

## Perspective Shifting

By

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Where you focus your attention determines what you see. It is that simple and it is also so very complex. I will share with you that I grew up seeing the world as a very hostile place, occupied by people who were out for only themselves, and so that's the type of person I became. I would lie, cheat, and steal to get what I wanted, and if people got hurt in the process, oh well, that was their problem. Since that was my perspective, or world view, then what showed up were those same types of people, and all of the consequences that can be expected of that lifestyle. That is to say that your friendly, loving, and hopefully enlightened therapist manifested violence, cops, judges, jail cells, anger, depression, addiction, relationship problems, stress, and a host of other problems into his life.

Now I live in a world where, among other things, psychology, and understanding human perceptions necessarily and thankfully takes up a good portion of my own thoughts. So while I could go on about how the concepts of "schema" and "schemata" can be traced back to Plato, Kant, and Piaget, let's say I didn't. However for the sake of understanding the concepts of schema and schemata lets jump to the 1930's when Sir Frederic Bartlett and others conducted research in areas such as thinking, memory and attention. Those folks laid the foundations for our modern understanding of how we process information from the world in order to interpret what happens around us. From this came awareness that we interpret information to fit how we already think. Yes, we are basically preprogrammed at a very early age to see the world from a particular perspective. We will touch more on that later.

Bartlett's findings were largely ignored because the predominant approach in psychology during that period was based on the work of people like Watson and Skinner who were showing that rewards and consequences shaped behaviors. This was called "behaviorism", and it dominated the psychological landscape for decades. Then in 1967 Ulric Neisser wrote a massively influential book called Cognitive Psychology. Now, four decades later, cognitive therapy is used frequently for a variety of psychological maladies.

The underlying concepts are that people are dynamic information-processing systems whose mental operations might be described in computational terms. So, thinking about your computer, if you come across a PDF file, and you don't have an Adobe reader, you will not be able to read the file on your computer, ever, unless, of course, you introduce a new way of interpreting the information. In this case that would mean that you download an Adobe reader. Neisser emphasized that it is a point of view which postulates the mind as having a certain conceptual structure. Point of view, or our individual perspective, determines, shapes, and defines what we see and how we interpret all of our sensory information. Coming to grips with that alone can be a life changing awareness. To understand that fully is to understand that what happens in the world does not impact us nearly as much as our interpretation of what is happening.

The next thing I want to share with you is how to go about this and the difficulty that you will face. Again I'll use a metaphor. Imagine a field that is a hundred square miles and which has never been driven over. It is flat and there are no obstacles, and it has unlimited potential for the amount and types of paths you can create. We will take our 4x4 and drive the same path in one particular spot over and over until there is a rut. If that rut is deep enough when we drive our vehicle around the field randomly, we will

eventually hit that rut. Our wheels will then follow the path until we come out the other side. That is, metaphorically, your frustration and anger response.

If we want to break out of that rut we will have to use some effort to force the wheels, *while we are in it*. Practicing how to do it ahead of time, and assuring ourselves that we will do it once we are in the rut are good strategies, but the real work of breaking out of that rut happens while we are in it. Some neural pathways are very much like that. In order to shift our perspective to enjoy the great rewards that come from this developed skill, it is necessary to think how we are going to respond ahead of time. For example, plan to use this strategy of perspective shifting the next time you're stuck in traffic. Use this tactic while you are in your frustration and upset, because when you feel most justified in being upset is when we most need to work on it. You can also practice with small annoyances every day. Then, when you have learned to shift your perspective successfully enough times, there will come a point where you have created new pathways out of your distress. The ability to do this will become second nature for you until you do it for so long that it will literally change the the form and function of your brain. As that happens you will no longer do this with effort but it will be your automatic response. No longer will you need to manage being upset (as in "anger management"), because you won't have any upset to manage. When your internal world changes, then your external world will follow suite. Simply put, if you stop thinking in negative terms, then negativity will stop showing up in your life.

I believe with all that I am that you can do this and that you will realize benefits beyond anything you can imagine. Think of it this way; how can it hurt to try? I sincerely hope that you work at it, and get good at it, because you're worth it.

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## References

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