion necessitates a restatement of the familiar, but, in view of the difficulties in some of the work on reference groups, repetition may not be entirely out of order. In spite of the enthusiasm of some proponents there is actually nothing new in reference group theory.

CULTURE AND PERSONAL CONTROLS

Thomas pointed out many years ago that what a man does depends largely upon his definition of the situation. One may add that the manner in which one consistently defines a succession of situations depends upon his organized perspective. A perspective is an ordered view of one’s world—what is taken for granted about the attributes of various objects, events, and human nature. It is an order of things remembered and expected as well as things actually perceived, an organized conception of what is plausible and what is possible; it constitutes the matrix through which one perceives his environment. The fact that men have such ordered perspectives enables them to conceive of their ever changing world as relatively stable, orderly, and predictable. As Riezler puts it, one’s perspective is an outline scheme which, running ahead of experience, defines and guides it.

There is abundant experimental evidence to show that perception is selective; that the organization of perceptual experience depends in part upon what is antici-
pated and what is taken for granted. Judgments rest upon perspectives, and people with different outlooks define identical situations differently, responding selectively to the environment. Thus, a prostitute and a social worker walking through a slum area notice different things; a sociologist should perceive relationships that others fail to observe. Any change of perspectives—becoming a parent for the first time, learning that one will die in a few months, or suffering the failure of well-laid plans—leads one to notice things previously overlooked and to see the familiar world in a different light. As Goethe contended, history is continually rewritten, not so much because of the discovery of new documentary evidence, but because the changing perspectives of historians lead to new selections from the data.

Culture, as the concept is used by Redfield, refers to a perspective that is shared by those in a particular group; it consists of those "conventional understandings, manifest in act and artifact, that characterize societies." Since these conventional understandings are the premises of action, those who share a common culture engage in common modes of action. Culture is not a static entity but a continuing process; norms are creatively reaffirmed from day to day in social interaction. Those taking part in collective transactions approach one another with set expectations, and the realization of what is anticipated successively confirms and reinforces their perspectives. In this way, people in each cultural group are continuously supporting one another's perspectives, each by responding to the others in expected ways. In this sense culture is a product of communication.

In his discussion of endopsychic social control Mead spoke of men "taking the role of the generalized other," meaning by that that each person approaches his world from the standpoint of the culture of his group. Each perceives, thinks, forms judgments, and controls himself according to the frame of reference of the group in which he is participating. Since he defines objects, other people, the world, and himself from the perspective that he shares with others, he can visualize his proposed line of action from this generalized standpoint, anticipate the reactions of others, inhibit undesirable impulses, and thus guide his conduct. The socialized person is a society in miniature; he sets the same standards of conduct for himself as he sets for others, and he judges himself in the same terms. He can define situations properly and meet his obligations, even in the absence of other people, because, as already noted, his perspective always takes into account the expectations of others. Thus, it is the ability to define situations from the same standpoint as others that makes personal controls possible. When Mead spoke of assuming the role of the generalized other, he was not referring to people but to perspectives shared with others in a transaction.

The consistency in the behavior of a man in a wide variety of social contexts is to be accounted for, then, in terms of his organized perspective. Once one has incorporated a particular outlook from his group, it becomes his orientation toward the world, and he brings this frame of reference to bear on all new situations. Thus, immigrants and tourists often misinterpret the strange things they see, and a disciplined Communist would define each situation differently from the non-Communist. Although reference-group behavior is generally studied in situations where choices seem possible, the actor himself is often unaware that there are alternatives.

The proposition that men think, feel, and see things from a standpoint peculiar to the group in which they participate is an old one, repeatedly emphasized by students of anthropology and of the sociology of knowledge.... The concept of reference group actually introduces a minor refinement in the long familiar theory, made necessary by the special characteristics of modern mass societies. First of all, in modern societies special
problems arise from the fact that men sometimes use the standards of groups in which they are not recognized members, sometimes of groups in which they have never participated directly, and sometimes of groups that do not exist at all. Second, in our mass society, characterized as it is by cultural pluralism, each person internalizes several perspectives, and this occasionally gives rise to embarrassing dilemmas which call for systematic study. Finally, the development of reference-group theory has been facilitated by the increasing interest in social psychology and the subjective aspects of group life, a shift from a predominant concern with objective social structures to an interest in the experiences of the participants whose regularized activities make such structures discernible.

A reference group, then, is that group whose outlook is used by the actor as the frame of reference in the organization of his perceptual field. All kinds of groupings, with great variations in size, composition, and structure, may become reference groups. Of greatest importance for most people are those groups in which they participate directly—what have been called membership groups—especially those containing a number of persons with whom one stands in a primary relationship. But in some transactions one may assume the perspective attributed to some social category—a social class, an ethnic group, those in a given community, or those concerned with some special interest. On the other hand, reference groups may be imaginary, as in the case of artists who are "born ahead of their times," scientists who work for "humanity," or philanthropists who give for "posterity." Such persons estimate their endeavors from a postulated perspective imputed to people who have not yet been born. There are others who live for a distant past, idealizing some period in history and longing for "the good old days," criticizing current events from a standpoint imputed to people long since the internalization of norms; they constitute the structure of expectations imputed to some audience for whom one organizes his conduct.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL WORLDS

As Dewey emphasized, society exists in and through communication; common perspectives—common cultures—emerge through participation in common communication channels. It is through social participation that perspectives shared in a group are internalized. Despite the frequent recitation of this proposition, its full implications, especially for the analysis of mass societies, are not often appreciated. . . .

Modern mass societies, indeed are made up of a bewildering variety of social worlds. Each is an organized outlook, built up by people in their interaction with one another; hence, each communication channel gives rise to a separate world. Probably the greatest sense of identification and solidarity is to be found in the various communal structures—the underworld, ethnic minorities, the social elite. Such communities are frequently spatially segregated, which isolates them further from the outer world, while the "grapevine" and foreign-language presses provide internal contacts. Another common type of social world consists of the associative structures—the world of medicine, of organized labor, of the theater, of café society. These are held together not only by various voluntary associations within each locality but also by periodicals like *Variety*, specialized journals, and feature sections in newspapers. Finally, there are the loosely connected universes of special interest—the world of sports, of the stamp collector, of the daytime serial—serviced by mass media programs and magazines like *Field and Stream*. Each of these worlds is a unity of order, a universe of regularized mutual response. Each is an area in which there is some structure which permits reasonable anticipation
which one may act with a sense of security
and confidence. Each social world, then, is a
culture area, the boundaries of which are set
neither by territory nor by formal group
membership but by the limits of effective
communication.

Since there is a variety of communication
channels, differing in stability and extent, so-
cial worlds differ in composition, size, and
the territorial distribution of the participants.
Some, like local cults, are small and concen-
trated; others, like the intellectual world, are
vast and the participants dispersed. Worlds
differ in the extent and clarity of their bound-
aries; each is confined by some kind of hori-
zon, but this may be wide or narrow, clear or
vague. The fact that social worlds are not
coterminous with the universe of men is rec-
ognized; those in the underworld are well
aware of the fact that outsiders do not share
their values. Worlds differ in exclusiveness
and in the extent to which they demand the
loyalty of their participants. Most important
of all, social worlds are not static entities;
shared perspectives are continually being re-
constituted. Worlds come into existence with
the establishment of communication chan-
nels; when life conditions change, social rela-
tionships may also change, and these worlds
may disappear.

Every social world has some kind of
communication system—often nothing more
than differential association—in which there
develops a special universe of discourse,
sometimes an argot. Special meanings and
symbols further accentuate differences and
increase social distance from outsiders. In
each world there are special norms of
conduct, a set of values, a special prestige
ladder, characteristic career lines, and a com-
mon outlook toward life—a Weltanschau-
ung. In the case of elites there may even arise
a code of honor which holds only for those
who belong, while others are dismissed as
beings somewhat less than human from
whom bad manners may be expected. A so-
cial world, then, is an order conceived which
serves as the stage on which each participant
seeks to carve out his career and to maintain
and enhance his status.

One of the characteristics of life in mod-
ern mass societies is simultaneous participa-
tion in a variety of social worlds. Because of
the ease with which the individual may ex-
pose himself to a number of communication
channels, he may lead a segmentalized life,
participating successively in a number of un-
related activities. Furthermore, the particular
combination of social worlds differs from
person to person; this is what led Simmel to
declare that each stands at that point at
which a unique combination of social circles
intersects. The geometric analogy is a happy
one, for it enables us to conceive the numer-
ous possibilities of combinations and the dif-
ferent degrees of participation in each circle.
To understand what a man does, we must
get at his unique perspective—what he takes
for granted and how he defines the situa-
tion—but in mass societies we must learn in
addition the social world in which he is par-
ticipating in a given act . . .

NOTES

1. R. Redfield, The Folk Culture of Yucatan (Chi-
For a more explicit presentation of a behavioristic
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ward Sapir in Language, Culture and Personality, ed.
D. G. Mandelbaum (Berkeley: University of Cali-
2. G. H. Mead, "The Genesis of the Self and So-
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(1925), 251–77, and Mind, Self and Society (Chi-
cago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), pp. 152–
64. Cf. T. Parsons, "The Superego and the Theory
3. Cf. K. Riezler, Man: Mutable and Immutable
Landgrebe, "The World as a Phenomenological
Problem," Philosophy and Phenomenological Re-
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