SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM: THE ROLE OF INTERACTION IN THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict began when Israel came into existence in 1948. Deep divisions exist over how to solve the conflict that encompasses cultural, religious, and political differences, in addition to territorial and natural resource disputes. The conflict persists today, despite decades of attempts to broker peace. While a two-state solution remains at the forefront of a potential resolution, neither party has been able to reach a satisfactory consensus. Interaction between Israel and Palestine has not produced a successful, mutually beneficial solution. This thesis examines the role of interaction, and how misinterpretation of actions, contributes to the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine.

Conflict is defined as a competitive or opposing action of incompatibles; an antagonistic state or action (as divergent ideas, interests, or persons); or a mental struggle resulting from incompatible or opposing needs, drives, wishes, or external or internal demands (Merriem Webster, 2009). Conflict between individuals and groups has been around since the beginning of time and has been the subject of much academic study in the last century. Social theorists have produced a collection of theories that discuss the many facets of conflict. Such dominant classical and social theorists include Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer. These prominent sociologists were pioneers in their work on the study on conflict, or conflict theory.

Conflict theory emphasizes the concept of conflict in human society. It focuses on what causes conflict to emerge in a particular society and tries to account for the
continuation of social order in a society that has accepted norms, values, customs, traditions, and rules (Ragunathan, 2006). Conflict theory materialized from the sociological study of social order and social stability and encompasses a wide variety of modes of conflict, including warfare and revolution, strikes, domination, to name a few. All of the modes in modern conflict theory rest on four primary assumptions that state that competition, structural inequality, revolution and war are all inherent in society and are associated with how and why conflict emerges.

Conflict is a broad concept. Sociologists have studied the concept from differing perspectives to examine how conflict arises and what circumstances in a given society are more or less conditioned towards engaging in conflict (Collins, 1974). Conflict presupposes that individuals or groups are interacting; thus the study of interaction on a more abstract level might assist in further uncovering the roots of conflict. If interaction were always positive and ended with a consensual outcome, conflict in its purest form, would cease to exist. Because this is not the case in today’s world, understanding conflict remains of utmost relevance. I posit that by exploring forms of interaction prior to an outcome such as conflict arising, societies might be better geared to work toward consensus, or peace. Symbolic interactionism is one theoretical framework that is useful in exploring the origins of conflict.

Symbolic interactionism posits that social participants in a social situation are constantly negotiating a shared definition of the situation, taking one another’s viewpoints into account, and interpreting each other’s behavior prior to implementing an action--has value for studying conflict. Based in sociological theory, symbolic
interactionism speaks to how parties can reach consensus—through a humanistic approach and willingness to see actions via the eyes of the actor carrying out the action, the receiving party can better interpret intentions and motivations. Ascribed meanings to objects and interpretation serve as the lynchpin for successful communication. This study posits that in instances where these basic conditions are unmet, eventually such high levels of misinterpretation continue to the point that communication devolves into conflict. Collectives then sometimes turn to violence as a means of voicing their opposition. Violence indicates the ultimate breakdown of communication.

Symbolic interactionism presents a commonsensical approach to analyzing how two parties interpret each other’s actions. What the theory omits, though, is an explanation of how repeated, exacerbated misinterpretation gives way to conflict. The aim of this research is to apply the tenets of symbolic interactionism to see if the theory can contribute to understanding the root of conflict, why it arises, and what symbolic interaction might propose for repairing communication in times of conflict. How can two parties compromise to reach a shared meaning of objects? How can cyclical misinterpretation be resolved? Are new interpretations possible or does history triumph over the hope of the future?

Mired in conflict since the inception of Israel in 1948, the societies that make up Israel and Palestine consistently interact in such a way that conflict persists. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is distinct in that it involves many complex layers that cannot all be examined at once, or through one conceptual framework. Symbolic interactionism
however, sheds light on how misinterpretation, vice interpretation, of one party’s actions can lead to an exacerbated state, laying the seeds for conflict.

The focus of this study is to analyze how misinterpretation has perpetuated this conflict. The actors involved on both sides attribute different meanings to the same object, idea, or event, leading to a misinterpretation of actions undertaken. Dissimilar, mistrusting attitudes emerge and communication breaks down. Israeli has claimed that their benevolent actions are being misinterpreted by the Palestinians as being disingenuous. In return, Palestinians react in a purported defensive way, which the Israeli’s subsequently interpret as aggressive. The cycle of conflict continues thusly.

The roots of symbolic interactionism were first conceptualized by George Mead, and later expanded upon by Herbert Blumer. Chapter 2 of the thesis the three major premises upon which interactionism rests. First, human beings behave toward ‘things’ or objects based on the meaning those objects carry for them. Second, the meaning of these objects is derived from the social interaction one has with other humans as party to daily life. Finally, these meanings are modified through an interpretative process employed by the person interacting with the objects that he or she might encounter. Ascribing meanings to objects, interaction with those objects, and the interpretation of actions undertaken accordingly are fundamental to symbolic interactionism.

The theory implies that if groups in society attribute similar meanings to objects and interpret them accordingly, the interaction is mutually understood. Consensus can be reached. This thesis turns symbolic interactionism on its head. It posits that instead of employing symbolic interactionism to comprehending how two individuals or groups can
reach consensus, it can be use to explain how misinterpretation of actions can result in conflict. If one takes action and the action is misinterpreted by the second party, then that party will respond with an action that reflects their misinterpretation of the original action. The cycle thus begins, reinforcing misinterpretation to the point of conflict.

Path dependency theory, described in Chapter 2, complements symbolic interactionism. The concept of path dependency is useful for studying conflict because it avers that historical events must be taken into account to understand the present and the future. As Douglass C. North and Robert Putnam assert, history matters. Choices made in the past define the status quo and affect future decisions. One cannot study the Israeli-Palestinian conflict without deep consideration of the history behind the people, their respective culture and religion. The continuity of the conflict is certainly an outcome of past interactions and decisions undertaken by both sides.

Chapter 2 briefly highlights how symbolic interactionism can be employed together with a case study methodology. The Israeli unilateral disengagement plan from the Gaza Strip in 2005 and Israeli military forces’ Operation Rainbow are the cases analyzed in this thesis. The case study methodology serves as the means by which I will apply symbolic interactionism to gain greater insights into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

For the purposes of this thesis, data sources are comprised of Israeli and Palestinian media, mostly in the form of online newspapers, and public statements issued by influential leaders in both the Israeli and Palestinian governing authorities. Newspaper sources consist of Israeli publications *Ha’aretz* and *The Jerusalem Post* because both are widely read by influential leaders in the Israeli government, and
represent two different political leanings. Insofar as there are no comparable Palestinian newspapers with as much readership and influence, the majority of the data for Palestine was pulled from public statements issued by Palestinian politicians and leaders. The limitations of these data sources are described in chapter 2.

In Chapter 3, I take an in-depth look at case study methodology. The case study approach is the detailed examination of an aspect of a historical episode used to develop or test historical explanations that may be generalizable to other events. Exploring the strengths, weaknesses and overall applicability of case study methods, I evaluate how symbolic interactionism can be fruitfully used in conjunction with this method. The chapter outlines how a case study approach can test the thesis’ hypothesis that continued conflict between Palestine and Israel stems in part from miscommunication that is reinforced overtime.

Chapter 4 comprises the case studies. The first is the Israeli military Operation Rainbow—an IDF military incursion into Gaza after the unilateral pullout to allegedly eradicate Gazan tunnels along the Rafah border through which weapons for supposed terrorists were being smuggled. The second case study is the Israeli unilateral disengagement plan of the Gaza Strip in 2005.

The first case study is an analysis of Israeli military IDF Operation Rainbow, which began on 22 May 2004, not long after Sharon’s disengagement plan from Gaza was completed. The purported reason for the IDF incursion into Gaza was to clear the Palestinian terrorist infrastructure. More specifically, Israel designed to find and disrupt smuggling tunnels connecting the Gaza Strip to Egypt, and to kill the militants
responsible for the deaths of thirteen Israeli soldiers targeted in guerilla attacks in preceding weeks. As a result of the Israeli incursion, many Palestinians were killed and homes destroyed.

Israel viewed this tactical military operation as necessary in order to secure the nation of Israel from Palestinian rockets. Israel claimed that tunnels used for smuggling weapons and terrorists needed to be destroyed. Once Israel determined that the mission was successful, the Israeli military retreated back to Israeli borders. Outraged, Palestinian leaders viewed the operation as inhumane, and as the cause of a major humanitarian crisis. They accused Israel of an overreaction in its use of brute force on the ground, a view shared by much of the international community. The Palestinians also viewed the operation as evidence of a strong sign of continued Israeli occupation of Gaza despite its withdrawal.

Operation Rainbow is significant in that it exemplifies how, regardless of the evacuation of Israeli settlements and military installations in the Gaza Strip proper, the military operation shows how symbolic interactionism, when misinterpreted, can lead to violence. While the Israeli camp trumpeted national security as the reason behind sending in ground troops, Palestinian governing authorities contended that such great force was superfluous, particularly in light of the agreement to work toward peace as part of the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. Operation Rainbow was the first of many military incursions into Gaza undertaken by the IDF after their official withdrawal.

I selected the first case study because of its significance as a historical event between Israel and Palestine. It tells the story of how the Israeli Prime Minister Ariel
Sharon elected to act against severe opposition amongst Israeli parliamentary officials by formulating a disengagement plan to withdraw from Gaza in 2005. Sharon promoted the Plan as an Israeli sign to move toward peace and a sincere effort at diplomatic initiative, and he was steadfast in pushing it through. Conversely, Palestinian authorities, while generally supportive of any Israeli withdrawal from claimed Palestinian land, interpreted the withdrawal in a totally different way. They saw it as an overall deceitful strategy to avoid furthering the road map to peace. According to the Palestinian authorities, a move to withdraw from Gaza while maintaining the right to intervene in Gazan affairs at any time was nothing more than a half-hearted attempt to skirt international obligations to end the occupation of Palestine.

Chapter 4 describes the history of the disengagement plan and characterizes the divisions within the Israeli government as to whether to pursue the disengagement plan. These divisions were illuminated by the heated four month debate that took place within the Knesset. Drawing on a multitude of public statements and articles in Israeli and Palestinian newspapers, this case study describes the controversy within Israel, and then showcases the way in which Israel, and particularly Sharon, characterized the plan as a benevolent act. Responding to Israel’s formally published plan, Palestinian authorities encouraged any withdrawal from the Gaza Strip (as well as the four settlements in the West Bank), but maintained the position that Sharon’s primary motivation lay in his desire to avoid furthering the peace process on a broader scale. Second, Palestinian officials perceived the plan as a reshuffling of settlements from Gaza to the West Bank.
Finally, even with the disengagement plan, Palestinian leaders continued to view Israel’s right to control Gazan airspace, borders, water flow, etc., as occupation.

Chapter 5 analyzes the case studies in the light of the hypothesis and the theory of symbolic interactionism. In particular, it seems to determine whether the continued tensions between the Palestinians and the Israelis, and the actions that each took during the two case studies examined in Chapter 4, can be explained, in part, by mutual misinterpretations that were based on prior, historical events. If so, are these conclusions more generalizable at the theoretical level of symbolic interactionism? And, finally, does an understanding of the miscommunications among the Israelis and the Palestinians suggest alternative approaches for resolving conflicts such as these?

Symbolic interactionism proved useful as a theoretical framework for analyzing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and why it persists. Based on the two case studies selected, similarities in how one party’s actions are interpreted, or misinterpreted, lead the second party to respond based on their (mis)interpretation. If misinterpretation endures, conflict can arise. Path dependency weighs in by explaining how history factors into the equation. Without an appreciation for the history of Israel and Palestine and their past interaction, one cannot fully comprehend the current state of affairs.

Indeed, misinterpretation appears to be one factor that contributes to persistent nature of the conflict. Other factors certainly weigh in, perhaps with even more influence than that of misinterpretation, to add to the persistence of the conflict. However, based on the evidence gleaned from the case studies, perceptions and interpretations of actions are one component of the multifaceted issue that is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Rather
than inherently react as non-symbolic interaction suggests, leaders in both Israel and Palestine interpret one another’s actions with a skeptical eye and react accordingly. A history of misinterpretation has evolved into where the situation still stands today: two distinctive groups of people mired in conflict.

The researcher studied the actions and interpretations of influential leaders in Israel and Palestine. To build upon the credibility of symbolic interactionism as an approach to studying conflict, future research might take into account the voice of the everyday Israeli and Palestinian citizen. Analysis of the same two case studies from the perspective of the people rather than the governments, for instance, would be an interesting addition to the conclusions drawn from this research. Such an undertaking would likely entail in-person interviews from across socio-economic demographics in both territories, but would either complement or refute the legitimacy of symbolic interactionism for studying conflict.

Other sociological concepts outside of symbolic interactionism could be useful in further identifying how human behavior and the human psyche play into conflict. For example, the researcher did not calculate the very likely possibility that perhaps misinterpretation is simply used as a guise for disingenuous intentions. The research simply judged actions based on the media portrayal of them. Another route worth exploring could consist of a textual analysis of the media content which might uncover supplementary motives and reasons for why the conflict continues. Human interaction is multilayered and this research only covers one narrow aspect of the broad field of sociological study.
Chapter 2: Conceptual Frameworks for Studying Interaction Between Israel and Palestinian Journals

This chapter examines the main three tenets that serve as the basis for symbolic interactionism. It discusses the origins of symbolic interactionism as a theoretical concept based in the sociological study of human behavior. The purpose of this in-depth investigation into symbolic interactionism is to determine its utility for studying conflict. Path dependency is also addressed as a complement to symbolic interactionism, based on path dependency theory’s premise that history matters, thus illuminating its relevance to how conflicts began in history and transgress over time. Finally, this chapter discusses the data sources selected for the analysis conducted via the case study methodology described in the following chapter, in addition to the limitations present in the data sources chosen.

What is Symbolic Interactionism?

Symbolic interactionism is founded on the analysis of three major premises. First, human beings behave toward things based on the meaning those things carry for them. “Things” encompass anything from physical objects like tables and chairs, to other humans, institutions, guiding ideals, activities of others, and situations that arise as part of daily life. The second premise rests on the idea that the meaning of these things is derived from the social interaction one has with other humans that are part of one’s life. The third and last premise is that these meanings are modified through an interpretative process employed by the person dealing with the things he or she might encounter.
Social participants in a social situation are constantly negotiating a shared definition of the situation, taking one another’s viewpoints into account, and interpreting each other’s behavior prior to implementing an action, (Vilar, 2001). These three premises are fundamental to the understanding of human group life and human conduct.

The fact that human beings behave and respond toward things based on the meanings those things carry for them might appear to be a natural, logical point; however, the notion is often ignored in the academic arena of sociology. Meaning is taken for granted or described as a neutral link between other factors responsible for human behavior. Sociologists and psychologists view the various factors that play upon human beings differently—while psychologists turn to factors such as stimuli, attitudes, motives, and perceptions, sociologists look to social roles, positions, demands, norms and values, and cultural prescriptions to explain behavior. To take it a step further, symbolic interactionism suggests that the meanings that things have for human beings are central in their own right.

The first premise does not satisfy the unique characteristic of symbolic interactionism. The idea that human beings act towards things on the basis of the meaning of such things is a notion accepted by multiple sociological theories on human conduct. Rather, the second premise which refers to the source of the meaning is the major differentiating aspect of symbolic interactionism. Unlike realist methods of assessing human behavior that often treat meaning as a psychical accretion brought to the thing by the person for whom the thing has meaning, symbolic interactionism points to interpretation of actions as the root of where meaning is derived (Blumer, 1969).
More specifically, symbolic interactionism posits that meaning arises in the process of interaction between people. Meaning grows out of the ways in which people act toward the person with regard to the thing. Actions define the thing for the person. Meanings are social products, that is creations that are formed in and through the way people interact (Blumer, 1969). Unlike other dominant, traditional views on meaning, symbolic interactionism does not believe meaning emanates from the intrinsic makeup of the thing that has meaning, nor do the psychological elements in the person constitute meaning. It is the claim that the interaction between people that brings meaning to a thing that makes symbolic interactionism distinct as a theory.

The third premise further distinguishes symbolic interactionism from traditional sociological theories of human group conduct. The use of meanings by a person in his action involves an interpretive process. The process of interpretation has two unique steps: first, the actor points out to himself the things that have meaning through an interaction or communication with himself; and second, the actor, by virtue of communicating with himself, interpretation becomes a process of handling meanings. The actor selects and transforms meanings based on the situation in which he is placed and the direction his actions take (Vilar and Inglesia, 2005). Interpretation is not an automatic application of previously established meanings, but rather a formative process whereby meanings are employed as a means to guide and form action.

The three premises mentioned above comprise the basic ideas of symbolic interactionism as envisioned by the fathers of the theory, George Mead and Herbert Blumer. The roots of symbolic interactionism refer to and describe the nature of human
groups or societies, social interaction, objects, humans as actors, human action, and the interrelatedness of the lines of action (Blumer, 1969 and Mead, 1934). If we take all of these factors into account, we begin to have the framework through which symbolic interactionism theory can be explained. Each root image has a role that adds to the overall notion of the theory.

The nature of human society or human group life is understood in the context of humans who engage in action. Action is defined as innumerable activities an individual performs as they encounter other humans and their reaction to the continual situations humans find themselves in as they progress through life (Blumer, 1969). Human groups and society exist in action. Human society is a continual process of fitting together the actions and activities of its members. It is in the sphere of such activity that structure and organization exist. The idea that humans engage in action is a principle root image of symbolic interactionism.

**The Roots of Symbolic Interactionism**

Building on the fact that humans engage and exist in action is the notion that group life necessarily supposes that group members of society interact. Humans respond to one another based on the actions taken and the interpretation of those actions to and by one another. Although interaction is universally accepted as part of the larger definition of human society, social interaction is often treated as an insignificant, non-defining aspect of society. It is treated merely as a medium through which determinants of behavior pass to produce the behavior, (Blumer, 1969). Social interaction is an
interaction, communication, or relation between humans and not between factors attributed to them.

Social interaction is at the heart of symbolic interactionism theory—it is essential in its own right. The value lies in the fact that social interaction is a process that forms human conduct as opposed to a means for the expression or product of human conduct. When human beings interact, they take into account what each other is doing or planning to do and respond accordingly. The activity of others positively influences the response one gives—this means potentially modifying an intended response, ceasing it, intensifying it, and/or replacing it (Blumer, 1969). One adapts one’s own activity to fit into the actions of others. The actions of others, then, must be taken into account in assessing one’s own planned action.

George Herbert Mead, the father of social interactionism theory offered the most in depth analysis of social interaction. Mead believed in two forms of social interaction in human society—one referred to as “the conversation of gestures” and “the use of significant symbols”—the first Herbert Blumer labels “non-symbolic interaction” and the second as “symbolic interaction.” When one simply reacts to another’s activity without interpreting that activity, this is non-symbolic interaction. Contrastingly, symbolic interaction requires an interpretive process to take place (Mead, 1934). Human society engages in non-symbolic action frequently through immediate, unreflective, direct responses to other’s actions; however according to Mead, human’s characteristic mode is to interact on a symbolic level in order to find meaning in each other’s actions, (Mead, 1934).
Symbolic interaction occurs in response to the smallest action or gesture. A gesture can be described as any part of an ongoing action that denotes the intent of a larger act (Blumer, 1969). For instance, the gesture of sticking one’s leg out might foreshadow the intention of a kick to come in self-defense. The person who is observing this action will interpret and respond to the intention to kick accordingly. A gesture or action has meaning for the person who originally initiates the action and in turn for the person responding to it. When both parties interpret actions along the same lines, they understand each other.

Interactions are broken down into three main types, as described by Mead’s triadic nature of meaning (Blumer, 1969). One type involves the signification of what the person to whom the gesture is directed is to do. The second signifies what the person who makes the gesture intends to do. Lastly, the nature of meaning signifies the joint action that arises out of the initial gesture and the response to that gesture. A misinterpretation in any of the three kinds of meaning along the way renders communication ineffective, interaction is obstructed and joint action ceases.

Blumer adds to Mead’s analysis of symbolic interaction by offering that each party must necessarily take each other’s roles. To specify what the other is supposed to do, one has to take the viewpoint of the other (Mead, 1939). If one is preparing to punch another out of anger, the individual getting ready to punch interprets what the person about to get punched will do in return and reacts accordingly. For instance, if he thinks he will get punched in return, perhaps he puts his hands up to block the punch. Symbolic
interactionism posits that this cycle of actions, interpreting actions and reacting is largely the way humans communicate.

Objects exist in society in many forms, as any thing can be pointed or referred to, from a table, a carpenter, or an ideology. Although a broad definition of what an object is, this definition brings with it the idea that objects are the product of symbolic interactions. Objects can be classified into three categories: 1) physical objects (a tree or a soccer ball), 2) social objects (a mayor, a sister, or a friend), 3) and abstract objects (values, norms, manipulation). According to Blumer, the nature of all objects is such that each object carries with it a meaning for the person for whom it is an object (Blumer, 1969).

The meaning of objects is inherently derived from the way in which those objects are defined by the interaction one has with the object. Through indications, certain objects come to have a common meaning. We have come to understand that lawyers are the professional cadre charged with upholding the law, for example, or that priests are held in high esteem as an authority on Christianity. Mutual indications lead to the emergence of common objects that are seen by a given set of people as having similar meaning (Blumer, 1969). Individuals will act toward those objects dependent on the meaning they carry.

Humans also interact with themselves as objects in symbolic interactionism. The human is treated like an organism that makes indications to oneself and responds in line with the meaning that corresponds to that indication. In this way, humans are consistently engaging in self-interaction. As a social object, humans tend to deal with
what they are taking in from their environment by making note of other objects. Humans then begin a process of self-indication by which they attribute meaning to the object, and use that meaning to guiding future action (Blumer, 1969). Responses are not the result of simply releasing a response or action towards other objects; rather, humans function as an acting organism that is involved in a cyclical assessment of their environment.

The environment in which humans exist is a complex one. Individuals are forced to cope with a multitude of situations at any given time and engage in establishing the meaning of actions of others, and determining one’s own action based on interpretations of actions. The view that humans play such an active role in interpreting actions and responding based on meanings is in sharp contrast to the current theories in psychological and social science. These approaches disregard the fact that humans engage in self-interaction, a vital aspect of human society as social beings. Instead, symbolic interaction supposes that humans take active control of their wants and desires, the wants and desires of others, and determine the best course of action.

**Symbolic Interactionism and the Collective**

Thus far, it would appear that symbolic interaction focuses on the individual rather than the collective; however, the theoretical framework applies equally well to joint or collective action. Because a collective consists of groups, institutions, organizations, and social classes, we can say that the collective is comprised of multiple individuals. As such, it is appropriate and possible to study behavior in joint or collective components. The interpretive process is expanded to include the many individual participants of the collective who are making indications to one another instead of
engaging in self-indication only. The collective may include a nation at war, a military tactical force that institutes a naval blockade, or a church congregation.

The collective engages in joint action—as individuals fit their lines of action to one another. Just because the action is acted out by a collective does not mean that it loses its interpretive process as described in individual action. One needs to view the interpretive process of joint action as an expansion of how one analyzes individual action. Whether it is the joint action of a non-governmental organization (NGO) disbursing humanitarian aid in an African country or a corporation restructuring the company for better profit, participants still make indications to each other in that particular environment. Joint action is in fact the outcome of the individuals of a collective making indications and interpreting those indications.

The study of human group life exists in the interlinkages of action between individuals who fit line of action to one another respective to the groups of which humans are a part. Interlinkages that arise from joint action in human, settled societies are most often repetitive and stable. Normally, people act towards one another with advanced knowledge of how those actions will be perceived and thus take on actions that have pre-established meanings. There is an expectation of how the other participants will interpret actions and guide their own behavior by those pre-established meanings. Patterns of behavior and interaction in the study of joint action are so prevalent that sociological scholars rely on repetitive joint action to study concepts of culture and social order.

Joint action follows the same general scheme as described above regarding self-indication and interaction between individuals—indications can be affirmed, rejected,
halted, subject to indifference, dissatisfaction, etc. Large complex networks of action evolve from interlinkages and interdependencies of joint action. Participation from diverse people engaging in diverse action in diverse times and places forms institutions and systems. According to Blumer,

> A network of an institution does not function automatically because of some inner dynamics of system requirements; it functions because people at different points do something, and what they do is a result of how they define the situation in which they are called on to act, (Blumer, 19).

Blumer’s point is one that goes largely ignored in the sociological field of study; however it is necessary to acknowledge the sets of meanings that provoke individuals to act as they do within their network. The function and fate of institutions are created from the process of interpretation taking place amongst diverse groups of participants.

Every instance of joint action, whether newly enacted or historically established, necessarily arose out of a backdrop of prior actions by participants. The history of interaction matters. New joint action involves participants who bring to the forefront their own set of previous experiences, meanings, interpretations and world of objects. These aspects of the human experience are already ingrained by participants and as such, joint action can only be understood from within the greater context of the historical linkage of joint action. Horizontal and vertical linkages comprise the activities of participants and the previous joint action in which they have engaged.

The roots of symbolic interactionism outline human society as individuals partaking in living. Living insinuates the process of ongoing activity wherein participants choose to act in a certain way dependent upon the variety of situations they
encounter. A matrix of interactions is the result and indications of actions and interpretations of those actions are continuously being produced in a world of objects that carry pre-established meanings. Objects’ designation can shift, weaken, or be sustained based upon the way people organize themselves as a collective. Overall, the activities of the collective are created through a process of indication and interpretation.

The Utility of Symbolic Interactionism Theory in Studying Conflict

Symbolic interactionism is useful for studying conflict because it allows the researcher to understand why conflict is cyclical in instances where two (or multiple) actors (individuals or collectives) continuously misinterpret the action of one another. Because symbolic interactionism rests on the judgment that objects carry meanings derived from social interaction ultimately modified through an interpretive process, one can observe how misinterpreted action and meaning can persist and escalate into conflict. Shared meanings are necessary to create social order and without shared meanings, conflict can arise (Blumer, 1969 and Mead, 1939).

Symbolic interactionism also posits that meanings ascribed to objects are derived from social interaction amongst humans. The cyclical nature of conflict perpetuates the meanings both sides attribute to one another’s actions. The history of conflicted interaction is mired with repeated misinterpretation and subsequent action based on that particular misinterpretation. In other words, history matters (North, 1991). History is vital to understanding the context of current interaction in any circumstance, but particularly if two parties are involved in conflict.
Lastly, the interpretive processes through which meanings are internalized by actors are essential to interaction. If two parties interpret meanings in the way in which they are intended to be interpreted, effective, mutual communication occurs. In conflict, communication is disrupted. Symbolic interactionism forces us to understand at what juncture in the interpretive process interaction was disrupted or misinterpreted and why. Was it a result of the historical nature of interaction of the two parties that caused conflict? Are culture, religion, and/or politics involved? Employing symbolic interactionism as a means to study conflict can assist in answering the aforementioned questions.

Blumer’s humanistic approach to symbolic interactionism posited that the world should be viewed through the eyes of the actor (Schnell, 77). He proposes a sympathetic perspective to the actor that is doing the interpreting of an action by a separate actor. If the system breaks down and misinterpretation occurs, one actor is no longer able to justly take on a sympathetic role. Once again, one can deduce from Blumer’s position that conflict is perhaps a result of cyclical misinterpretation, so much so that the two actors no longer attribute shared meanings to objects. Without shared meanings and a common understanding of symbols, interaction is disrupted and in certain conditions exacerbated to the point of creating polarized positions by both parties.

Mead argued that interaction creates and recreates the patterns and structures that bring society to life (Mead, 1939). The theory does not focus on the idea of a social system possessing structure, but how interpretation of action gives meaning to social interaction (Del Carlo, 2009). It is the interaction that lends itself to forming some sort of
regularity and structure to society. If we understand conflict as part of the pattern and structure fomented by misinterpretation, the value of symbolic interaction is its ability to show how conflict emerges. One individual or group’s actions are intended to be perceived in a certain fashion. If the second actor or party does not interpret the action in the way it was intended, confusion, misinterpretation and potentially conflict materializes.

Path Dependency and Conflict

Douglass C. North, in his renown work *Institutions, Institutional Change, and Economic Performance* declares that history matters for comprehending the present state of society (North, 1990). History matters not only because we can learn from the past, but because the present and future are connected to the past by the continuity of society’s institutions (Margolis and Liebowitz, 1995). Choices made now are indicative of past decisions. The past is unraveled through an analysis of institutional evolution. North defines institutions as the rules of the game in a society, or humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction (North, 1990 and Putnam, 1993). Institutions then, are part of history that shape the present and future, and form the basis of path dependency.

Some of the constraints that are devised may be informal in nature. Informal constraints are embodied by customs, codes of conduct and traditions—culture. Cultural constraints help explain the path of historical change. Path dependency means that the path of our past characterizes the status of the present and the path into the future. Change is incremental because of the way actors interpret their environment and make
choices accordingly. The cyclical outcome of path dependency involves actors interpreting their surroundings and making choices over time—choices that reflect past decisions and the outcomes that occurred as a result.

Path dependency nicely complements symbolic interactionism because it views interaction as part of understanding the present and formulating the future. History plays a significant role in defining the path forward; actors undertake choices and interact with one another to interpret their surroundings. The result of path dependency is what emerges from taking into account the complete historical picture. History is relevant.

**Filling in the Gaps of Symbolic Interactionism in Studying Conflict**

From the above, it can be said that symbolic interactionism has value for studying conflict. The theory itself, however, speaks to how to parties can reach consensus—through a humanistic approach and willingness to see actions via the eyes of the actor carrying out the action, the receiving party can better interpret intentions and motivations. Ascribed meanings to objects and interpretation serve as the lynchpin for successful communication. This study posits that in instances where these basic conditions are unmet, eventually such high levels of misinterpretation continue to the point that communication devolves into conflict. Collectives then sometimes turn to violence as a means of voicing their opposition. Violence indicates the ultimate breakdown of communication.

Mead and Blumer offer a foundation in sociological perspective to understanding interaction. Symbolic interactionism presents a commonsensical approach to analyzing
how two parties interpret each other’s actions. Where the theory omits, though, is in explaining how repeated, exacerbated misinterpretation gives way to conflict. The aim of this research is to apply the tenets of symbolic interactionism to see if the theory can contribute to understanding the root of conflict, why it arises, and what symbolic interaction would propose for repairing communication in times of conflict. How can two parties compromise to reach a shared meaning of objects? How can cyclical misinterpretation be resolved? Are new interpretations possible or does history triumph over the hope of the future?

In the case of the unilateral disengagement of the Gaza Strip by Israel in 2005, symbolic interactionism is useful to analyze how attitudes toward the act of disengagement differ in interpretation for the Israelis and Palestinians. Leaders in the Israeli government, most notably Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, claimed to move forward with disengagement as a means of stepping closer to peace. The physical act of evacuating settlers via the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) while shutting down synagogues and dismantling IDF installations was a bold move by Sharon to purportedly show the Palestinians and the world a leap of faith in a future peace process. Despite the intense opposition from right wing Israeli religious leaders with ardent support from the settler population, Sharon convinced the Knesset that unilateral withdrawal was a sign of Israeli fortitude and a diplomatic investment for the security of Israel in the long-term.

Contrastingly, Palestinians’ attitude toward Israel’s alleged act of good faith was perceived as a means of satisfying to the most minimal degree their international obligation to withdraw to the borders set by the United Nations after the war of 1967.
Disengagement was a way of skirting the issue of signing onto the peace process instead of a means of working towards it. The Palestinian governing authorities viewed Israel’s continued right to control Gazan airspace and borders as occupation—simply occupation in a less invasive form. Moreover, the lack of evacuation of West Bank settlements and resettlement of Gazan settlers to the West Bank only served to further Palestinian distrust of Israeli actions. The attitude of the Palestinians towards Israel’s decision to withdraw from Gaza was in opposition of Israel’s claimed intentions.

The focus of this study is to analyze how misinterpretation rather than interpretation has perpetuated this conflict. The actors involved on both sides attribute different meanings to the same object, idea, or event, leading to a misinterpretation of actions undertaken. Dissimilar, mistrusting attitudes emerge and communication breaks down. Israeli claimed benevolent actions are interpreted as disingenuous by Palestinians. In return, Palestinians react in a purported defensive way, subsequently interpreted by Israelis as aggressive. The cycle of conflict continues thusly.

**Applying Symbolic Interactionism to the Case Study Methodology**

This research uses the case study methodology as a means of examining a historical episode to test historical explanations that may be generalizable to other events. Case studies are strong in contributing to the systematic development of social science theories. The researcher derives observable implications from theories, and then tests these implications against empirical observations and measurements. The results of these tests make inferences on how best to modify the theories tested. The case study
methodology, its strength, weaknesses, and applicability to this kind of research are outlined in finer granularity in Chapter 3.

Symbolic interactionism is the theory tested against the case studies chosen. The case studies selected serve as the methods by which to analyze symbolic interactionism in relation to the historical event. The research seeks to use symbolic interactionism as a lens through which to study the historical episode in order to draw conclusions and test the hypothesis. Conclusions drawn may lend credibility or further the theory, or contrastingly, challenge or refute the theory.

Data Sources: Public Statements and Media as a Forum for Symbolic Interaction

For the purposes of this study, public statements by leaders from both the Israeli and Palestinian side were analyzed. References to Israel and Palestine denote the stance of Israeli and Palestinian politicians and influential leaders in decision-making positions, vice the opinions of regular citizens. Public statements and articles were derived from a variety of political and publicly circulated sources, but focus on leading news sources from Israeli and Palestinian media. From the Israeli perspective, the newspapers Ha'aretz and The Jerusalem Post were culled for articles relating to the Gaza withdrawal and Operation Cast Rainbow for a period of a month leading up to and after each event. Based on a lack of widely available and circulated international Palestinian media, public statements by the Palestinian Authority, influential Palestinian politicians and religious leaders were analyzed during the same period.
*Ha’aretz* is the oldest Israeli daily newspaper and is found online in both Hebrew and English. It is considered Israel’s most influential daily newspaper and has a reported paid subscribership of 65,000 daily sales, 72,000 copies and 100,000 on weekends. The newspaper’s readership includes Israel’s intelligentsia in addition to Israeli political and economic elites (Ha’aretz Service, 2008). *Ha’aretz* is considered one of Israel’s most left-leaning publications. It was chosen for this study based on its readership, influence, availability online in English, and its left--leaning stance on international and security issues.

*The Jerusalem Post* is an Israeli daily newspaper that is published in English. Readership is low compared to other major Hebrew newspapers, but has a much broader reach than other newspapers because it is extensively read by Israeli politicians and foreign journalists. It is published worldwide. Traditionally viewed as a left-leaning newspaper, in 2004 the newspaper underwent an evident shift to a right centrist position under its new ownership. Notably, the paper endorsed the August 2005 disengagement from the Gaza Strip (Chartrand, 1990). *The Jerusalem Post* was elected as a prime media source based on its influential readership, its availability in English, and its shifting political perspective on the disengagement from Gaza.

Public statements by Palestinian leaders serve as the basis for Palestinian media sources. Influential politicians inside the Palestinian Authority (PA), to notably include the late PA leader Yasar Arafat, religious leaders and appointed Palestinian spokespeople were selected as the prime data sources representing the Palestinian perspective. Palestinian newspapers are not broadly circulated online and do not carry the equivalent
readership of Israeli newspapers. Sources such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and documents from the United Nations, particularly United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) were selected to support the pro-Palestinian perspective. These sources outside of the regular Palestinian news publications offer accounts of destruction and humanitarian crises caused by violence in the Palestinian territories. Palestinian publications, such as the Palestinian Chronicle, were investigated in certain instances to support the Palestinian perception of Israeli action.

**Limitations of Data Sources**

The data sources selected have limitations in testing symbolic interactionism. The first limitation rests in the fact that the media sources elected were studied online in English, as opposed to Hebrew and Arabic for Israeli and Palestinian media respectively. In translation meaning and direct quotes can be misconstrued. This is particularly true in such a highly politicized, controversial issue such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Examining interaction in the native languages of each party would enhance the accuracy of attitudes, perceptions, and conclusions drawn.

Secondly, the data sources were purposefully narrow in scope and number. With only two major Israeli newspapers selected, public statements and Palestinian publications utilized for the analysis, the data pool was restrictive in gaining a greater sense of Israeli/Palestinian stances. Extreme opinions on either side, such as media statements issued by the terrorist-dubbed Palestinian group Hamas or by fanatical religious settler groups in Israel, were only marginally integrated as a data source. The
study seeks to comprise the moderate leftist and rightist positions on the issue. Nevertheless, by expanding the media sources, additional political leanings could have been taken into account, an increasing amount of opinions and statements considered, and a larger amalgamate of evidence from which to draw conclusions.

Finally, the data sources were not equally comparable in terms of readership and circulation. Part of the challenge was inherent in that Palestine has no influential international publication on par with Israeli newspapers. The researcher attempted to offset the imbalance by integrating public statements from leading Palestinian politicians, religious figures and decision-makers. However, more distinct parallels between Israeli and Palestinian data sources would have allowed for a more fastidious cross-comparison.
Chapter 3: Case Study Methods

This chapter examines the utility of case study as a methodology for social science theories. It details the purpose of employing case study methods, its applicability, strengths and weaknesses. This chapter also discusses how to go about effectively conducting case studies and how to draw conclusions from sound case study analysis. Lastly, this chapter explores how the researcher can transition from case study analysis to theory application, which is important for understanding how symbolic interactionism is the theory being applied to the case study methodology for the purposes of this study.

Why Use the Case Study Methodology?

The case study approach—the detailed examination of an aspect of an historical episode to develop or test historical explanations that may be generalizable to other events—has obvious strengths and weaknesses as a methodological means of thesis writing. Case studies, because they are intuitive, have been around as long as recorded history; however, the systematic development of case studies for the collective building of social science theories is comparatively a current phenomenon. Like all methodologies, case studies entail epistemological logic that attempts to derive observable implications from theories, and then test these implications against empirical observations or measurements, and finally uses the results of these tests to make inferences on how best to modify the theories tested.
Case study methods have made great advances in the last decade. Interest in theory-oriented cases has increased not only in the traditional fields of political science and sociology, but in economics as well. In particular, the scientific realist school of thought has pronounced that causal mechanisms are key in understanding causal explanation. Case study researchers have long studied causal explanation via process-tracing to explain outcomes. Process-tracing attempts to trace links between possible causes and observed outcomes. Researchers may examine histories, archival documents, and/or interview transcripts in their quest. Process-tracing has become a strong suit of case study methodology.

Case study methods also have wide applicability. Rational choice theorists, structuralists, historical institutionalists, social constructivists, cognitive theorists, postmodernists, in additional to many other schools of thought, find benefits in the case study approach. For instance, a growing number of rational choice theorists are noticing that case study methods can be used in conjunction with, or to test rational choice theories. Others welcome the comparative advantages of case studies for addressing qualitative variables, individual actors, decision-making processes, historical and social contexts, and path dependencies (Alexander and Bennett, 2005). As can be observed, case studies are advantageous to a broad range of theorists.

To further explore the advantages of case studies, it is important to define a case, which, for the purposes of this paper, is an instance of a class of events (Alexander, 1982). A class of events can include, for instance, revolutions, types of governmental regimes, or types of economic systems. The aim for the researcher is to develop a theory
from the causes of similarities or differences among instances, or cases, of that class of events. It is an aspect of an historical episode that the investigator chooses for analysis rather than a historical event itself. This is done by including both within-case analysis of single cases and comparisons of a small number of cases. Within-case analysis combined with cross-case comparisons is the strongest technique to draw inferences.

**Strengths of the Case Study**

Case studies are most fruitful precisely in the areas where statistical methods and formal models are not. Four essential advantages of case studies have been identified: their potential for achieving high conceptual validity; their strong procedures for garnering new hypothesis; their value as a productive means to closely examine the role of causal mechanisms in individual cases; and their ability to address causal complexity. These qualities make case studies invaluable in testing hypotheses and in developing theories, and will be examined in more depth below.

Researchers can achieve high levels of conceptual validity or can identify and measure the indicators that best represent the theoretical concepts the researcher intends to measure through the case study approach. The variables that social scientists study, such as democracy, power, and political culture, are notoriously hard to measure. Researchers are thus forced to conduct a contextualized comparison, or search for analytically equivalent phenomena. Case studies serve this purpose. Conceptual refinements can be made with a higher level of validity over a smaller number of cases.
Through the study of deviant or outlier cases and in the course of field-work, case studies help the researcher discover and create new hypotheses. If a case study researcher asks a participant whether he or she were thinking X when they did Y, and the response is that the participant was actually thinking Z, the researcher is now presented with Z as a causally relevant variable. Statistical methods can also identify deviant cases that may lead to new hypotheses, but—in and of themselves—these methods lack any clear means of actually identifying novel hypotheses. Unless statistical researchers undertake their own archival work, interviews, etc., to measure the values of variables in their model, there is no unproblematic inductive way to identify left-out variables—a characteristic for which case methodologies account.

Bent Flyvbjerg from Aalborg University in Denmark discusses five common misunderstandings about case-study research which he outlines as follows: 1) theoretical knowledge is more valuable than practical knowledge; 2) generalizations from single-case studies are not possible, so single-case studies do not contribute to scientific development; 3) case studies are considered most useful for uncovering hypotheses, whereas other research methods are useful for hypothesis testing and theory building; 4) case studies contain a bias toward verification by the researcher; and 5) it is difficult to effectively summarize specific case studies (Flyvberg, 2006). Flyvbjerg explains the genesis of these five myths while correcting their conclusions.

Flyvbjerg posits that case-study research allows for context-dependent knowledge that leads researchers to become experts in their field. Expertise, he claims, comes from the knowledge of several thousand concrete cases on the topic in question. The closeness
of the case study to real-life experiences is important to the researcher in order to establish a nuanced view of reality and to develop the necessary skills to conduct effective research. The specific skill that comes from context-dependent cases is as important as any other concrete skill that an expert should acquire.

It is true that the investigator should be careful of over-generalizing based on a single case; however, Flyvberg asserts that one can generalize from a single case depending on the case selected. As Flyvberg points out: according to Anthony Giddens (1984), a single case can elucidate the nature of agents’ knowledgeability, and thereby their reasons for action across a wide range of action-contexts. This is particularly relevant to ethnographic research, which characteristically can be turned into generalizable theories based on a single case being carried out in numbers. In other words, if a single case produced the same results over and over, judgments of their typicality can be reasonably made. Additionally, Flyvberg notes that formal generalization of either large or single cases is far overrated as the main source of scientific progress.

Flyvberg’s also contends that causal mechanisms are dissected in detail through case studies. Even in a single case, a large number of intervening variables are studied and inductively observed to find unexpected aspects of the operation of a particular causal mechanism, or to identify what conditions exist in a case to activate the causal mechanism. In contrast, statistical studies omit all contextual factors except those codified in the variables selected for measurement or used for constituting a population of cases. Theories on causal mechanisms can be leveraged to give historical explanations of
cases. As statistical researchers are well aware, correlation does not imply causation. Case studies assist in examining the particulars of a case (or cases) with historical explanation.

Finally, case studies accommodate complex causal relations such as equifinality, complex interactions effects, and path dependency (Ragin, 1987). By allowing for equifinality—the principle that describes how in open systems a give end state can be reached by many potential means—case studies produce narrow and more contingent generalizations. As mentioned previously, they also require substantial process-tracing evidence to document complex interactions. In other words, the case study illuminates complex causal relations that statistical methods cannot produce so decisively.

**The Major Limitations of Case Study Methods**

Recurrent limitations that result from the use of case study methodologies are the problem of case selection, the trade-off between cost-cutting and richness, and the related tension between achieving high internal validity and good historical explanations of certain cases in opposition without making sweeping statements that apply to large populations. Inherent limitations include the inability to render judgments based on the incidence or the representation of particular cases. A weak capability for calculating the average causal effect of variables for a sample is a common pitfall. Indeterminacy and lack of independence of cases encompass natural limitations of case study methodologies.

The single most universal critique of case study methods is that they are prone to selection bias, described as a form of selection process in either the design of the study or
the real-world phenomena under investigation that results in inferences that suffer from systematic error (Collier and Mahoney, 1996). Indeed, selection biases can constitute a severe problem in case study research, and generally occur when the researcher, either wittingly or not, selects cases that represent a truncated sample along the dependent variable of the relevant available cases. Cases, except in very specific instances, should not be selected based on the dependent variable. Cognitive biases may favor certain hypothesis causing the researcher to favor some cases over others. Ignoring cases that contradict the researcher’s theory is another form of bias, and researchers should be wary of avoiding cases that may run counter to the hypothesis they seek to put forth.

Case analyses are not as suitable for estimating the generalized causal effects of variables across a range of cases. Rather, they are much stronger at judging whether and how a variable affects the outcome than at how much it mattered. Methodologists who focus on case studies are working to mitigate the effects of case studies’ ability to make tentative conclusions.

Methodologist Douglas Dion has studied the role of case studies in testing theoretical claims that a variable is a necessary or sufficient condition for a particular outcome. He offers a compelling argument that selection bias does not present an obstacle for testing necessity or sufficiency, and that counterexamples in single-case studies can falsify deterministic claims of necessity or sufficiency. Dion posits that only a small number of cases can test whether a condition is almost always necessary or sufficient for an outcome. As a result, case studies are an effective means for evaluating claims of necessity and sufficiency (Dion, 2003).
Despite Dion’s claims, it is essential to carefully distinguish between three kinds of claims of necessity and sufficiency: 1) first, that a single variable is necessary or sufficient for an outcome with respect to an entire population of cases; 2) second, that a variable is either necessary or sufficient in a certain historical context or for specific historical outcomes to have taken place; and 3) that the relationship of a variable to conjunctions of variables that are themselves necessary and/or sufficient for an outcome. Each of the three kinds of claims has a caveat that must be taken into account. Primarily, it is not usually possible to determine whether a causal condition identified as contributing to the case is a necessary condition for that case, the type of case it represents, or for the outcome. Next, whether or not a factor is necessary to a particular outcome is a differing issue from how much it contributed to the scale of an outcome. Lastly, even when a factor is necessary to the outcome of a certain case, it does not automatically follow into a general claim for its causal role in other cases.

Case studies can also suffer from their lack of representativeness. It can be assumed that case researchers do not purposefully select cases that are obviously representative of diverse populations nor should researchers claim that findings from selected cases apply to such populations except in contingent ways (McKweon, 1999). Unlike case methodologies, statistical researchers look for a large sample of cases that can be described as representative of a larger population. Statistical researchers devote time and effort to attempting to make the sample as representative of possible. This method and the subsequent outcomes achieved should not be extended to the case study methodology, as case methods are not chosen for their broad representative abilities.
Case study methodologies require a trade-off between the goal of attaining theoretical prudence and establishing explanatory richness while keeping the cases selected manageable in scope and number. Theoretical prudence rarely produces rich explanations of particular cases, and such theories should be presented in highly general terms to be applicable throughout varying types of cases (George and McKeown, 1985). If the researcher’s goal is to explain in copious detail varying types of cases, many cases must be studied. Case studies may surface or refine a theory about a causal mechanism that is germane to vast case studies, but usually the effects of such mechanisms differ from one case or context to another.

In light of the aforementioned trade-offs, researchers often have to sacrifice the parsimony of their theories to create generalizations that can apply to specific types or subtypes of cases with a strong ability to achieve explanatory richness. The frequency with which specified outcomes occur is less important than the conditions under which they occur and the mechanisms through which they occur. Cases are most often selected to proffer the strongest inferences on a theory or to evidence variables of extreme values that support a given theory. Deviant cases can be employed to discover variables that may have been left out in the selection of other cases.

The research designs described thus far are intentionally unrepresentative of larger populations. It is up to the researcher to explain that only contingent generalizations apply to a subclass of cases or that the researcher opted to choose the cases to uncover causal mechanisms. Selection bias and overrepresentation, better known as over generalizing, can be defeated by a pointed explanation by the researcher to
mitigate a lack of credibility in using the case study method. Focusing on a subclass of cases or searching for the causal mechanisms that lead to one conclusion over another is truly the key to effective case selection.

Single-case studies have been the cause of much critique. Skeptics purport that single-case research designs leads to “single-observation” and are at great risk of indeterminacy and can lead to incorrect inferences if there is any sort of measurement error (King and Verba, 208-211). This is a valid point and researchers should be wary of over generalizing if the research design involves one case. However, a single-case research design can effectively contribute to a theory as long as the researcher looks for multiple observations in a single case. Theories on comparative politics have been successfully drawn from single-case studies (Kennedy, 1979).

Case study methods likewise also raise concerns about whether cases are ‘independent’ of one another. The inherent danger is that the researcher will fail to identify a lack of independence between multiple cases thereby reaching false conclusions. In statistical methods on the other hand, if a correlation is drawn from studying multiple cases, the addition of cases does not lead to new information and there are fewer degrees of freedom than the researcher first anticipated. In case methods, the issue is not a ‘degrees of freedom’ problem, but rather that the researcher might choose cases that have the same variables and thus lack independence.

Researchers can limit the concerns of lack of independence of cases by employing process-tracing as it can uncover linkages between cases, reducing the danger of case-dependency. Process-tracing is also valuable for scrutinizing the types of detailed
sequences in learning and diffusion processes that can create relationships between cases, allowing researchers to measure what level of variance in outcomes is explained by learning or diffusion (George, 1985). Alternatively, researchers can count on a lack of independence of cases to test whether the outcomes of an earlier case had an effect in later cases. In other words, there is value to investigating many cases that are all co-dependent, so long as the researcher is aware of it and uses it to compare and contrast earlier cases to later ones.

Notwithstanding these many limitations to case study methods, researchers can alleviate them by remaining mindful of them in selecting cases. Once selected, researchers must be equally cognizant of the research design chosen when drawing conclusions from cases. In certain instances, limitations of case methods can be used to the advantage of the researcher. For example, when the danger of over generalizing exists, researchers can attempt to observe multiple variables from a single-case and clearly point out in their research that a single case cannot speak to wider populations, but it can produce multiple observable variables. Paradoxically, limitations then can prove useful to the overall research.

**How to Conduct Case Studies**

Case methodologies should be decided upon with the goal in mind of employing a method of structured, focused comparison. General questions should be crafted to reflect the researcher’s objectives, and those questions should be applied to each case studied. This procedure standardizes data collection, formulating a systematic comparison that
will cumulate findings derived from case research. Research should be focused so that it only concentrates on those aspects of the case that contribute to the theory. To this end, case studies should meet three major criteria.

Firstly, the investigator should clearly classify the class or subclass of events from which the cases are selected. Each case should speak to one phenomenon: either crisis management, causes of war, the effect of the economy on conflict, or any other phenomenon selected for examination. Second, a well-stated research objective, complimented by a well thought out strategy, should guide the selection and investigation of cases. Researchers should stay away from choosing cases merely because they are interesting. Lastly, selected cases should contain variables of theoretical and academic intrigue for purposes of examination.

Designing case study research consists of three phases—the first entails formulating the objectives, design and structure of the research. Each case should then follow in accordance with that design. In phase three the researcher draws conclusions from the cases that have contributed to the research objective of the study. The phases are inter-reliant and require careful attention to the process to ensure integration with each phase. The three phases will be discussed in greater detail below.

When embarking on a case study research design, the first step is to specify the problem and research objective. It is the most important step because it frames and guides the remainder of the process. A precise research statement should lead the investigation—a statement that addresses current gaps of knowledge in the subject matter at hand. The puzzle or research question, once answered, should contribute to the field
by acknowledging contradictory theories and pointing out shortfalls in existing theories. There are generally six different kinds of theory-building research objectives: the atheoretical/configurative idiographic case studies, the disciplined configurative case studies, the heuristic case studies, the theory testing case studies, the plausibility probes, and the “building block” studies of particular types or subtypes of a phenomenon (Lijphart, 1971).

Task two involves developing a research strategy through the specification of variables. The specification of the problem, already identified in step one, relates to the declaration of the dependent variable. If the research question is too broad the investigator risks losing the nuances between cases being compared. Contrarily, if the question is too narrow, the scope and relevance of the study is limited through case comparison. Instead, researchers should seek to answer questions such as, which variables will serve as parameters, and which might vary across cases? What is the precise dependent (or outcome) variable is being explained/predicted? Which independent variables intervene to compromise the theoretical structure of the research? (George and Bennett, 2005)

Next comes the difficult task of case selection. Cases should be elected as an integral part of a solid research strategy. Relevance to the research objective is paramount, regardless of whether the study includes theory development or testing, for example. Control and necessary variation are other key factors in case selection that should be taken into account. That said, case selection also presents an opportunity for
creativity—a pair of well-matched cases or ones that are most similar, or even list similar can make for an interesting study.

Researchers often begin their journey with a theory in search of a test case or vice versa, a case in search of a testable theory. As long as concerns of selection bias are considered, and several cases are explored as possible test cases, either approach is practical. A particular case might interest the researcher and subsequently lead the researcher to a candidate theory. The theory may then become more appealing than the case itself, and lead the researcher to a variety of new cases. History does not always endow the researcher with adequate cases the first time around. This process can be laborious and repetitive but ultimately lends itself to suitable case selection.

The next step in forming a case study research design entails describing the variance in variables. It is critical to the process of the case analyses in order to develop innovative theories or refine existing ones. Variance can be defined in terms of qualitative types of outcomes in some instances, and in others it can be quantitative in measure. In conducting research on coercive diplomacy, Alexander George, David Hall and William Simons treated coercive diplomacy itself as the independent variable and derived from an analysis of multiple cases, that four types of coercive diplomacy strategy exist: the explicit ultimatum, the tacit ultimatum, the “gradual turning of the screw,” and the “try and see” variant (George, Hall, and Simons, 1971). By distinguishing the independent variable, a more effectual analysis of coercive diplomacy was conducted.

Finally, the researcher must formulate data requirements and general questions from the selected cases. The research strategy should guide data requirements and should
be integrated with the above four steps to a successful study. General questions apply to each case as a way of standardizing data for comparative purposes. Much like a survey, the same questions must be asked of each individual being surveyed in order to compare and analyze the results equally. Researchers should take caution to not over specify the questions so as to be applicable across variant cases selected; however, this method does not preclude the researcher to identify idiosyncratic features of a particular case.

Five major steps constitute interrelated and interdependent outline how to conduct case studies. No one step can properly be attained without respect to the previous steps. Identification of data requirements in the final step depends on the success of the prior four steps, for example. This process takes time to refine and a well-founded design does not often come to fruition on the first try. Vital to the end product, though, is integration of all five steps whereby it is possible to draw conclusions of use to the field.

Analyzing the case studies selected should lead the researcher to uncover answers to the general questions previously designed for each case. These answers make up the information that the researcher will use to shed light on the research objectives. Each case should contribute to the overall understanding and exploration of the objectives. The first step involves studying a case that is relatively unfamiliar and gathering as much literature on the case as possible. The outline of the case can then be formed via a chronological account that elucidates the case for the reader.

Analyzing the case requires the establishment of the existing independent and dependent variables, which is accomplished by standard procedures of historical inquiry. Historical study informs how and why change occurs over time, from where political
systems and cultural norms originate and assists in understanding primary sources. More
generally, it is invaluable for learning how to understand the significance of a primary
source (text, image, or artifact). The past and the present provide an overwhelming
number of facts and events that are not equally important. Many are inconsequential.
Historical inquiry helps us discern which are most important and why.

**Forming Explanations from Case Analysis**

It is now up to the researcher to formulate explanations for the outcome of each
case, through his/her own historical analysis. Understanding how historical analysis is
performed—the context surrounding the case, the particular difficulties associated with
the available evidence, procedures for sifting through large amounts of data with complex
variables—are all paramount to achieving accurate historical analysis. Applying
traditional quasi-experimental designs will not serve the ultimate purpose of case study
methodology the way that historical analysis will.

Case explanations are inherently provisional in nature, and as a result, so will the
theoretical conclusions drawn from the case explanations. In other words, case
explanations can be challenged by other experts or scholars based on a certain premise—
for example, the research design may be called into question for having overlooked other
relevant data or the researcher may have neglected to consider a strong rival hypothesis in
the overall calculus of their findings. The result may be that the researcher has to review
and retest his or her theory. Another reason to retest may be that new historical data has
been published that changes the premise of the study.
The historian’s method of causal imputation should be used to form case explanation. Contrastingly, in analyzing statistical-correlational studies the researcher will employ the mode of causal inference (George, Hall, and Simons, 1971). Causal interpretations gain credibility if they are line with available data, and should be supported by generalizations drawn from studies conducted on the same topic. The more researchers takes into account alternative hypothesis and explanations, the more they can prove that their own explanation is most credible, and the more plausible their conclusions.

A common problem with case study methods is reconciling inconsistent or contradictory interpretations of a case, or identifying which interpretation is most plausible. To avoid such challenges, researchers should look to sufficiently showcase how their interpretation is superior to differing ones. In this regard, it is a good idea to review the independent variables that the researcher has identified as causing a specific outcome. If differing explanations cannot be reconciled, but both are credible, they should both be considered as contributing to the theory. In this situation, the explanations are not deemed conflicting, but rather complimentary.

Descriptive explanations should be able to be transformed into analytical ones. The process starts with developing a specific explanation for each case, but then converts into concepts and variables of the general theoretical framework previously created. The theoretical outline must be broad enough to encapsulate the main aspects of the historical context. Variables should be sufficient enough to capture the major points of a causal account of the outcome in a case.
In deriving explanations from cases, the researcher should consider scholarly work on the case already published, but should not rely solely on one authoritative voice. It is necessary to include debates among historians in the final product. The conclusions drawn from such scholarly debates can assist in devising the researcher’s hypothesis. Historical interpretations of a case that are complete outliers might be cast aside in favor of case explanations that fall within the scope of the general debate. If possible, it is prudent to have historians or scholars in the field of study review the varying historical explanations.

Case writers should familiarize themselves with the array of possible critiques their case explanations may face. Critics must possess a great deal of knowledge regarding the intricacies of the case and the historical academic debate. The most common questions that threaten the case writer include, do the case findings really support the chosen theory? Do the findings support other theories the researcher may have overlooked? Consideration of these questions from the beginning will mitigate narrow findings from case explanations.

Transitioning from Case Explanations to Theory Application

Case explanations can have great effects on theory development and/or testing. Even when theories have been tested numerous times, deviant cases or probes into past case explanations can surface new hypothesis or variables for instance. Theory testing is important because it can strengthen or diminish the plausibility of a theory. It can also limit or expand the scope conditions of a theory or assist in determining which of a
myriad of theories best explains cases. Equally essential to constructing solid theories is
theory development.

Case studies affect theory testing and development in three ways. According to
George, Hall and Simons, case study findings may provide the foundation for, strengthen
or weaken historical explanations of a given case. Process-tracing assists in this
endeavor, because if a theory supports the idea that a specific causal mechanism is the
basis for the case explanation, but the mechanism is absent, the theory is weakened. The
researcher should guard against measurement error or omitted variables. Alternatively, if
the causal mechanisms are present, generally the theory is strengthened.

Third, it is necessary for the researcher to ensure that case study findings do not
spill over into neighboring cells in a typology. Generalizations can mistakenly occur in
instances where the role of a particular variable is recurrent in dissimilar cases or to all
cases of a certain phenomenon. Causal variables are incorrectly identified as causally
related to the outcome. Researchers, as a result, tend to limit their study to a narrowly
defined generalization about a type of case (Collier and Mahoney, 1996). It should be
noted however, that if a case presents a strong test of theories, it can be generalized to
other cases beyond the one from which it was derived.

Deductive theory of development is distinguishable from theory development
through case studies. Deductive methodologies have developed wholly new theories or
fill major gaps in existing theories. Case studies are useful in testing deductive theories
by developing new variables. Theory development however, is first and foremost an
inductive process. Researches are advised not to develop a theory from evidence and
subsequently test it against the same evidence. Similarly, using the same evidence to
craft a theory and test it against the same evidence will likely result in confirmation bias,
which refers to affirming one’s own theories to those already well established in
academia.

Deviant cases can be a source of generalizing across types of cases for theory
development. Often, deviant cases produce a new concept, variable, or theory regarding
a causal mechanism that affects more than one genre of cases and even across a certain
phenomenon. Max Weber believed that the specification of new concepts or variables is
often one of the most important contributions of research (Weber, 1988). If a new theory
is formed by a deviant case, the researcher may generalize about how the new mechanism
should be widely relevant and/or applied. Deviant cases then, present one means of
generalizing in a more credible fashion.

Well established theories are prime for testing by case study methods. The
objective of testing is to discover ways to either expand or narrow the theory’s
applicability. Testing is a challenging process because when a theory does not meet the
evidence found in a case, it is not always clear whether the theory does not explain that
particular case or if it fails to explain a whole subset of cases. Theories should not be
rejected on the basis of one or two anomalous cases but perhaps the theory requires a
narrowing of its scope. Researchers should be cautious though, of adding additional
variables to make the theory fit the evidence found in cases. Unfortunately, there is no
simple way to address all of the complications that arise from attempting to generalize.
Some scholarly methodologists such as Harry Eckstein propose that ‘crucial cases’ offer the most definitive evidence on a theory. Crucial cases are defined as those that “must closely fit a theory if one is to have confidence in the theory’s validity.” (Eckstein, 1985) Crucial cases are not effortless to identify and rarely occur in the social world. As such, Eckstein suggests the alternative of tough testing through most-likely and least-likely cases. Most-likely cases possess variables that strongly posit an outcome, while least-likely cases posit independent variables that only weakly predict an outcome. Least-likely cases can reduce the credibility of a theory while most-likely cases can fortify theories.

Generalizing case studies is a complex undertaking. Diverse, numerous case studies examined may produce no common findings. In these circumstances, only a unique historical explanation can suffice. Sometimes only a few cases or even a single-case are studied but uncover a new causal mechanism applicable to a wider range of cases than multiple, diverse cases. Case study findings are most constructive in their ability to systematically refine generalizations by either broadening or narrowing their scope, and by introduction new types and subtypes of cases through adding in variables.

Relevance of Case Studies in the Practical World

Research in the field of political science is valuable in learning from or solving real world problems. Scholars who study comparative politics, international relations, and adherents of the rational choice agree that the aim of research is to contribute to their respective fields of study in applicable real world ways. A gap certainly exists between
theory and practice, but researchers should strive to bridge this gap by creating a dialogue between policymakers and academics. Those researchers who opt to employ case study methodology and present policy prescriptions cannot eliminate the gap, but they can assuage it. Abstract models do not transform into strategies without introducing logic and context to the research—a function of case studies.

Developing policy-relevant knowledge can come from in depth case study methodologies in numerous ways. Cases of past historical experiences with varying problems and strategies are needed to identify and accumulate lessons of the past into future policy recommendations. Within-case analysis and process-tracing present alternatives to variable-oriented approaches that can be duplicative to other methods. Any single case examined can offer valuable contributions to theory development. Structured and focused comparisons tender a research strategy for single and comparative case studies. Finally, development of usable knowledge gained from case studies are taken from historical experience and scholars should advertise lessons learned to policymakers.

The importance of case study methodologies in bridging the gap between theory and practice cannot be underscored enough. Scholarly knowledge can be conceptualized as an entry into policy analysis on specific issues within the government and can aid policymakers in making policy determinations. This knowledge is critical for the development and choice of sound, effective policies. Case studies give scholars the opportunity to diagnose real world problems first and later offer lessons learned from
historical experience. Case studies play, and will continue to play an increasingly significant role in paving the way for future policies to repair real world problems.
Chapter 4: What Symbolic Interaction Can Tell You About the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

This chapter employs the theory of symbolic interactionism to enhance our understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For this purpose, it looks at two case studies. The first case is the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) 2004 military incursion into the Gaza Strip, “Operation Rainbow”. The operation symbolizes the cyclical misinterpretation of Israeli’s military tactical goals and the succeeding Palestinian behavior in response to what they viewed as an Israeli excessive use of force. The misinterpretations resulting from “Operation Rainbow” are particularly pertinent since the then Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s unilateral disengagement plan was already in its development stages. The second case study follows with an analysis of Israel’s unilateral disengagement of Gaza in 2005. Withdrawal from the Gaza Strip might reasonably have signified a positive step towards peace, yet Palestinian authorities interpreted this historical event as disingenuous on the part of Israel in order to divert attention from the road map to peace. The chapter employs symbolic interactionism to better understand the tenacity of the ongoing conflict.

The chapter is divided into subsections, which follow the case study methodology outlined in Chapter 3. The researcher begins each case study with a brief history of the circumstances surrounding each event, given the importance of process tracing in case study methodology. Additionally, path dependency contends that history matters. The subclass of events from which the cases are selected relates to how interaction contributes to greater understanding of conflict. The dependent variable results from the interaction
throughout the conflict in each case. The independent variables are the actions taken, the interpretation of those actions and subsequent reactions, and how those actions differ in their portrayal in the media.

A History of Conflicted Interaction

After World War II and the grave atrocities that occurred against Jews during the Holocaust, a Zionist movement arose to restore the Jews to Israel, despite the existing Arab population. The Balfour Declaration of 1917 proclaimed Palestine as part of Britain, and pressure mounted to allow increased Jewish immigration to what had previously been Palestinian land. To regulate the growing contentious situation, the United Nations partitioned the land into Jewish and Arab states in 1947, thereby granting Israel independence. Arabs did not accept the partitions and war broke out with the Zionists winning a decisive victory, expanding their state and creating several hundred thousand Palestinian refugees. Subsequent wars broke out between Israel and their Arab neighboring states in 1956, 1967, 1973 and 1982 (MideastWeb, 2003).

Since the creation of Israel in 1947, the two populations living on the sacred land, Israeli and Palestinian, have existed in conflicted interaction. This conflict stemmed from fact that Israel was created as a safe haven for Jews fleeing Europe after the Holocaust, notwithstanding the opposition from its Arab inhabitants, which included both Christians and Muslims. Territorial disputes, religious and cultural differences have only exacerbated interaction between these populations. Terrorism and violence was rampant on both sides (United Nations documents) in the earliest stages of Jewish immigration.
In 1948, the British relinquished any responsibility for the situation, and turned the problem over to the United Nations who sought to implement a partition plan that would create two states—one Arab and one Jewish with Jerusalem as the capital (United Nations documents). Despite many attempts to reach peace, even with several other nations’ involvement as intermediaries, the peace process has failed at every turn.

Both sides are responsible for inciting violence and committing acts of terrorism. Palestinians have engaged in suicide bombings inside Israel, often killing Israeli civilians. In addition, they have launched Qassam rockets into Israel. First created and launched in 2001, these rockets are named for the armed branch of Hamas, Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades (The Jewish Policy Center). On the Israeli side, the IDF has provided the means of force. It is the sole military wing of the Israeli security forces and is advanced both technologically and in training (The Institute for National Security Studies, 2009). In particular, the IDF has used the superior Caterpillar D9 armored bulldozer to demolish Palestinian homes and buildings (Dearden and Zacune, 2005). Both sides have used the military tactics at their disposal in acts of violence. However, the Israeli air, sea and ground forces can not effectively deal with the guerilla-type militant groups that have comprised Palestinian resistance. Thus, sixty-two years after the formation of Israel, the exchange of violent acts continues today.

Case Study 1: The History behind Israeli Military Action “Operation Rainbow”: Actions and Reactions
Military operations in the Gaza Strip were not a new phenomenon for Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) when it planned Operation Rainbow. Israel sought to conduct a short-lived ground incursion into Gaza near the Philadelphi Corridor in late May 2004, in order to prevent a shipment of Strela-2 shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles, AT-3 Sagger anti-tank guided missiles, as well as other long-range rockets that were stored on the Egyptian side of the Palestinian border. Israel sought to disrupt the shipment, which was allegedly to be smuggled via tunnels into the Gaza Strip, ultimately destined for what were presumed to be Palestinian terrorist groups (*Ha’aretz*, 2004). The operation also endeavored to kill the Palestinian militants responsible for the deaths of thirteen Israeli soldiers targeted in the several preceding weeks leading up to the operation.

Israel did not carry out “Operation Rainbow” without having its own alleged justification. On 11 and 12 May, two armored personnel carriers of an IDF combat engineering battalion were destroyed by Palestinian militants. Two separate Palestinian attacks in Gaza City claimed the lives of 11 Israeli soldiers during those two days (*Economic Expert*, 2004). The remains of slain Israeli soldiers were reportedly dragged around the city of Zeitoun by members of the terrorist-dubbed Palestinian militant group Palestinian Islamic Jihad. United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) ambulances were used by the militants as transportation. In an interview with *Ha’aretz*, Israel’s Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz confirmed his belief that UNRWA’s ambulances were used by Palestinian militants in order to smuggle some of the remains of IDF soldiers killed in Zeitoun on 11 May. UNRWA confirmed the incident and offered the
explanation that the militants forced the driver to take them, but denied they carried body parts (Hasson, 2004).

In the period up to Operation Rainbow, Israel had determined that smuggling experts were transporting weapons for terrorist organizations, or for other elements that purchased firearms in exchange for money. Israeli tactical intelligence operations discovered the process of how money was being transferred to Palestinians and Egyptians who owned the houses or property from which tunnels were being dug. The IDF reported that the construction of these tunnels was being overseen by Palestinian residents of Rafah who specialize in tunneling. According to the Israelis, the Palestinians tried to avoid detection by appointing small children to construct tunnels and smuggle weapons (Israeli Defense Forces, 2004). It was this complex system of smuggling via tunnels led to the events of 22 May 2004, or Operation Rainbow.

Operation Rainbow made way for the IDF to uncover considerable information about how the tunnels were being constructed in Gaza. More precise targeting of Gazan homes allowed for the discovery of tunneling plans and intended smuggling routes. That said, as of the last day of fighting, the Israeli Defense Forces found only one smuggling tunnel loaded with explosives and two additional tunnels destroyed (Israeli Defense Forces, 2004). Considering the reported excessive damage caused to the Gazan infrastructure and the high amount of civilian casualties, compared to the achievement of Israel’s stated goals, the world questioned the use of Israeli excessive force. Operation Rainbow became an event that spurred a great deal of media attention and public debate in relation to the larger ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
On 25 May 2004, toward the end of the operation, the IDF withdrew most of its forces from Rafah, and lifted the strict blockade that it had imposed on all entry/exit points in Gaza. Only small military units were left behind to pinpoint smuggling tunnels. Thereafter, the Israeli government, in concert with the IDF, debated widening the Philadelphi corridor in order to dig a moat to block the future excavation of tunnels (Israeli Ministry of Affairs, 2004). Such an action would have required tearing down many homes in the area in addition to the ones already demolished by the creation of the current buffer zone. After left-wing Israeli groups protested, the plan was disposed of in favor of a less invasive solution for dealing with the residents of southern Rafah.

The Media Battle Arises

The Israeli government planned “Operation Rainbow” as part of a strategy to respond to Palestinian militants’ actions against Israel in the preceding weeks. On 18 May, IDF Chief of Staff Ya’alon briefed the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee on arms shipments in the Sinai originally from Iran, waiting to be smuggled through tunnels into Gaza (Gilbert, 2004). Leaks to the Israeli media later mentioned anti-aircraft missiles and long-range rockets shipments destined for Palestinian militant groups. The weapons were to be shipped by tunnels underneath the Suez Canal (Dudkevitch, 2004). Israeli Justice Minister Yosef Lapid stated on 20 May that the Rafah operation [Operation Rainbow] was necessary to protect Israeli civilian airliners from anti-aircraft missiles: “If this happens, God forbid, and airplanes are shot down, people will ask us why we didn’t act to stop it,” (Dudkevitch and Keinon, 2004). Israel would
carry out “Operation Rainbow” in response to Palestinian attempts to carry out acts of violence against Israel.

Consider for instance, an article in The Guardian entitled “Bloody Vengeance or Assault on Terrorists: Can Truth Emerge from Rafah’s Ruins?” that attempts to uncover the motives behind “Operation Rainbow” and the initial causes for the incursion. The article declares that

Operation Rainbow was undoubtedly prompted by the twin attacks, a fortnight ago, on Israeli armoured vehicles - one in Rafah, the other in Gaza City - that killed 11 soldiers. Two more died in the subsequent operation to recover the soldiers' body parts in Rafah (McGreal, 2004).

However, according to the same article, Israeli military officials privately told Israeli reporters that the operation was, in part, about hitting back and restoring army moral. The operation also presented an opportunity to advance the continued goal of the demolition of Palestinian homes along the Philadelphi road and the disruption of Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Rafah before Jewish settlers were to be withdrawn from the Gaza Strip as part of Israel’s disengagement plan. The army said it would not allow Gaza to become “Hamasland,” (McGreal, 2004). Who then was responsible for the violence resulting from “Operation Rainbow”?

What Israel deemed a short-fused tactical military operation to eradicate tunnels used for smuggling, Palestinian authorities viewed as another Israel effort to attack innocent Palestinian civilians, homes, and infrastructure in search of a few so-called terrorists. Media reports reflected the polarized positions, as neither side agreed to compromise on the reported events that occurred during Operation Rainbow. Israel was
appealing to the right, defending itself from Hamas by aggressively destroying tunnels used for weapons and human smuggling. In the name of Israeli national security, the Israelis killed or wounded innocent civilians and demolished numerous buildings and homes. Palestinian leaders interpreted Operation Rainbow as an excuse for Israel to invade Gaza at will, to expand the width and length of Israeli control of the Philadelphi corridor, and to revenge the 13 deaths of Israeli soldiers in the preceding weeks.

When the Palestinians accused the Israelis of unnecessarily demolishing Gazan infrastructure, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) defended its position, calling it a ‘military necessity.’ Specifically, the MFA argued that

A further instance necessitating the demolition of buildings is the use made by terrorist groups of civilian buildings in order to conceal openings of tunnels used to smuggle arms, explosives and terrorists from Egypt into the Gaza Strip. Similarly, buildings in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are used for the manufacturing and concealment of rockets, mortars, weapons and explosive devices to be used against Israel. The demolition of these structures is often the only way to combat this threat (Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2004).

Taking action to demolish buildings under the premise of military necessity is permitted under international law. As long as Israel could prove that its intentions were targeted specifically against buildings used by terrorist groups, the IDF was following proper international regime protocol.

Unfortunately a statement by both then IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Moshe Ya’alon and Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz on 16 May 2004 highlighted Israel’s intention to demolish “hundreds of buildings” in Rafah “as part of the plan to widen the Philadelphi Route. Ya’alon further stated that the targeted houses had already been marked in aerial photos (Arutz Sheva, 2004). Indeed, Palestinians hung onto the words
spoken by the Senior IDF officer. The *Christian Science Monitor* reported that,
according to Arye Eldad, a far-right leaning Israeli coalition legislator on the Knesset’s
Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, the idea was in fact to widen the Philadelphia
Corridor to approximately 500 yards from its current width of about 250 yards (Lynfield, 2004). On hearing this, Palestinians no longer believed Israeli and IDF statements
claiming that their only intent was to eradicate tunnels, according to *The Electronic
Intifada*, an online pro-Palestinian publication that compiles news stories from other
major news sources to offer a pro-Palestinian perspective. According to an article
published in the online publication entitled “Key Israeli Distortions about ‘Operation
Rainbow’, Israel's military operations in Rafah have produced multiple reports of grave
human rights violations reported in the media and by local and international human rights
organizations. Further, "Operation Rainbow" coincided with the release of a new report
on the Israeli practice of home demolition by human rights organization Amnesty
International, which concluded that, “The grounds invoked by Israel to justify the
destruction are overly broad and based on discriminatory policies and practices,” (Parry,
2004).

Other peace activists and Palestinian leaders interpreted the incursion as Israeli
revenge against Palestinians responsible for the 13 deaths of the Israeli soldiers. In the
*Palestine Report*, a weekly publication that reports on weekly news and analysis in
Palestine, Israeli peace activist Uri Avnery wrote “The first reason [for the invasion] is
the simplest: Thirst for revenge. Dozens of Palestinians are killed for 13 of our soldiers,
hundreds of homes demolished for two destroyed personnel carriers,” (Baker, 2004).
During a Gazan demonstration against the incursion, an Israeli tank fired at what they claimed to be an abandoned structure. In the process, the IDF ended up killing 14 innocent demonstrators. Israel army’s Gaza division Brigadier General Shmuel Zakai said the tank commander did not see the nearby demonstration, saying: “To the best of my professional judgment, the tank commander’s decision was correct.” (Baker, 2004). The real ground truth was lost in a fiery debate of conflicting reports.

Few, although some, Israeli Defense Ministry officials admitted that the operation entailed an element of revenge for the death of the Israeli soldiers. Rather than point to revenge so overtly, however, Israeli military preferred terms such as keeping up “the deterrent capacity” of the army, or making a “show of force,” (Biedermann, 2004). Palestinian viewed these vague military terms as a cover for legitimizing the use of excessive force. Military and strategic analysts in Israel acknowledged that the incursion would only set back arms smuggling operations temporarily (Biedermann, 2004). Israeli defense officials were not convinced of the long-term gains of “Operation Rainbow,” but understood nonetheless that the short-term importance of eliminating smuggling routes, which they judged as a threat to peace.

Palestinian resistance was not completely absent. Palestinian sources at the time reported that Yasser Arafat ordered the distribution of Kalashnikov assault rifles to Hamas and Jihad Islamic groups who would be left behind to defend Gaza. Arafat evacuated the Strip, leaving Saib Ajez, a Khan Younes-based Palestinian general in command with approximately 20,000 men at his disposal (DEBKAfile, 2004). Israeli
superior firepower and military prowess was overwhelming, however, and Palestinian resistance was no match for the IDF.

Weaker Palestinian contingencies fighting against the superior Israeli forces often result in human rights violations debate. What might be perceived as Israeli excessive force has human rights implications for major international humanitarian organizations like Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International. In particular, serving as a strong pro-Palestinian voice, HRW weighed in with their assessment of “Operation Rainbow”. Countering the Israeli explanation that destruction of infrastructure was necessary, given that terrorist threats existed everywhere, HRW cited Israeli actions as contravening principles of international humanitarian law. HRW describes survival of civilian populations as dependent on the functioning of basic services such as clean water and sewage systems. HRW specifically cites Article 54(2) of Protocol I (ICRC, Commentary to Protocol I, p. 655) as part of the basis of their argument.

Human rights organizations entered the conflict as an outside actor only to monitor human rights violation in violent situations. They have often supported, fairly or not, the pro-Palestinian perspective based on the IDF’s advanced weaponry and Palestinian weaker military capability. Insofar as “Operation Rainbow”, the HRW was particularly concerned about the three rationales that they claimed the IDF had used for road destruction: to clear a path free of improvised explosive devices (IEDs); to sever wires used to detonate IEDs; and to protect against suicide car attacks. HRW accused the IDF of not following those rationales with the consistent military procedure that adhered to their stated intent (Human Rights Watch, 2008). According to HRW, the IDF used a
blade on the back of the Caterpillar D9 called the “ripper” to rip down the middle of the streets, creating lines of broken asphalt and dirt. Because the ripper penetrates deep into ground, many water and sewage pipes were severed. Although it was only one of the smaller, more specific points of the incursion, for HRW it was evidence of a clear violation of international humanitarian law. This position was also supported by the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), which accused Israel of war crimes for what FIDH claimed was a violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention (FIDH, 2004).

For its part, and in response to these media interpretations, Israel reiterated the necessity of entering Rafah at all costs, because it had become a gateway for terrorism in their eyes. IDF Chief of Staff Ya’alon explained that Israel never intended to destroy masses of homes nor did Israel maintain a policy of systematically destroying homes and infrastructure. He is quoted as saying “If the Palestinians want to prevent house demolitions, they must stop the arms smuggling,” (Lewin, 2004). Ya’alon insisted that prior to launching the operation, the IDF had ensured that residents of Gaza had all the basic necessities, including food and water. The particulars of war should be left as just that—the consequence of the Palestinian governing authorities not taking responsibility for ceasing tunnel activity. The Israeli perception, according to IDF Chief of Staff Ya’alon, was that the Israeli government had done everything to protect Palestinian civilians and ensure their basic needs were met prior to the incursion.

Interpreting Actions and Reactions: Motivations behind “Operation Rainbow”
At the end of the operation, according to United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), a total of three tunnels at most were uncovered and destroyed. Approximately thirteen Israeli soldiers were killed and dozens of Palestinians, both militants and civilians alike, died as a result of Israeli superior firepower. Blockades meant a cessation of food and aid to needy Palestinians as water and electricity supplies were decimated in the fighting. UNRWA estimated that 155 buildings were ruined in Rafah, leaving 1,960 residents homeless, (UNRWA, 2005). The total damage in both monetary and human terms was unprecedented since September 2000, the beginning of the Second Intifada.

Interestingly, Palestinians did not contest the operation’s original, focused intent to cease smuggling via tunnels. It is a matter of fact that the tunnels were facilitating an entire economy of black market goods, and were being used to ship weapons and humans across the Rafah border. It was the excessive use of force that gave rise to a Palestinian media reaction. In a publication by The Palestinian Chronicle, “Myth of Gaza: Justifying Slaughter in Gaza,” interviews with IDF soldiers after the operation was completed offered insight into possible Israeli motivations. The soldier explained how a senior IDF officer had explained that they had accomplished “‘Two things: (a) we showed them [Gazans] that the IDF can be brutal when necessary and (b) we didn’t let these left-wingers screw up our operation.’ ‘He was referring to the Israelis calling for peace,’” (Roberts, 2009).

Palestinian leaders urged the world to assist in convincing the Israeli government to cease “Operation Rainbow” due to the drastic humanitarian crisis the incursion was
Palestinian Authority (PA) Negotiations Minister Saeb Erakat told the *Voice of Palestine Radio* that the PA was holding “extensive contacts” with countries to persuade them to act immediately to stop the Rafah raid. He said, “We call upon the whole world to immediately intervene to block Israel’s military escalation,” (*Ha’aretz*, 2004).

Palestinians pleaded their case to the Arab League as well. At a meeting in Cairo, the Arab League announced that the incursion was aimed at “ethnic cleansing.” The League announced it would take judicial steps to bring Israelis to trial for war crimes, stating that “[The Council]…holds the Government of Israel wholly responsible for the consequences of the crime it is committing against the unarmed Palestinian people and condemns them as war crimes aimed at ethnic cleansing and collective punishment,” (*Ha’aretz*, 2004).

Dovetailing off of such statements, Palestinian leadership issued a statement condemning the heinous and grave “war crimes” Israel committed in Rafah and its refugee camp, calling on the UN and the US Administration to issue a UN resolution that would protect Palestinians from Israeli aggression (Division for Palestinian Rights, UNISPAL, 2004).

**Case Study 2: The History Behind Israel’s 2005 Unilateral Disengagement from Gaza**

On August 2005, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s began to evict all Israelis from the Gaza Strip and from four settlements in the West Bank. His plan, adopted by the Israeli government in 2005, was named the Disengagement Plan Implementation Law, the “Disengagement plan”, or the “Gaza expulsion plan”. The plan was quickly implemented; all residents were evicted, residential building destroyed, and security
personnel evacuated from Gaza by 12 September 2005. (Ynetnews.com, 2005). Ten days later the process was completed in the West Bank. Twenty-one civilian Israeli settlements in Gaza and many IDF installations were part of the disengagement plan.

Under the disengagement plan Israel would continue to control much of Gaza. Thus, according to Article 3.1 Israel retained control over Gaza’s coastline and airspace, and reserved the right to undertake military operations as necessary. Article 8 of the plan allowed Israel to maintain control of Gaza’s Egyptian border, to control water, communication, electricity, sewage networks, and to continue prior existing customs arrangements. Article 10 provided that Israeli imports could not be taxed but required that Gazan exports be taxed by Israel, which was also responsible for collecting customs duties on foreign products entering Gaza (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2005).

Inside Israel, Ariel Sharon touted the plan as a means of further improving Israeli security in addition to Israel’s international standing in the absence of political peace negotiations to end the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Rightist Israeli political parties and extremist settler groups opposed the plan, criticizing it as bolstering Palestinian terrorism efforts and showing weakness to international and Palestinian opposition to Israel’s presence in Gaza. Leftist parties rallied behind the disengagement as a sign of Israel’s willingness to reach a peace agreement. With the Israeli parliament (Knesset) in disagreement, a coalition was needed to move the plan forward. Key Israeli leaders resigned and fiery rhetoric from both sides of the Knesset hit the media with force, but Sharon would prevail.
Benjamin Netanyahu, then powerful Minister of Finance, led much of the opposition to the disengagement plan, touting his concern for the future security of Israel. In early August 2005, Netanyahu resigned, blaming the Israeli government for moving blindly along with disengagement notwithstanding the likely spike in terrorism. In his resignation speech to the Knesset, he said: “…I am convinced today that the disengagement will eventually aggravate terrorism instead of reducing it…The withdrawal endangers Israel’s security, divides its people and sets the standards of the withdrawal to the ’67 border,” (Disconnected, 2005). Netanyahu was resolute in his stance against the disengagement plan.

Sharon pushed forward despite intense opposition from rightist parties such as the Likud rightist party, Jewish religious leaders and the settler population. In a speech on 15 August 2005, Sharon lamented having to let go of the Gaza settlements, claiming that reality had intervened, and asserting that it was “out of strength and not weakness that [Israel] is taking this step,” (Patience, 2005). Sharon publicly cast the disengagement as a diplomatic initiative toward peace, and as a sign of Israeli benevolence and strength. Even within Israel, Sharon’s interpretation was not universally accepted. His own Likud Party soundly rejected his proposal in a 2 May referendum. Sharon told the cabinet in remarks later broadcast on Israeli radio: “The plan will allow us to guard our national interests, also security interests, and it will free Israel from the dangerous diplomatic stalemate,” (Myre, 2004). Still, there was no sign that any ministers had changed their minds as the Israeli news media said the breakdown in the cabinet remained the same: 11 ministers in support of the plan, and 12 in opposition (Myre, 2004).
The official proposal, published for the world to read, clearly laid out Sharon’s alleged intentions. Section 1 of the plan states that “Israel is committed to the peace process and aspires to reach an agreed resolution of the conflict on the basis of the principle of two states for two peoples…” (The State of Israel, 2004) Subsections i-vii of Section 1 lays out more specifically how Israel intends to accomplish peace. The plan will lead to “a better security situation,” “reduce friction with the Palestinian population, and carries with it the potential for improvement in the Palestinian economy and living conditions,” and “dispel claims regarding Israel’s responsibility for the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip,” amongst other goals. Israel embarked on the process was unilaterally, having concluded that “there is no reliable Palestinian partner with which it can make progress in a bilateral peace process,” (The State of Israel, 2004). Sharon was clear in stating his actions and intentions.

The proposal offered conditions to the Palestinians as well. Section 1 of the proposal concluded that once “there is evidence from the Palestinian side of its willingness, capability and implementation in practice of the fight against terrorism and the institution of reform as required by the Road Map…” it would then be possible to reconsider dialogue and negotiation (The State of Israel, 2004). Under the circumstances, Palestinian viewed the proposal as a means of halting the peace process. PA Prime Minister Qureia criticized Sharon’s plan by explaining that “By talking about a unilateral withdrawal, his aim is to drag the world’s attention from being interested to see the Road Map implemented to making them believe that he presents a new political initiative.” He
said the plan “would ... impose everything Sharon wants on the Palestinians unilaterally,”
(UPI.com, 2004). One plan would be interpreted in such diverse ways.

The Media Battle Arises

Despite internal Israeli disunity on disengagement, the pullout of Gaza was completed on 22 September 2005, when the last IDF solider departed from IDF’s Gaza Strip Divisional Headquarters. The media turned its attention to this historic event and numerous public statements were released from both Israeli and Palestinian leaders alike regarding the long-awaited withdrawal from the disputed territory. Palestinians, who were mostly in favor of the disengagement, remained guarded about Israeli intentions and the future of the West Bank.

Unilateralism was the first, central point of debate, fueling Palestinian disillusionment with the disengagement plan. The proposal was formulated and executed unilaterally, and explicitly so. In an interview with Ha’aretz’, Sharon explained that a long process of negotiations lay ahead, “not with the Palestinians, who will be excluded from any negotiations about the plan…” (Marcus, 2004). This sentiment was backed up by then Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, who proclaimed at a cabinet meeting in 2004, “There is no intention here of creating a diplomatic agreement with Hamas. We need diplomatic agreements against Hamas,” (The Electronic Intifada, 2004). From the outset, therefore, Israel expressed its intention to cut Hamas –if not the Palestinian governing authorities as a whole--out of the plan.
The second response to the disengagement plan was the accusation by Palestinian authorities and pro-Palestinian groups that Israel was using the disengagement plan as a way to bypass international obligation under the United Nations to withdraw to the 1967 borders. While Hamas had long been cut out of any negotiations, having not agreed to recognize Israel as a sovereign state and agree to a cease-fire, the Palestinian Authority had been in negotiations with Israel for years. This was evidenced in an interview with Israel’s Channel 10 TV, wherein PA President Arafat gave conditional support to Prime Minister Sharon’s Gaza withdrawal plan, asking: “When will it come? Will it be a complete withdrawal?” “I extend my hand to Sharon, to the nation of Israel and its Government,” Mr. Arafat also said, offering to meet Prime Minister Sharon and talk peace: “Why not? If there is a will for peace, it will overcome all other ideas.” (Myre, 2004). Sharon, however, shunned Arafat, accusing him of encouraging violence (Myre, 2004).

Officially, the Palestinian Authority, believed that withdrawal from Gaza, while a start, was not enough: they called for a complete withdrawal from both Gaza and the West Bank. In one interview, former Palestinian security chief Mohammad Dahlan asserted “I believe if Israel withdraws fully from the Gaza Strip, there will be no attacks in or from the Gaza Strip. We must exploit it to build a positive model so that the world community would be encouraged to apply pressure on Israel to begin similar withdrawals from the West Bank,” (Arab Press, 2005). This mindset might have been prompted by statements from Sharon’s top aide, Dov Weisglass, who was quoted in the renowned
Israeli newspaper *Ha’aretz* as saying that the withdrawal would prevent Palestinian statehood for years to come. Specifically, Weisglass declared:

“The significance of the disengagement plan is the freezing of the peace process... When you freeze that process, you prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state and you prevent a discussion on the refugees, the borders and Jerusalem. Disengagement supplies the amount of formaldehyde that is necessary so there will not be a political process with the Palestinians,” (*Ha’aretz*, 2006).

Weisglass, a most trusted aide of Sharon, helped devise the disengagement plan. Like Sharon, Weisglass was clear on Israeli intentions. In an interview with Ari Shavit of *Ha’aretz*, he trumpeted the main achievement of the Gaza plan as the freezing of the peace process in a “legitimate manner,” (*Israeli Insider*, 2004). He deemed the term ‘peace process’ a bundle of concepts and commitments that elude to the establishment of a Palestinian state with all of the security risks that entails. In Weisglass’ view, the peace process entailed the evacuation of settlements, the return of refugees, and the partition of Jerusalem, all actions Israel sought to halt (*Israeli Insider*, 2004). The brash statements by Weisglass emboldened critics of the plan who insisted Israel was purposefully sidelining the peace process. Denying these accusations, media critics fought back by asserting that Weisglass’ comments were taken out of context. The damage however, was done.

The third aspect of the withdrawal plan that was cause for misinterpretation was that, although it improved conditions in Gaza and promoted a movement toward ending occupation, it by no means fulfilled a complete end to occupation as espoused by international regimes and the Palestinians themselves. Israel however, did not necessarily envision the plan as part of any international agreement—quite the opposite in
fact, as stated in the official published proposal. The unilateral nature of the decision seemed to reinforce that action was not related to any previous negotiations. Rather, it aimed to be a plan to fulfill Israel’s national security needs in the long-term and a plan that just so happened benefited the Palestinians living in Gaza.

Consider, for instance, an article entitled “Investigating Israeli War Crimes in Gaza” in the online Palestinian newspaper, *The Palestinian Chronicle*. As it emphasized, despite the Israelis 2005 engagement, Gaza remained occupied (Lendman, 2009). The article cites Article 42 of the 1907 Hague Regulations which defines occupation. According to Article 42, legally, effective control of a territory exists if military forces can assume physical control of any part of the territory at any time (Fourth Geneva Convention, United Nations). As the article points out, Israel’s disengagement plan bestows exclusive authority over Gazan air space and coastline, a clear violation of the 1907 Hague Regulation. Israel’s disengagement plan would not be interpreted as an honest effort to end occupation for Palestinian observers.

On a more positive note, in early August 2005 Sheikh Jamal al-Bawatna, the mufti of the Ramallah district in Gaza and a top Palestinian religious cleric issued in a fatwa the banning of shooting attacks against Israeli security forces and settlements. Al-Bawatna’s concern was that any acts of violence of perceived hostility would be cause for Israel to postpone or abandon the pullout. Israeli press picked up on the story and *Ha’aretz* singled out the fatwa as the first time a Muslim cleric forbade shooting at Israeli forces, (*Ha’aretz*, 2005).
Interpreting Actions and Reactions: Motivations behind the Withdrawal?

According to authors Idith Zertal and Akiva Eldar, who conducted a detailed analysis of the history of Israeli settlers, Prime Minister Sharon was the first to present disengagement as an alternative that offered hope (Marcus, 2004). The authors submit that Sharon did, however, crawl lopsidedly toward the implementation of his plan with many contradictions and deceptive maneuvers so that Israelis and Palestinians alike no longer knew what was truth regarding the benefits and costs of withdrawing (Zertal and Eldar, 445). Sharon appeared to be acting out of a survival instinct and in response to external pressures from the international community, who insisted on ending the occupation.

Sharon openly admitted there was no longer a road map to peace in his eyes. Confiding in his Israeli political colleagues on the eve of Rosh Hashanah 2004, Sharon declared “Even now we are not going for the road map,” (Barnea and Schiffer, 2004). It appeared that Sharon, while not making it completely public, at the same did not deny that the road map was indefinitely suspended. The plan was to unilaterally disengage from Gaza and revisit peace negotiations with a more reliable Palestinian partner. Could Sharon be taken at face value by the Palestinians? And at what point could the Palestinians prove themselves a trusted partner in working toward peace? Could the Palestinian governing authorities reign in militant group’s intent on the complete destruction of Israel?

Sharon’s plan as published openly states that until Israel is able find a reliable interlocutor with whom to work on the road map, peace negotiations were to be put on
hold. Was Sharon really espousing an insincere plan then? Or was he simply attempting to unify Israelis in support of his plan while legitimately asserting Israel’s right to curtail the peace process until a trustworthy partner could be found amongst Palestinian political factions?

A Resolution?

The above analysis of the two case studies selected elucidates how actions are interpreted. Each side purportedly reacts to the other’s actions and vice versa. One theme weaves through both cases however—what actions Israel carries out in relation to the Palestinian territories are for Israel, a matter of national security. National security trumps most all other Israeli policies, perhaps because of the way in which Israel came into being. Palestinians though, represent the militarily weaker of the two and what actions are taken against them by Israel are often seen through the lens of a fledgling government, and an overpopulated, poor, defenseless, victimized populace. One action, easily misinterpreted, causes a severe reaction, and so goes the cycle.

The cases were selected because they represent interaction between Israel and Palestinian, specifically in Gaza, after the beginning of the Second Intifada in 2000. The first case embodies the debate surrounding “Operation Rainbow,” that occurred with unilateral disengagement already in the planning stages. The second case displays how even disengagement was fraught with conflict as intentions and interpretations were consistently misunderstood. In both instances, history was at the heart of interaction.
Neither party could interpret the other’s actions without the knowledge of the outcome of past interactions.

However, one must be careful not over generalize. The two cases, while interrelated on some level, are independent of one another. “Operation Rainbow” was a specific military operation that ended in approximately five days. Sharon’s disengagement plan was debated internally within the Israeli government for about a year and was a significant shift in strategy in dealing with the Palestinian territories. Interaction and the misinterpretation of interaction are central in both cases, but need not necessarily apply to other aspects of the ongoing conflict. In other instances, it is possible that there was no misinterpretation, but simply a fundamental religious or cultural difference that accounts for the ongoing nature of the conflict.

Despite the polarized positions on both sides and the fact that the conflict goes on, the unilateral disengagement from Gaza was seen as a start to returning Palestinian land to the Palestinians. As a thoughtful editorial in *Ha’aretz* longingly proposed, the future of Israel and Palestine does not belong to extremists on either of these gainsayers. Life and the desire for peace and prosperity rests in the common interests among the majority of both peoples. Further, “they are destined to be stronger than any illusion or scheme whose purpose is to foil the vision of two states living together in peace,” (*Ha’aretz*, 2004).
Chapter 5: Conclusions

This chapter analyzes the case studies presented in Chapter 4 in the light of the hypothesis and the theory of symbolic interactionism. It seeks to determine whether the continued tensions between the Palestinians and the Israelis, and the actions that each took during the two case studies examined in Chapter 4, can be explained, in part, by mutual misinterpretations that were based on prior, historical events. This chapter also discusses whether these conclusions are more generalizable at the theoretical level of symbolic interactionism. Moreover, it strives to determine whether an understanding of the miscommunications among the Israelis and the Palestinians suggest alternative approaches for resolving conflicts such as these. And, finally, it offers recommendations toward achieving peace using symbolic interactionism as a theoretical framework.

Reasons for Misinterpretation: What does Symbolic Interactionism Tell Us?

Based on the two case studies presented in Chapter 4, symbolic interactionism appears to be useful for studying conflict situations. Actions taken by one side are interpreted by the receiving side, which then takes action accordingly. Interpretations of any given action are subject to interpretations of prior actions. In other words, history plays a substantial role in the interpretive process.

The theory takes a subjective approach to human behavior, positing that humans ascribe symbols to objects and interpret actions based on those ascribed meanings. In conflict situations, it might be said that actions are subjectively interpreted based on how each side views the reason for the conflict, whether each side views themselves as the
aggressor or the defender, and how the outcomes of conflict are perceived (i.e. who wins or loses? How is this measured?). As the case studies demonstrate, symbolic interactionism can shed light on how repeated misinterpretations can exacerbate conflict.

In the case of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is clear that the Israelis and the Palestinians have vastly differing interpretations of the same events. For example, in the case of “Operation Rainbow,” Palestinians interpreted the Israeli incursion into the Gaza Strip as an excessive use of force to punish Gazans for Palestinian militants’ violent actions against Israeli targets in the preceding weeks. Palestinian leaders also viewed the operation as part of the Israeli government’s strategy to widen their hold on the Philadelphi corridor. Contrastingly, Israeli was purported to be responding to Palestinian militants’ slaying of 13 Israeli soldiers in the week prior. Moreover, Israeli stated their military aims were to eradicate smuggling of weapons to terrorist groups via tunnels along the Rafah border, and to secure the Gaza Strip in light of Sharon’s imminent disengagement plan. Symbolic interactionism tells us the actions taken, at least in part, are a result of repeated misinterpretation.

History is vital to comprehending symbolic interactionism in relation to conflict. In case one, the researcher could analyze Palestinian militants’ motives in killing 13 Israeli soldiers. The reasons behind the killings might be explained by prior Israeli action, or even in the greater context of the Second Intifada. Likewise, the reason given for the killings would then prompt Israel to defend their own action, and so on. The conflict is rooted in history. Stemming from the historical nature of these two peoples’
interaction, meanings that have long been ascribed to objects and interactions have been interpreted in light of those previously ascribed meanings.

The second case gives rise to a similar conclusion. Sharon’s disengagement plan, if proposed in a vacuum, would seem to be a mutually beneficial offer, yet it was not interpreted as such, neither by rightist Israelis nor by Palestinians. While welcoming the withdrawal from Gaza, Palestinian leaders were weary of Israeli true motives. Instead of accepting the plan as a step towards ending Israeli occupation, Palestinians interpreted the move as part of a greater plan to reshuffle settlers to the West Bank and to cease progress on the road map to peace. In Israel’s defense, Sharon stated that although the decision was unilateral, it had to be so because there existed no suitable Palestinian political party with whom negotiations could be made. Sharon acknowledged the decision was a diplomatic one, but one he believed would greatly enhance Israeli national security in the long-term.

Once again, history played a major role in how both sides interpreted Sharon’s disengagement plan. Sharon and his political supporters were gauging what persistent violence in the Gaza Strip meant for Israel’s future security. Palestinian groups had engaged in consistent violent acts against Israel since the Second Intifada in 2000. Hamas had won the elections in the Gaza Strip and was now the ruling authority. Sharon believed the time had come to withdraw. Was his grand strategy to take over the West Bank and halt peace negotiations? Palestinian leaders drew upon their prior experience in interpreting Israeli motivations, and believed there was more to Sharon’s proposal than a clear-cut withdrawal that might be the first step toward a complete end to occupation.
Precedent and history would predict the likely reactions to any action undertaken by either side.

**Symbolic Interactionism: Wider Applicability?**

Symbolic interactionism is useful in the context of analyzing the two case studies and how the theory can contribute to the conflict resolution field of study. The theory offers a commonsense approach to how humans interact and how interpretations lead to follow-on actions. It would seem, therefore, that conclusions drawn from the two case studies illustrate the value of symbolic interactionism as a way of illuminating cases dealing with conflict. Conflict presupposes that humans are engaging in some form of interaction, either at an individual or collective level, lending credibility to the use of a sociological-based interactionist framework.

As a theory, symbolic interactionism was designed to explain how engagement might lead to consensus building. It presupposes that if two parties can evaluate another’s action through their own lenses, they will be more likely to interpret the action’s intent accurately and react in a way that is reflective of that intent. Consider for instance, if the Palestinians had viewed the Israeli position as that of a people historically persecuted and thereby security conscious, and extremely cautious of potential enemies infringing on their right to a peaceful existence. Similarly, suppose Israelis could better empathize with the militarily weaker, impoverished Palestinian population which also strives to live peacefully on a land that was theirs to inhabit until
the mass immigration of Jews. Both sides might find themselves less polarized and more willing to compromise.

One must take caution, however, in over generalizing the theory’s utility in studying conflict, insofar as the cases presented two sequential historical episodes in a narrow timeframe. Future studies might include less sequential cases that cross over a larger period in history. For instance, it would be interesting to study a historical episode from the very beginning of the creation of Israel and compare it to a more recent case, such as the Israeli-Gaza war in 2006. Changes or lack thereof, in how the two sides have interacted during a longer time span, particularly as Israel has developed as a nation, would be telling.

Symbolic interaction has limits. Founded by sociologist George Mead and largely expanded by Herbert Blumer who coined the theory’s name, the theory has not evolved significantly since 1969. It has been the gateway for other theories and might be considered the foundation of more modern theories and ideas like emergence and path dependence, the subject of much academic study by scholars such as Douglass North and Robert Putnam. Symbolic interaction at its core though, has not been extensively tested using modern cases. Its applicability has not met its full potential.

The model that makes up symbolic interactionism is simplistic. Although adaptable, it does not account for the strong possible influence of outside actors in a given interaction. Outside actors are vital to understanding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. From neighboring states like Egypt and Jordan, to international humanitarian organizations such as UNRWA and HRW, these intermediaries have heavily influenced
how Israel and Palestine interact. In the case of Palestine, outside actors are particularly key in communicating their position to the world. Without many resources or widely available media outlets, Palestinians rely on external actors to relay their message. This is particularly true in light of the peace agreements established between Israel and Egypt and Israel and Jordan.

**Alternative Approaches to the Study of Conflict Resolution**

Although applicable and legitimate for studying conflict, the research method applied to symbolic interactionism in the cases selected suggests other alternatives are possible for future research. To build upon the credibility of symbolic interactionism as an approach to studying conflict, future research might take into account the voice of the everyday Israeli and Palestinian citizen. This research for this thesis evaluated public statements made by influential leaders in Israel and Palestine. Analysis of the same two case studies from the perspective of the people rather than governments and influential decision-makers, for instance, would be an interesting addition to the conclusions drawn from this research. Such an undertaking would likely entail in-person interviews from across socio-economic demographics in both territories, but would either complement or refute the legitimacy of symbolic interactionism in the context of conflict resolution.

Other sociological concepts outside of symbolic interactionism might be useful in further identifying how human behavior and the human psyche contribute to conflict. One route worth exploring might consist of a textual analysis of the media content which could uncover supplementary motives and reasons for why the conflict continues.
Another alternative might entail a restructuring of the methodology used and the data sources selected. A statistical methodology might have given more weight to how Israeli and Palestinians assess the other’s position. Questions to either side such as, “Do you believe Sharon’s disengagement plan is a step towards peace?” or “Do you believe Sharon’s plan has ulterior motives?” might lend further credibility to the otherwise interpretive methodology used for the purposes of this research. Human interaction is multilayered and this research only covers one narrow aspect of the broad field of sociological study.

Working Towards Peace

What can be learned from the cases presented: As the saying goes: “violence breeds violence.” The more pressure that is exerted on Palestinians by Israeli incursions and strict blockades and the less resources the Palestinians have to survive, the more likely Palestinians are to engage in violent acts. Conversely, the more Palestinians engage in violent acts, the more likely Israel is to take swift action inside the Palestinian territories to ensure their national security needs are being met. A negative cycle of actions and reactions form and neither side is willing to compromise.

As neighbors for the foreseeable future, interaction on some level, either positive or negative, will continue for Israel and Palestine. It is in both of their best interests to interact in a way that is mutually beneficial for their people, their sustainability, their governance, and ultimately their success as a people and a nation. Gaza presents a difficult situation—with Hamas democratically elected with a militant wing that openly
calls for the ultimate destruction of Israel, it is no surprise Israel is unwilling to negotiate peace. Although naïve and seemingly implausible today, Israel should look to engage Hamas leaders and vice versa, Hamas leaders should encourage militant offshoots of their group to halt violence.

It is imperative that both sides attempt to view the other’s position with an empathetic eye. Interpretations of one another’s actions will be that much more accurate in relation to the initiator’s intent, allowing for compromise. Until Israelis can conceivably accept that Palestinians view of them as the aggressor, as a people that immigrated to what was previously Palestinian land, conquered the land and evolved as a military prowess, Israelis will continue to treat Palestinian acts of violence with severe retaliatory force. For their part, until Palestinians understand the psyche of a historically persecuted people and come to accept their existence in the land of what is today known as Israel, they will continue to advance Qassam rockets and launch them into Israel.

As the researcher walked through the streets of Jerusalem almost two years ago, a graffiti mural stood out amongst the ancient sites. It read: “We Need Peace.” It was one individual or group’s way of symbolically communicating to Israeli and Palestinians that peace is necessary for the viability of both people. Religious and cultural differences will always exist between the two sides. Territorial disputes rooted therein will present reasons to engage in conflict. The one area that will determine whether peace is sustainable in the long-term is how the two sides opt to interact despite their differences. It is my hope that influential leaders and savvy decision-makers that can carry the region
to peace pass by that mural and remember to interpret actions with the other’s history and viewpoint in mind. We Need Peace.
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