

CHAPTER OUTLINE

The Process of Human Perception

Influences on Perception

Social Media and Perception

Guidelines for Improving Perception and Communication

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Recognize how perception is made up of means of selecting, organizing, and interpreting the world to create meaning.

Identify factors that affect individuals' perceptions.

List examples of the reciprocal relationship between your perceptions and social media.

Apply this chapter's guidelines to enhance your perceptions.

MindTap

Read, highlight, and take notes online.

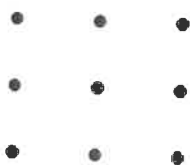


Figure 3.1

The Nine-Dot Problem

A few months ago, I attended a meeting of a dining committee that oversees dining policies and practices for a community. The committee had received complaints about a group of men in the formal dining room who had been dressed inappropriately—shorts, cutoffs, t-shirts. One committee member suggested buying a few jackets and ties for men who were not dressed for the formal dining room. Another member noted that buying the jackets would require funds as would periodically cleaning them. A third member said the coats would have to be cleaned after every use to make sure they didn't harbor germs. Can you guess which member was a CPA and which a medical doctor? The CPA's training led him to perceive costs involved in providing jackets and ties, while the doctor's training primed her to perceive the danger that germs would spread. Perception is central to how humans create meanings for themselves and their activities.

Before reading further, try to connect the nine dots in Figure 3.1 without lifting your pencil from the paper. You may use no more than four lines, the lines must be straight, and the lines must be connected to one another.

This chapter explores relationships between perception and communication. As we will see, perception shapes the meaning we assign to others' communication and how we ourselves communicate. At the same time, communication influences how we perceive people and situations.

First, we'll discuss the three-part process of perception. Second, we'll consider factors that affect our perceptions. Third, we'll explore how social

media shape and are shaped by perception. Last, we'll identify guidelines for improving perception so we can communicate more effectively.

Before we explore those topics, let's return to the nine-dot problem (Figure 3.1). Could you connect the dots? Most people have trouble solving the problem because they label the nine dots a square, and they try to connect the dots while staying within the boundaries of a square. However, it's impossible to connect the dots with four straight lines if you define the dots as a square. One solution (there are several) appears at the end of the chapter.

This exercise makes an important point about the relationship between words and human perception. If you label the dots with the word *square*, it's impossible to solve the problem. In everyday communication, words shape how we perceive others, situations, events, behaviors, and ourselves. At the same time, our perceptions influence what things mean to us and hence the labels we use to name them. We communicate with others according to how we perceive and define them, and we may miss opportunities when our labels limit what we perceive. In the pages that follow, we will unravel the complex relationships between perception and communication.

THE PROCESS OF HUMAN PERCEPTION

Perception is the active process of creating meaning by selecting, organizing, and interpreting people, objects, events, situations, and other phenomena. Note that perception is defined as an active process. We do not passively receive what is "out there" in the external world. Instead, we actively work to make sense of ourselves, others, and interactions. To do so, we notice only certain things, and then we organize and interpret what we have selectively noticed. What anything means to us depends on the aspects of it that we notice and on our organization and interpretation of those aspects. Thus, perception is not a simple matter of receiving external reality. Instead, we invest a lot of energy in constructing the meanings of phenomena.

Perception consists of three processes: selecting, organizing, and interpreting. These processes are continuous, so they blend into one another. They are also interactive, so each of them affects the other two. For example, what we select to perceive in a particular situation affects how we organize and interpret the situation. At the same time, how we organize and interpret a situation affects our subsequent selections of what to perceive in situations.

Selection

Stop for a moment and notice what is going on around you right now. Is there music in the background? Is the room warm or cold, messy or neat, large or small, light or dark? Can you smell anything—food being cooked, the stale odor of last night's



popcorn, traces of cologne? Can you hear muted sounds of activities outside? Now, think about what's happening inside you: Are you sleepy, hungry, and comfortable? Do you have a headache or an itch anywhere? Is the type you are reading large, small, easy to read? How do you like the design of the pages? If you're reading an e-book, is the screen resolution good?

Probably you weren't aware of most of these phenomena when you began reading this chapter. Instead, you focused on understanding the content in the book. You narrowed your attention to what you defined as important, and you were unaware of other aspects of the book and your surroundings.

This is typical of how we live our lives. We can't attend to everything in our environment, so we focus on what we decide is relevant to us in any given moment.

We select to attend to certain stimuli based on a number of factors. First, some qualities of phenomena draw attention. For instance, we notice things

that **STAND OUT** because they are larger, more intense, or more unusual than other phenomena. So we're more likely to hear a loud voice than a soft one and to notice bright, flashy ads on the Internet than a black-and-white message. In the photo on this page, your eyes are probably drawn to the reddish-brown boots because they stand out from all of the other boots. Further, eyes aren't drawn to the soldier who isn't even visible as a whole person; eyes go to the boots instead.

Change also compels attention, which is why we may take for granted all the pleasant interactions with a friend and notice only the tense moments. Pop-ups on screens grab our attention because they are a change from what we were viewing.

Recent research shows that we can override the tendency to focus on noisy or novel stimuli. We can use the prefrontal cortex, which is known as the

Communication in Everyday Life

SOCIAL MEDIA

Inattention Blindness

Which of the following is most distracting to drivers?

- Listening to an audiotape
- Talking on a handheld phone
- Using a speech-to-text system
- Talking on a hands-free phone

The answer is (c). It came as a surprise to many when research showed that the most distracting is a dashboard system that allows drivers to use voice commands to do everything from turning on lights to ordering food to posting comments on Facebook. Car dealers have marketed these pricey systems as safer for drivers since they allow drivers to keep both hands on the wheel. It turns out that the problem isn't hands; it's concentration that is on an infotainment system instead of on the road.

When drivers text or use a speech-to-text system, their attention focuses on the messages and commands they are generating. As a result, they stop scanning the road ahead, fail to check side and rear-view mirrors, and may not notice stop signs or pedestrians. This phenomenon is called **inattention blindness**, which is the tendency not to see what is right in front of oneself (Lowry, 2013). This finding is based on brain waves, eye movements, reaction times, and other indicators of driving competence displayed by the university students who participated in the research.

Have you ever realized you were inattentive to what's around you because you were talking on your phone, or listening to an iPod, or texting?

brain's planning center, to focus our attention deliberately (Gallagher, 2009; Tierney, 2009). We rely on self-indication when we call particular phenomena to our attention. In fact, in many ways education is a process of learning to indicate to ourselves things we hadn't seen before. Right now, you're learning to be more conscious of the selectivity of your perceptions, so in the future, you will notice this more on your own. In science courses, you learn to attend to molecular structures and chemical reactions. Look at the white vase in Figure 3.2. Look again at Figure 3.2, knowing that it is not a vase but profiles of two faces. Do you see the faces now?

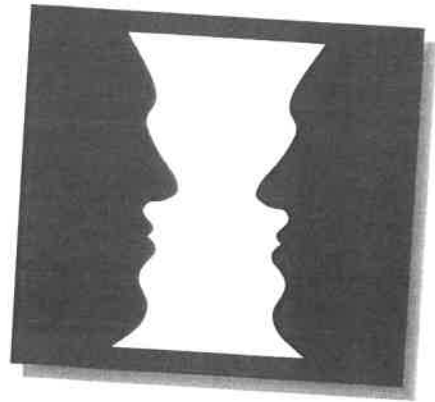


Figure 3.2

Perception

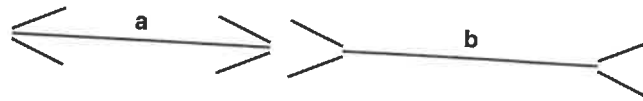
What we select to notice is also influenced by who we are and what is going on within us. Our motives and needs affect what we see and don't see. If you have recently ended a romantic relationship, you're more likely to notice attractive people at a party than if you are committed to someone. Motives also explain the oasis phenomenon in which thirsty people stranded in the desert see water although none is actually present. In a series of experiments, researchers showed that people perceive objects they desire (water when thirsty, or money) as closer than objects they do not desire (Balcetis & Dunning, 2013).

Cultures also influence what we select to perceive. Assertiveness and competitiveness are encouraged and considered good in the United States, so we don't perceive it as unusual when people compete and try to surpass one another. By contrast, because some traditional Asian cultures emphasize group loyalty, cooperation, and face saving, competitiveness stands out as unusual and is judged negatively (Gudykunst & Lee, 2002). In Korea, age is an important aspect of identity: The older a person is, the more he or she is respected. Many Koreans also place priority on family relations. Consequently, Koreans are more likely than Westerners to perceive the ages and family roles of people with whom they communicate. The Korean language reflects the cultural value of age and family ties through its different word forms used for people of different ages and different family status. A student from Korea explained that elders are generally addressed more formally by putting *yuh* or *yo* at the end of

Communication in Everyday Life

DIVERSITY

Which Line Is Longer?

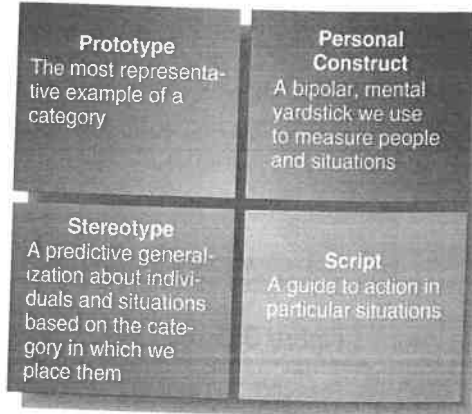


Is line *a* or line *b* in the figure longer? The lines are known as the **Müller-Lyer illusion**. The lines are actually identical in length, but they don't appear so to some people. If you are a Westerner, it's likely that you perceive line *b* as longer. However, if you are a San Forager of the Kalahari, you are likely to perceive the lines as equal in length. Why the difference?

Researchers (Henrich & Norenzayan, 2010; Watters, 2013) have found that cultures shape not just our behaviors and values but also our perceptions. Westerners live in a world with lots of carpentered corners—squared corners in rooms and buildings—so they learn to perceive lines in three dimensions. People who live in less industrialized cultures see fewer carpentered corners, and their perceptions are not trained to see lines as three dimensional. Of more than a dozen cultures studied, Americans emerge as the most likely to perceive line *b* as longer.

Figure 3.3

Cognitive Schemata



a phrase. For instance, a teenager who wants to communicate that he or she is going somewhere might say “*gahsaeyuh*” or “*gahsaeyo*” (“Goodnight, sir”) to an elder family member, but the more informal “*gahndah*” (“Later, guys”) to friends (*gahndah* means “to go”).

Organization

Once we have selected what to notice, we must make sense of it. We organize what we have noticed and attribute meaning to it. A useful theory for explaining how we organize experience is **constructivism**, which states that we organize and interpret experience by applying cognitive structures called *schemata* (Burlinson & Rack, 2008). We rely on four schemata to make sense of interpersonal phenomena: prototypes, personal constructs, stereotypes, and scripts (Hewes, 1995; Kelly, 1955) (see Figure 3.3).

Prototypes A **prototype** defines the clearest or most representative example of some category (Fehr, 1993). For example, you probably have prototypes for categories such as teachers, supervisors, friends, and coworkers. Each of these categories is exemplified by a person who is the ideal; that’s the prototype. For example, if Jane is the best friend you’ve ever known, then Jane is your prototype of a friend. The prototype (Jane) helps you decide who else fits in that particular category (friend). You get to know Burt, and then ask yourself how much he is like Jane. If you view him as a lot like her, then you would put Burt in the category that Jane exemplifies: friend. Prototypes organize our perceptions by allowing us to place people and other phenomena in broad categories. We then consider how close they are to our prototype, or exemplar, of that category.

DAMION

The person who is my ideal of a friend is my buddy Jackson. He stood by me when I got into a lot of trouble a couple of years ago. I got mixed up with some guys who used drugs, and I started using them too. Pretty soon the coach figured out what was going on, and he suspended me from the team. I felt like I was finished when he did that, and then I really got into drugs. But Jackson wouldn’t give up on me, and he wouldn’t let me give up either. He took me to a drug center and went there with me every day for 3 weeks. He never turned away when I was sick or even when I cried most of one night when I was getting off the drugs. He just stood by me. Once I was straight, Jackson went with me to see the coach about getting back on the team.

We also have prototypes of relationships (Fehr, 1993; Fehr & Russell, 1991; Hasserbrauck & Aaron, 2001). Most Americans’ prototypes of romantic relationships emphasize trust, caring, honesty, friendship, and respect. Although passion may come to mind when we think of love, it seems less central to our prototype of love than companionship and caring. In addition, most Americans’ prototype of enduring relationships reflects media’s emphasis on acquisition of material goods and enjoyment of leisure (Bachen & Illouz, 1996).

Personal Constructs A personal construct is a “mental yardstick” we use to measure a person or situation along a bipolar dimension of judgment (Kelly, 1955). Examples of personal constructs are intelligent–not intelligent, kind–not kind, responsible–not responsible, assertive–not assertive, and attractive–not attractive. We rely on personal constructs to size up people and other phenomena. How intelligent, kind, responsible, and attractive is this person? Whereas prototypes help us decide into which broad category a phenomenon fits, personal constructs let us make more detailed assessments of particular qualities of people and other phenomena.

One of the ways I look at people is by whether they are independent or related to others. That is one of the first judgments I make of others. In Korea, we are not so individualistic or independent as people in the United States. We think of ourselves more as members of families and communities than as individuals. The emphasis on independent identity was the first thing I noticed when I came to this country, and it is still an important way I look at people.

NAI LEE

The personal constructs we rely on shape our perceptions because we tend to perceive in terms of the constructs we use. Notice that we organize what we perceive and what it means by the constructs we employ. Thus, we may not notice qualities of people that aren’t relevant to the constructs we apply.

Stereotypes A stereotype is a predictive generalization applied to a person or situation. Based on the category in which we place someone or something and how that person or thing measures up against the personal constructs we apply, we predict what he, she, or it will do. For instance, if you label someone as a liberal, you might stereotype him or her as likely to vote Democratic and support environmental protections. You may have stereotypes of fraternity and sorority members, military personnel, athletes, and people from other cultures. Stereotypes don’t necessarily reflect the actual groups to which they refer. Instead, stereotypes are based on our perceptions of groups or on social perspectives that we’ve internalized.

What are your stereotypes of the people in this photo?



KATIE

I had a lot of difficulty getting people to respect me in my summer internship at a radio station. I'm very career focused, and I worked hard to get that internship, but everyone there treated me like a ditzy college student. They acted like I took the job as kind of a light summer lark or something, but I took it to learn how radio stations actually work. No matter what I did, they didn't take me seriously because they put me in a category that had nothing to do with who I am or the work I was doing.

Research shows that a majority of Americans of all races have racial stereotypes that lead them to have an unconscious preference for white people over black people. You read that correctly—black people as well as people of other races favor white people (Nosek & Hansen, 2008). Cultural critic Raina Kelley, who is African American, recounts a time when she assumed a black man at a party might be a criminal. She says, "Being black doesn't get me a pass on unconscious negative feelings about African Americans" (1997, p. 28).

Racial and ethnic stereotypes can lead us to not see differences among people we place in a particular category. The broad label *Asian* doesn't distinguish among people from varied cultures, including Japan, Malaysia, Nepal, and China. *Native American* is a very broad category that includes diverse indigenous North American tribes. A student of mine, Winowa, believes that the term *Native American* leads people not to notice differences among tribes.

WINOWA

People have a stereotype of Native Americans. People who are not Native American think we are all alike—how we look, how we act, what we believe, what our traditions are. But that isn't true. The Crow and Apache are as different as people from Kenya and New York. Some tribes have a history of aggression and violence; others have traditions of peace and harmony. We worship different spirits and have different tribal rituals and customs. All of these differences are lost when people stereotype us all into one group.

Stereotypes may be accurate or inaccurate. In some cases, we have incorrect understandings of a group, and in other cases individual members of a group don't conform to the group as a whole. Interestingly, Americans are often negatively stereotyped in other parts of the world. They may be perceived as arrogant or ethnocentric because they often cannot speak the native language of the cultures they visit and expect English to be spoken by others, they expect luxurious treatment, and they may expect American norms and preferences to be observed—for instance, serving salads before entrees, which is the norm in America but not in most of Europe. Yet Americans, like all groups, are diverse—some Americans can speak other languages and can do without luxury accommodations; some can't or won't. Although we need stereotypes to predict what will happen around us, they can be harmful if we forget that they are based not on objective reality but instead on perceptions.

Scripts The final cognitive schema we use to organize perceptions is the **script**. A script is a guide to action. Scripts consist of sequences of activities that are expected of us and others in particular situations. They are based on our experiences and observations of interaction in various contexts. Many of our daily activities are governed by scripts, although we're typically not aware of them. We have a script for greeting casual acquaintances on campus ("Hey, what's up?" "Not much"). You also have scripts for managing conflict, talking with professors, dealing with clerks, and interacting with coworkers on the job.

Scripts are useful in guiding us through many of our interactions. However, they are not always accurate or constructive, so we shouldn't accept them uncritically. For instance, if your parents often engaged in bitter, destructive quarreling, you may have learned a script for conflict that can undermine relationships. If you grew up in a community that treated people of certain races negatively, you may want to assess that script critically before using it to direct your own activities.

The four cognitive schemata we have discussed interact with one another. A good example of this interaction comes from Dr. Jerome Groopman (2007), who has studied patterns in doctors' thinking that can result in misdiagnosis and mistreatment of patients. For instance, a man may stumble into an emergency room and mutter incoherently. If the doctor puts the man in the category of homeless (prototype) because he stumbles and mumbles, the doctor may then stereotype him as having drunk too much and follow a script of not testing the man and assuming he just needs to sleep off the intoxication. Conversely, if the doctor assumes the man is middle class and employed, the doctor might perceive the stumbling and mumbling as signs of a medical problem. Accordingly, the doctor would order tests to diagnose the problem.

Prototypes, personal constructs, stereotypes, and scripts are cognitive schemata that we use to organize our perceptions of people and phenomena. These cognitive schemata reflect the perspectives of particular others and the generalized other. As we interact with people, we internalize our culture's ways of classifying, measuring, and predicting phenomena and its norms for acting in various situations.

Communication in Everyday Life

WORKPLACE

Racial Stereotypes in the Workplace

Brenda Allen is a communication scholar who focuses on race and the workplace. Her research (Allen, 2006) has led her to identify a number of racial stereotypes that can lead to misunderstandings in the workplace:

All black men love sports.

All members of a racial minority look alike.

Anyone with a Spanish last name is fluent in Spanish.

People of color are experts on race issues.

Expressive communication is not rational.

What stereotypes related to your race have you noticed where you have worked?

Communication in Everyday Life

DIVERSITY

"I Can't Understand the Teacher's Accent."

It's not unusual to hear American students complain that teachers from other countries are hard to understand. In response to student complaints, more than a dozen states have passed laws to establish standards for English for international teaching assistants. According to John Gravois (2005), such laws may be solving the wrong problem.

Gravois asks whether the problem is that some international teaching assistants don't speak English clearly or that some American students don't listen well because they stereotype international teaching assistants as lacking proficiency in English. Don Rubin, a professor of communication, designed an experiment to answer that question.

Rubin audiotaped an American man from central Ohio delivering a lecture. He then played that lecture to students. To half the students, the lecturer was identified as "John Smith from Portland," and the image of an American man was projected in the classroom. The same tape was played to the other half of the students, but the lecturer was identified as "Li Wenshu from Beijing," and the image of an Asian man was projected in the classroom.

After hearing the lecture, students were asked to fill in the missing words from a printed transcript of the lecture. The students who thought the lecturer was Asian made 20% more errors than students who thought the lecturer was American. Rubin concluded that students stereotype international teachers as less proficient at English than American teachers. They heard Li Wenshu as less proficient in English than John Smith even though the two were the same person giving the same lecture.

Interpretation

Even after we have selectively perceived phenomena and used cognitive schemata to organize our perceptions, what they mean to us is not clear. There are no intrinsic meanings in phenomena. Instead, we assign meaning by interpreting what we have noticed and organized. **Interpretation** is the subjective process of explaining our perceptions in ways that make sense to us. To interpret the meaning of another's actions, we construct explanations, or attributions, for them.

Attributions An attribution is an explanation of why something happened or why someone acts a certain way (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967; Manusov & Spitzberg, 2008). Attributions have four dimensions, as shown in Figure 3.4. The first is locus, which attributes a person's actions to internal factors ("He has no patience with people who are late") or external factors ("The traffic jam frustrated him"). The second dimension is stability,

which explains actions as the result of stable factors that won't change over time ("She's a Type A personality") or unstable factors that may or will be different at another time ("She acted that way because she has a headache right now").

Specificity is the third dimension, and it explains behavior in terms of whether the behavior has global implications that apply in most or all situations ("He's a big spender") or specific implications that apply only in certain situations or under certain conditions ("He spends a lot of money on clothes"). At first it may seem that stability and specificity are the same, but they are distinct dimensions. Stability concerns time (whether the reason is temporary or enduring), whereas specificity concerns the breadth of the explanation (all situations, events, and places, or particular or limited situations and places). Here are examples of how we might combine these two dimensions to explain why Angela yelled at Fred:

- Stable and specific: She yelled at Fred (specific) because she is short-tempered (stable).

- Stable and global: She yells at everyone (global) because she is short-tempered (stable).
- Unstable and specific: She yelled at Fred (specific) because she was in a hurry that day (unstable).
- Unstable and global: She yells at everyone (global) when she is in a hurry (unstable).

The fourth dimension of attributions is responsibility. Do we hold a person responsible for a particular behavior? We're more likely to hold people responsible for behavior that we think they can control. If we attribute Angela's yelling to her lack of effort to control her temper, we're more likely to judge her harshly than if we attribute her yelling to lack of sleep during exam week (unstable) or to a medication she's taking (external) for a short time (unstable). How we account for others' actions affects our perceptions of them and our relationships with them. We can feel more or less positive toward others depending on our interpretation of why they act as they do.

Attributional Errors Researchers have identified two common errors people make in their attributions. The first is the **self-serving bias**. As the term implies, this is a bias toward ourselves and our interests. Research indicates that some people tend to construct attributions that serve our personal interests (Hamachek, 1992; Manusov & Spitzberg, 2008). For example, you might say that you did well on a test because you are a smart person (internal and stable) who is always responsible (global) and studies hard (personal control). We also attribute the victories of our athletic teams to internal, stable factors within the players' control, and we attribute our teams' losses to external, unstable factors, which the teams could not control (Wann & Schrader, 2000).

When I do badly on a test or paper, I usually say either the professor was unfair or I had too much to do that week and couldn't study like I wanted to. But when my friends do badly on a test, I tend to think they're not good in that subject or they aren't disciplined or whatever.

The self-serving bias also works in a second way. We tend to avoid taking responsibility for negative actions and failures by attributing them to external, unstable, and specific factors that are beyond personal control (Schutz, 1999). To explain a failing grade on a test, you might say that you did poorly because the professor (external) put a lot of tricky questions on that test (unstable, specific factor), so all your studying didn't help (outside of personal control). In other words, our misconduct results from outside forces that we can't help, but all the good we do reflects our personal qualities and efforts. This self-serving bias can

Dimension

1. Locus	Internal	External
2. Stability	Stable	Unstable
3. Specificity	Specific	Global
4. Responsibility	Within personal control	Beyond personal control

Figure 3.4

Dimensions of Attributions

CHICO

distort our perceptions, leading us to take excessive personal credit for what we do well and to abdicate responsibility for what we do poorly. When the self-serving bias shapes how we interpret our behaviors, we form an unrealistic image of ourselves and our activities.

There's an important qualification to the research on self-serving bias. Most of it was conducted on Westerners. When researchers decided to see whether the self-serving bias was equally prominent in other cultures, they discovered it was not. It is more pronounced in Western populations than in non-Western ones (Heine & Hamamura, 2007). Mexicans (Tropp & Wright, 2003), Native Americans (Fryberg & Markus, 2003), and Chileans (Heine & Raineri, 2009) are less likely to engage in self-serving bias, and some East Asians, whose cultures encourage modesty and humility, engage in self-effacing bias (Heine & Hamamura, 2007).

The second kind of attributional error is so common that it is called the **fundamental attribution error**. This involves the dimension of locus. When others behave badly, we tend to overestimate the internal causes and underestimate the external causes of their behaviors. Conversely, we are likely to underestimate the internal causes of our own misdeeds and failures and overestimate the external causes (Schutz, 1999; Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliott, 1998).

The fundamental attribution error was obvious in a legal case on which I consulted. A woman sued her employer for transferring her. She alleged that he did so because her supervisor was biased against women. Her supervisor denied being biased against women. He claimed that he transferred her because of her poor performance. Written records, such as yearly performance reviews, and the woman's own testimony revealed that she had not met all of her job responsibilities, and she had been told this repeatedly. Furthermore, her supervisor's record of hiring and promotions showed that nearly 50% of his hires and promotions over the past decade had been women and minorities.

At the trial, the plaintiff was asked whether it was possible that her performance had influenced her supervisor's decision

Communication in Everyday Life

INSIGHT

Thinking Your Way to a Good Relationship

How we think about what our partners do and don't do has a lot to do with how happy we are in our relationships (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Fletcher & Fincham, 1991; Friesen, Fletcher, & Overall, 2005; Seligman, 2002). Partners in happy relationships tend to think in positive ways about each other. People attribute nice things a partner does to internal, stable, and global reasons. "He got the DVD for us because he is a good person who always does sweet things for us." Happy couples attribute unpleasant things a partner does to external, unstable, and specific factors. "She yelled at me because all the stress of the past few days made her not herself."

In contrast, unhappy couples tend to think negatively. They tend to attribute a partner's nice actions to external, unstable, and specific factors. "He got the DVD because he had some extra time this particular day." Negative actions are seen as stemming from internal, stable, and global factors. "She yelled at me because she is a nasty person who never shows any consideration to anybody else." Negative attributions fix pessimistic views and undermine motivation to improve a relationship. Whether positive or negative, attributions may be self-fulfilling prophecies.

Related research demonstrates that attributional patterns are linked to marital quality and forgiveness. We are less likely to forgive a partner if we attribute his or her transgression to personal irresponsibility (Fincham, 2000; Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002; Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002).

to transfer her. "No, he did it because he doesn't want to work with women," she replied. Thus, she totally discounted external factors that could explain his decision and placed full responsibility on internal qualities (his alleged sex bias). When asked whether she thought her performance might have made her more expendable than others who worked in her former department, she said, "No, the only problems with my performance were due to interruptions and lack of cooperation from others." Thus, she rejected any personal responsibility for errors in her work and laid full responsibility on circumstances beyond her control. In court, I explained the fundamental attribution error to the jury and showed how it surfaced in the woman's testimony. The jury found in favor of the woman's supervisor.

We've seen that perception involves three interrelated processes. The first of these, selection, involves noticing and attending to only certain things. The second process is organization, whereby we use prototypes, personal constructs, stereotypes, and scripts to organize what we have selectively perceived. Finally, we engage in the third process, interpretation, to make sense of the perceptions we have gathered and organized. Attributions are a primary way we explain what we and others do.

Although we've discussed selection, organization, and interpretation separately, in reality they may occur in a different order or simultaneously. Thus, our interpretations shape the cognitive schemata we use to organize experiences, and the ways we organize perceptions affect what we notice and interpret.

INFLUENCES ON PERCEPTION

Individuals differ in how they perceive situations and people. In this section, we consider some of the influences on our perceptions.

Physiology

One reason perceptions vary among people is that we differ in our sensory abilities and physiologies. If you are tired or stressed, you're likely to perceive things more negatively than you normally would. For instance, a playful insult from a coworker might anger you if you were feeling down but wouldn't bother you if you were feeling good. Each of us has our own biorhythm, which influences the times of day when we tend to be more and less perceptually alert.

Medical conditions are another physiological influence on perceptions. If you've ever taken drugs that affected your thinking, you know how dramatically they can alter perceptions. People may become severely depressed, paranoid, or uncharacteristically happy under the influence of hormones or drugs. Changes in our bodies caused by medical conditions may also affect what we selectively perceive. I have a back disorder that periodically limits my mobility. When my back is out of order, I am keenly aware of stairs and uneven ground that I barely notice when my back is working well.

Expectations

Our expectations also affect what we notice (Bargh, 1999). Imagine that a friend tells you she wants you to meet a “really cool guy. He’s funny and considerate and so easy to talk to. I know you’ll like him.” It’s likely that you’ll expect to like the new person and will perceive the good qualities your friend has called to your attention. If instead your friend had said, “This guy is a real drag. He is totally self-centered and boring,” then your expectations would be low and you would be less likely to notice any good qualities in the man.

The impact of expectations on perception explains the self-fulfilling prophecy we discussed in Chapter 2. A child who is told he or she is unlovable may notice rejecting, but not affirming, communication from others. An employee who is told he or she has leadership potential is likely to notice all his or her professional successes and strengths and to be less aware of his or her shortcomings.

Expectations influence perceptions in a range of communication situations. If you are told that a newly hired person is a “real team player,” you’re likely to notice the new employee’s cooperative behaviors and be less aware of his or her competitive behaviors. If you hear that a campus group is “welcoming to new members and very friendly,” you’re more likely to perceive members of the group positively.

Age

Age is another factor that influences our perceptions. Compared with a person of 20, a 60-year-old has a more complex fund of experiences to draw on in perceiving situations and people. When I was 22 years old and in graduate school, I mentioned to my father that it was hard to get by on the salary from

my teaching assistantship. He said that, during the early 1930s, he would have been very happy to have had enough money just to eat. Because my father had lived through the Great Depression, he had a broader perspective than I did on how hard life can be.

As we grow older and have more experiences, both pleasant and challenging, our perspective on many things changes. Issues that seem overwhelming to a teenager are often manageable to a 30-year-old, who has more experience meeting and dealing with life’s challenges.



Image Source/Getty Images

Culture

Throughout this chapter and the prior one, we've seen that we are influenced by culture, which is the totality of beliefs, values, understandings, practices, and ways of interpreting experience that are shared by a number of people. The influence of culture is so pervasive that it's hard to realize how powerfully it shapes our perceptions.

Consider a few aspects of modern American culture that influence our perceptions. American culture emphasizes technology and its offspring, speed. Most Americans expect things to happen fast, almost instantly. We text messages and send letters by email attachment, we jet across the country, and we microwave meals. In countries such as Nepal and Mexico, life often proceeds at a more leisurely pace, and people spend more time talking, relaxing, and engaging in low-key activity.

The United States is also a highly individualistic culture in which personal initiative is expected and rewarded (Baxter, 2011). In more collectivist cultures, identity is defined in terms of membership in a family rather than as an individual quality. Because families are more valued in collectivist cultures, elders are given greater respect and care by family members than many receive in the United States. More communal countries also have policies that reflect the value they place on families. In every developed country except the United States, new parents, including adoptive parents, are given at least 6 weeks of paid parental leave, and some countries provide a year's paid leave (Fixmer-Oraiz & Wood, 2019).

Many doctors and businesspeople in the United States now are encouraged to attend workshops that teach them about the cultural practices of immigrants from other countries. Without awareness of cultural differences, the risk of misperception and misunderstanding is high.

Social Location We are affected not only by the culture as a whole but also by particular social groups to which we belong (Hallstein, 2000; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991; Wood, 2005). A social group is characterized by particular material, social, and symbolic conditions common to members and different from those of other groups. A **standpoint** is a point of view that grows out of political awareness of the social location of a group. People who belong to powerful, high-status social groups have a vested interest in preserving the system that gives them privileges; thus, they are unlikely to perceive its flaws and inequities. Conversely, those who belong to less-privileged groups are able to see inequities and discrimination (Collins, 1998; Harding, 1991).

Women and men tend to occupy different social locations in some ways. For instance, girls and women are more often in caregiving roles than boys and men. However, the caregiving we generally associate with women results less from any maternal instinct than from occupying the social role of caregiver (mother, older sister, babysitter), which teaches women to care for others, to notice who needs what, and to defer their own needs. Men who engage in caring for others often become nurturing, accommodative, and sensitive to others' needs as a consequence of being in the social role of caregiver.

JANICE

I was always a pretty independent person. Some people even thought I was kind of selfish, because I really would prioritize myself. Then I had my first baby, and I stayed home with him for a year. I really changed—and I mean in basic ways. I believed that my most important job was to be there for Timmy, and so my whole day focused on him. He was the person I thought about first, not myself. I learned to hear the slightest difference in his cries, so I could tell when he was hungry or needed his diapers changed or wanted company. When I went back to work after a year, a lot of my former colleagues said I was different—much more attentive and sensitive to what they said and more generous with my time than I had been. I guess I developed new patterns of communicating as a result of mothering.

Gender differences also are obvious in how much we invest in maintaining relationships. Socialized into the role of relationship expert, many women are expected by others and themselves to take care of relationships (Wood, 1993, 1998, 2001, 2006b, 2011). It's often assumed they know when something is wrong and know how to resolve it.

Racial-ethnic groups are also social locations that shape our perceptions. Stan Gaines (1995), who studies minority groups in the United States, reports that African Americans and Latinos and Latinas tend to perceive family and extended community as more central to their identities than most European Americans. Perceiving self as profoundly connected to larger social groups also is characteristic of many Asian cultures. Our membership in an overall culture, as well as our location in particular social groups, shapes how we perceive people, situations, events, and ourselves.

Communication in Everyday Life

INSIGHT

Peaceful Demonstration or Violent Protest?

America's legal system puts great weight on the testimony of witnesses: What they testify that they saw and heard can shape the outcome of trials. But is eyewitness testimony reliable?

In an experiment, people were shown a video of police dispersing a group of protestors who were described as anti-abortion activists. After watching the video, the viewers were asked whether the protestors were peaceful or violent. Viewers who held liberal values perceived the protestors as violent, whereas viewers with conservative values perceived them as peaceful.

Another group of viewers were shown the same video, but the experimenter described the protestors as gay rights proponents. In this case, liberals perceived a peaceful protest, whereas conservatives perceived a violent one.

Conclusion: Even when people intend to be objective and honest, their perceptions are shaped by their beliefs and values (Barrett, 2017; Kahn, Hoffman, Braman, Evans, & Rachlinski, 2012).

Roles Our perceptions also are shaped by roles. Both the training we receive to fulfill a role and the actual demands of the role affect what we notice and how we interpret and evaluate the role. Professors often perceive classes in terms of how interested students seem, whether they appear to have read the material, and whether they're applying course material to their lives. Students have told me that they perceive classes in terms of time of day, number and difficulty of tests, whether papers are required, and whether the professor is interesting.

The professions people enter influence what they notice and how they think and act. Medical professionals are trained to be highly observant of physical symptoms, lawyers are trained in analytic thinking, and human resources personnel are taught to be sensitive to others' emotions and life situations.

Social roles can also influence how we perceive communication about feelings. Professions that call for detachment and objectivity may encourage members not to express their emotions and to be uncomfortable when others do. We'll discuss the relationship between social roles and communication about emotions more fully in Chapter 7.



Louise Gubb/The Image Works

Cognitive Abilities

In addition to physiological, cultural, and social influences, perception is also shaped by cognitive abilities. How elaborately we think about situations and people, and our personal knowledge of others, affect how we perceive them.

Cognitive Complexity People differ in the number and type of cognitive schemata they use to perceive, organize, and interpret people and situations. **Cognitive complexity** refers to the number of personal constructs used (remember, these are bipolar dimensions of judgment), how abstract they are, and how elaborately they interact to shape perceptions. Most children have fairly simple cognitive systems: They rely on few personal constructs, focus more on concrete categories than abstract and psychological ones, and often are unaware of relationships between personal constructs.

In general, adults are more cognitively complex than children. However, adults have different degrees of cognitive complexity, and this affects perceptions. If you think of people only as nice or not nice, you have a limited range for perceiving others. Similarly, people who focus on concrete data tend to have less sophisticated understandings than people who also perceive psychological data. For example, you might notice that a person is attractive, tells jokes, and talks to others easily. These are concrete perceptions. At a more abstract, psychological level, you might reason that the concrete behaviors you observe reflect a secure, self-confident personality. This is a more sophisticated perception because it offers an explanation of why the person acts as he or she does.

What if you later find out that the person is very quiet in classes? Someone with low cognitive complexity would have difficulty integrating the new information into prior observations. Either the new information would be dismissed because it doesn't fit, or it would replace the former perception, and the person would be redefined as shy (Crockett, 1965; Delia, Clark, & Switzer, 1974). A more cognitively complex person would integrate all the information into a coherent account. Perhaps a cognitively complex person would conclude that the person is very confident in social situations but less secure in academic ones.

Person-Centeredness Person-centeredness is related to cognitive complexity because it entails abstract thinking and use of a wide range of schemata. As discussed in Chapter 1, person-centeredness is the ability to perceive another as a unique individual. Our ability to perceive others as unique depends, first, on how well we make cognitive distinctions. People who are cognitively complex rely on more numerous and more abstract schemata to interpret others. Second, person-centered communicators use knowledge of particular others to guide their communication. Thus, they tailor vocabulary, nonverbal behaviors, and language to the experiences, values, and interests of others. The result is person-centered communication.

Recalling the discussion of I-Thou relationships in Chapter 1, you may remember that these are relationships in which people know and value each other as unique individuals. To do so, we must learn about another, and this entails much time and interaction. As we get to know another better, we gain insight into how he or she differs from others in a group ("Rob's not obsessive like other political activists I've known," "Ellen's more interested in people than most computer science majors"). The more we interact with another and the greater the variety of experiences we have together, the more insight we gain into the other's motives, feelings, and behaviors. As we come to understand others as individuals, we fine-tune our perceptions of them. Consequently, we're less likely to rely on stereotypes. This is why we often communicate more effectively with people we know well than with strangers or casual acquaintances.

STEVE

When I first started dating Sherry, I sent her red roses to let her know I thought she was special. That's the "lovers' flower," right? It turns out that was the only flower her father liked, and they had a million red roses at his funeral. Now they make Sherry sad because they remind her he's dead. I also took her chocolates once, then later found out she's allergic to chocolate. By now, I know what flowers and things she likes, but my experience shows that the general rules don't always apply to individuals.

Person-centeredness is not empathy. **Empathy** is an emotional connection. It is the ability to feel with another person, to feel what he or she feels in a situation. Person-centeredness is a cognitive connection. It is the ability to understand another (Muehlhoff, 2006). With commitment and effort, we can learn a lot about how others see the world, even if that differs from how we see it. This knowledge, along with cognitive complexity, allows us to be person-centered communicators.

When we take the perspective of another, we try to grasp what something means to that person. This involves suspending judgment at least temporarily. We can't appreciate someone else's perspective when we're imposing our evaluations of whether it is right or wrong, sensible or crazy. Instead, we must let go of our own perspective and perceptions long enough to enter the world of another person. Doing this allows us to understand issues from the other person's point of view so that we can communicate more effectively. At a later point in interaction, we may choose to express our own perspective or to disagree with the other. This is appropriate, but voicing our own views is not a substitute for the equally important skill of recognizing others' perspectives.

Self

A final influence on our perceptions is ourselves. Consider how differently people with the four attachment styles we discussed in Chapter 2 would perceive and approach close relationships. People with secure attachment styles assume that they are lovable and that others are trustworthy. Thus, they tend to perceive others and relationships in positive ways. In contrast, people with fearful attachment styles perceive themselves as unlovable and others as not loving. Consequently, they may perceive relationships as dangerous and potentially harmful. The dismissive attachment style inclines people to perceive themselves positively, others negatively, and close relationships as undesirable. People who have anxious/ambivalent attachment styles often are preoccupied with relationships and may perceive others in unpredictable ways.

Each of us also tends to have an **implicit personality theory**, which is a collection of unspoken and sometimes unconscious assumptions about how various qualities fit together in human personalities. Most of us think certain qualities go together in people. For instance, you might think that people who are outgoing are also friendly, confident, and fun. The assumption that outgoing people are friendly, confident, and fun reflects your implicit personality theory of the qualities that accompany outgoingness.

In sum, physiology, culture and standpoint, social roles, cognitive abilities, and we ourselves affect what we perceive and how we interpret others and experiences. In the final section of the chapter, we'll consider ways to improve the accuracy of our perceptions.

Communication in Everyday Life INSIGHT

Come Join Us ... or Not

Consider two vignettes:

1. Three people are talking in a large room. A fourth person enters the room and the three people wave that person over to join them.
2. Three people are talking in a large room. A fourth person enters and the three people ignore the new person.

How do you explain the three people's inclusion or exclusion of the fourth person? Most people offer a range of explanations, but chronically lonely adolescents have a tendency to attribute vignettes of inclusion to circumstances (external, unstable) and vignettes showing exclusion to internal and stable characteristics of the three people. This pattern is likely to perpetuate their loneliness because they are prone to think they can't change internal, stable factors in others (Vanhalst et al., 2015).

SOCIAL MEDIA AND PERCEPTION

As in previous chapters, we now want to consider how ideas that we've discussed in the foregoing pages apply to digital and online communication. We'll focus on three connections between social media and perception.

First, our choices of social media influence how we perceive events, issues, and people. If you follow Rush Limbaugh's tweets, you will get a conservative perspective on national and international issues and on the people involved in them. If you follow Rachel Maddow's tweets, you will get a much more liberal perspective on the same issues and people. Limbaugh frequently disparages feminists, by labeling them "feminazis"; Maddow identifies as a feminist and advocates for feminist issues. Limbaugh sympathizes with corporate interests and tends to support lowering corporate taxes and boosting capitalism; Maddow is inclined to be distrustful of corporate interests, to think corporations should pay more taxes, and to favor reigning in some capitalist tendencies. Who's right? There is no objective answer to that question, but your views on such issues are shaped by whose posts you read.

Second, our cultural memberships influence the content of our own digital and online communication. Try this experiment: Look at the social network profiles of people you know who belong to different ethnic groups. How often do their postings include boasting about individual accomplishments? How many of the photos posted show the individual with family members? How often are family members and family values mentioned? Now look at the profiles of women and men you know. To what extent does each sex tweet and post about relationship issues and sports? Are the trends that you note consistent with research we've discussed about Western and non-Western cultural values and feminine and masculine social communities?

Third, think about the relationship between social media and our perceptions and expectations of time. When you text someone, do you expect a reply almost immediately? Do you get frustrated if a friend doesn't reply for several hours or days? Are you irritated when your Internet connection goes down or is slow? Most of us would answer yes to each of these questions. In doing so, we reflect a sense of time that has radically accelerated as a result of technologies. A hundred years ago, people stayed in touch by writing letters and waiting weeks for replies. Sixty years ago, phones were landlines, and long-distance calls were rare and expensive. Fifty years ago, most people didn't have personal computers, much less tablets and smartphones, and tweets didn't exist. Here's another way to appreciate the acceleration of our era: Downloading a 4-minute song required 540 seconds in 1995, 11 seconds in 2005, and 2 seconds in 2015 ("A Peek beneath the Hood of the Internet," 2016). As technologies of communication have evolved, they have altered how we perceive time, making what we once perceived as a short time to wait for a reply seem very long now.

Our interaction with social media has also altered our perception of space. The world seems smaller when we can see on a smartphone a protest occurring across the country or a tsunami across the world. With the aid of media, we are no longer confined to physical, material space for interaction. We can Skype or FaceTime with friends who are far away, participate in virtual



NEC/PhotoFest

meetings, conduct relationships online, and take classes at schools hundreds or even thousands of miles away. This means that we no longer perceive our physical location as an absolute limit on where we can be. These are just three of the many ways that our engagement with digital and online communication affects how we perceive ourselves and our world.

GUIDELINES FOR IMPROVING PERCEPTION AND COMMUNICATION

Because perception is central to interpersonal communication, it's important to form perceptions carefully and check their accuracy. Here, we discuss seven guidelines for improving the accuracy of perceptions and, ultimately, the quality of interpersonal communication.

Recognize That All Perceptions Are Partial and Subjective

Our perceptions are always partial and subjective. They are partial because we cannot perceive everything; and they are subjective because they are shaped by our physiology, culture, standpoint, social roles, cognitive abilities, values, beliefs, and personal experiences. A film you think is hilarious may be boring to your friend.

So this girl I met a few weeks ago said she was having a party, and it would be lots of fun with some cool people. She asked if I wanted to come, so I said, "Sure—why not?" When I got there, everybody was drinking—I mean seriously drinking. They were playing this weird music—sort of morbid—and they had the tape of *Rocky Horror Picture Show* going nonstop. They got so loud that the neighbors came over and told us to hold it down. In a couple of hours, most of the people there were totally wasted. That's not my idea of fun. That's not my idea of cool people.



THALENA

The subjective and partial nature of perceptions has implications for interpersonal communication. One implication is that when you and another person disagree about something, neither of you is necessarily wrong. It's more likely that you have attended to different things and that there are differences in your personal, social, cultural, cognitive, and physiological resources for perceiving.

A second implication is that it's wise to remind ourselves that our perceptions are based at least as much on ourselves as on anything external to us. If you perceive another person as domineering, there's a chance that you are feeling insecure or out of your league. You may perceive a person as being aggressive whereas others see the person as assertive. Remembering that perceptions are partial and subjective

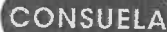
curbs the tendency to think that our perceptions are the only valid ones or that they are based exclusively on what lies outside us.

Avoid Mind Reading

Mind reading is assuming we understand what another person thinks, feels, or perceives. When we mind read, we act as though we know what's on another person's mind, and this can get us into trouble. Marriage counselors and communication scholars say mind reading contributes to conflict between people (Gottman, 1993). The danger of mind reading is that we may misinterpret others.

Consider a few examples. A supervisor notices that an employee is late for work several days in a row and assumes the employee isn't committed to the job. Gina is late meeting her friend Alex, who assumes she is late because Gina's still mad about what happened. A friend doesn't return your text message so you think the friend is angry.

Mind reading also occurs when we say or think, "I know why you're upset" (has the person said he or she is upset? What makes you think you know why he or she is upset, if he or she actually is?) or "You don't care about me anymore" (maybe the other person is too preoccupied or worried to be as attentive as usual). We also mind read when we tell ourselves we know how somebody else will feel or react or what he or she will do. The truth is that we don't really know; we're only guessing. When we mind read, we impose our perspectives on others instead of allowing them to say what they think. This can cause misunderstandings and resentment because most of us prefer to speak for ourselves.



CONSUELA

Mind reading drives me crazy. My boyfriend does it all the time, and he's wrong as often as he's right. Last week, he got tickets to a concert because he "knew" I'd want to go. Maybe I would have if I hadn't already planned a trip that weekend, but he never checked on my schedule. A lot of times, when we're talking, he'll say something, then before I can answer, he says, "I know what you're thinking." Then, he proceeds to run through his ideas about what I'm thinking. Usually he's off base, and then we get into a sideline argument about why he keeps assuming what I think instead of asking me. I really wish he would ask me what I think.

Check Perceptions with Others

The third guideline follows directly from the first two. Because perceptions are subjective and partial, and because mind reading is an ineffective way to figure out what others think, we need to check our perceptions with others.

Perception checking is an important communication skill because it helps people arrive at mutual understandings of each other and their relationships. To check perceptions, you should first state what you have noticed. For example, a person might say to a coworker, "Lately, I've thought you were less talkative in team meetings." Then the person should check to see whether the other perceives the same thing: "Do you feel you've been less talkative?" Finally, it's appropriate to ask the other person to explain his or her behavior. In the example, the person might ask, "Why

do you think you're less talkative?" (If the other person doesn't perceive that he or she is less talkative, the question might be, "It seems to me that you've been reading memos and not saying much during our team meetings lately. Am I wrong?")

When checking perceptions, it's important to use a tentative tone rather than a dogmatic or accusatory one. This minimizes defensiveness and encourages good discussion. Just let the other person know you've noticed something and would like him or her to clarify his or her perceptions of what is happening and what it means.

Distinguish between Facts and Inferences

Competent interpersonal communication also depends on distinguishing facts from inferences. A fact is based on observation. An inference involves an interpretation that goes beyond the facts. For example, suppose that a person is consistently late reporting to work and sometimes dozes off during discussions. Coworkers might think, "That person is lazy and unmotivated." The facts are that the person comes in late and sometimes falls asleep. Defining the person as lazy and unmotivated is an inference that goes beyond the facts. It's possible that the coworker is tired because he or she has a second job, has a sick child, or is taking medication that induces drowsiness.

It's easy to confuse facts and inferences because we sometimes treat the latter as the former. When we say, "That employee is lazy," we make a statement that sounds factual, and we may then perceive it as factual. To avoid this tendency, substitute more tentative words. For instance, "That employee seems unmotivated" or "That employee may be lazy" are more tentative statements that keep the speaker from treating an inference as a fact. We must make inferences to function in the world. Yet we risk misperceptions if we don't distinguish our inferences from facts.

Guard against the Self-Serving Bias

Because the self-serving bias can distort perceptions, particularly those of Westerners, we need to monitor it carefully. Observe yourself to see whether you attribute your failures or your adverse behaviors to factors beyond your control and whether you attribute your accomplishments to your own efforts. The self-serving bias also inclines us to notice what we do and to be less aware of what others do. Obviously, this can affect how we feel about others, as Janet illustrates in her comments.

For years, my husband and I have argued about housework. I am always criticizing him for not doing enough, and I have felt resentful about how much I do. He always says to me that he does a lot, but I just don't notice. After studying the self-serving bias in class, I did an "experiment" at home. I watched him for a week and kept a list of all the things he did. Sure enough, he was—is—doing a lot more than I thought. I never noticed that he sorted laundry or walked the dog four times a day or wiped the kitchen counters after we'd finished fixing dinner. I noticed everything I did but only the big things he did, like vacuuming. I simply wasn't seeing a lot of his contributions to keep our home in order.



JANET

Monitoring the self-serving bias also has implications for how we perceive others. Just as we tend to judge ourselves generously, we may also be inclined to judge others too harshly. Monitor your perceptions to see whether you attribute others' successes and admirable actions to external factors beyond their control and their shortcomings and blunders to internal factors they can (should) control. If you do this, substitute more generous explanations for others' behaviors, and notice how that affects your perceptions of them.

Guard against the Fundamental Attribution Error

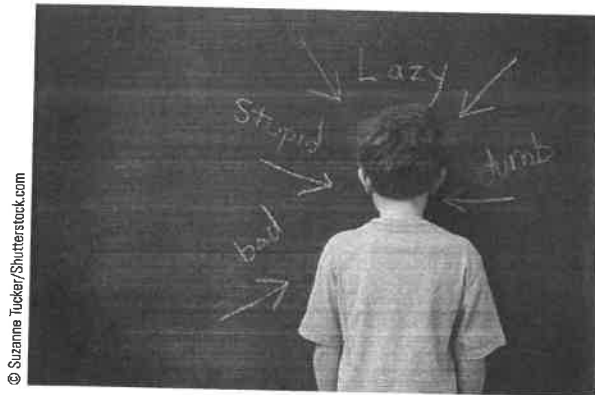
We've also discussed a second error in interpretation: the fundamental attribution error. This occurs when we overestimate the internal causes of others' undesirable behavior and underestimate the external causes, and when we underestimate the internal causes of our own failings or bad behaviors and overestimate the external causes. We need to guard against this error because it distorts our perceptions of ourselves and others.

To reduce your chances of falling victim to the fundamental attribution error, prompt yourself to look for external causes of others' behaviors that you may not have thought of or appreciated. Instead of assuming that the unwanted behavior reflects another's motives or personality, ask yourself, "What factors in the person's situation might lead to this behavior?" You can ask the converse question to avoid underestimating internal influences on your own undesirable actions. Instead of letting yourself off the hook by explaining a misdeed as caused by circumstances you couldn't control, ask yourself, "What factor inside of me that is my responsibility influenced what I did?" Looking for external factors that influence others' communication and internal factors that influence your own communication checks our tendency to make fundamental attribution errors.

Monitor Labels

In giving names to our perceptions, we clarify them to ourselves. But just as words crystallize experiences, they can also freeze thought. Once we label our perceptions, we may respond to our own labels rather than to actual phenomena. If this happens, we may communicate in insensitive and inappropriate ways.

Consider this situation. Suppose you get together with five others in a study group, and a student named Andrea occupies a lot of group time by asking questions. Leaving the meeting, one person says, "Gee, Andrea is so selfish and immature! I'll never work with her again." Another person responds, "She's not really selfish. She's just insecure about her grades in this course, so she was hyper in the meeting." Chances are that these two people will treat Andrea differently depending on whether they've labeled her "selfish" or



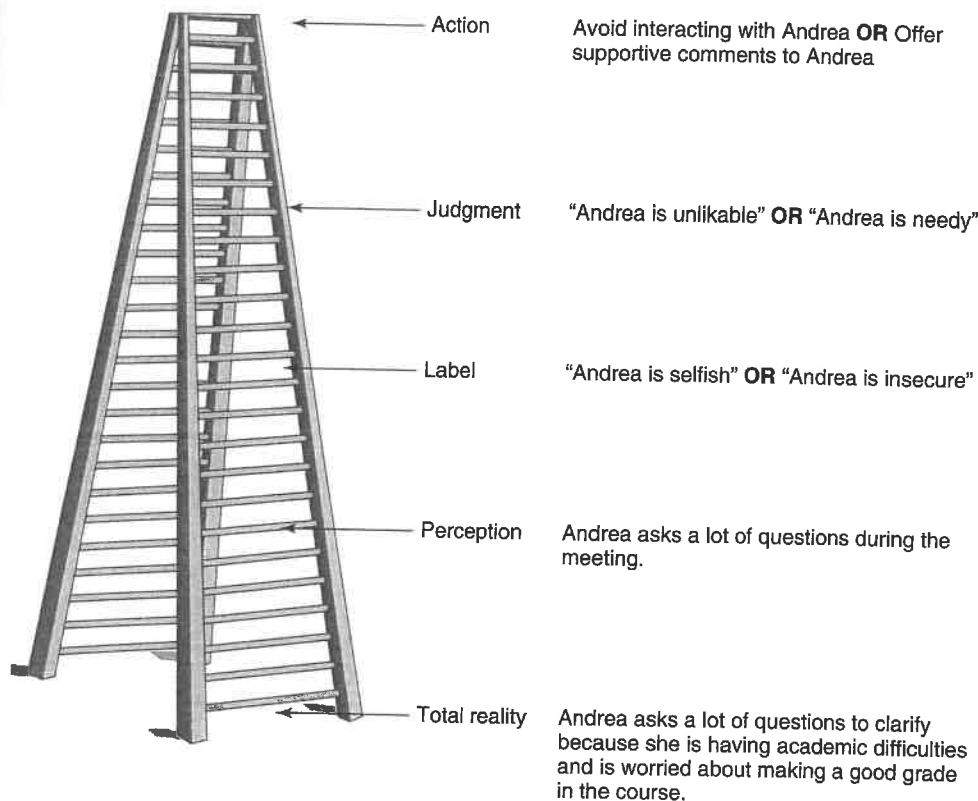


Figure 3.5

The Ladder of Abstraction

"insecure." Once the two people have labeled Andrea's behavior based on their subjective and partial perceptions, they may act toward Andrea based on their labels.

When we engage in interpersonal communication, we perceive only certain aspects of the total reality around us. Our perceptions are one step away from reality because they are always partial and subjective. We move a second step from reality when we label a perception. We move even further from the actual reality when we respond not to behaviors or our perceptions of them but instead to the label we impose. This process can be illustrated as a ladder of abstraction (see Figure 3.5), a concept emphasized by an early scholar of interpersonal communication (Hayakawa, 1962, 1964).

We should also monitor our labels to adapt our communication to particular people. Competent interpersonal communicators are sensitive to others and their preferences and choose their words accordingly. This is especially important when we are talking with or about identities. Most gays and lesbians reject the label *homosexual*, and they may resent hearing themselves labeled as such. Many people who have disabilities perceive the term *disabled people* as suggesting that they are disabled as people simply because they have some physical or mental condition. They prefer the term *person with disabilities* to the term *disabled person* (Braithwaite, 1996).

The U.S. Department of Labor surveyed 60,000 households to learn what identity labels different ethnic groups prefer. Not surprisingly, the survey revealed that

Communication in Everyday Life

INSIGHT

The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth

Ronnie Bullock was serving a 60-year sentence for kidnapping and raping a woman when DNA tests revealed that he could not have committed the crime. Like a number of other prisoners, Bullock was convicted largely on the basis of eyewitness testimony. "That's the man; I'll never forget his face" tends to convince jurors. The problem is that eyewitness testimony isn't always accurate.

In recent years, a number of convicted felons have been given new trials because DNA evidence could now be introduced. Nearly 75% of cases in which DNA exonerated a person serving time involved eyewitness testimony that the imprisoned person was the person who committed the crime (Beil, 2011).

Why is eyewitness testimony not always reliable? One reason is that witnesses' perceptions are shaped by language (Feigenson, 2000). In an experiment (Trotter, 1975), viewers were shown a film of a traffic accident, after which they filled out a questionnaire that included questions about things that had not actually been in the film. Viewers who were asked, "Did you see the broken headlight?" more frequently testified that they had seen it than did viewers who were asked, "Did you see a broken headlight?" Roy Malpass, a psychologist at the University of Texas, notes another reason for inaccurate eyewitness testimony: selective perception. Research shows that witnesses focus selectively on weapons, a phenomenon scholars call "weapon focus." When perception is riveted on a weapon, it's not focused on the person holding the weapon (Miller, 2000). Thus, recall of that person's appearance may be flawed.

Eyewitness Evidence: A Guide for Law Enforcement (1999), a Department of Justice publication, summarizes research on eyewitness testimony and offers guidelines for improving its reliability. Learn more about eyewitness evidence at their website: [\[\[http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/pubs-sum/178240.htm.\]\]](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/pubs-sum/178240.htm.)

Do you think eyewitness testimony should be allowed in courtroom trials? Why or why not?

members of various racial groups do not have uniform preferences. Among blacks, 44% wanted to be called *black*, 28% wanted to be called *African American*, 12% wanted to be called *Afro-American*, and 16% preferred other labels or had no preference. Nearly half of American Indians preferred to be called *American Indian*, yet 37% wanted to be called *Native American*. A majority of Hispanics wanted to be called *Hispanic*, not *Latino* or *Latina*. Whites overwhelmingly preferred to be called *white*; only 3% wanted to be called *European American* ("Politically Correct," 1995).

Is effective, sensitive communication possible when there are no universal guidelines for what to call people? Yes, if we are willing to invest thought and effort in our interactions. We begin by assuming that we may not know how others want to be labeled and that not all members of a group have the same preferences. Just because my friend Marsha wants to be called *black*, I shouldn't assume that others share that preference. It's appropriate to ask others how they identify themselves. Asking shows that we care about their preferences and want to respect them. This is the heart of person-centered communication.

Perceiving accurately is neither magic nor an ability that some people naturally possess. Instead, it is a communication skill that can be developed and practiced. Following the seven guidelines we have discussed will allow you to perceive more accurately.

INTERACTIVE VIDEO ACTIVITY

Continuing the Conversation



Jason Harris © 2001 Wadsworth

When you've watched the video online, critique and analyze this encounter based on the principles you learned in this chapter. Then compare your work with the author's suggested responses. Online, even more videos will let you continue the conversation with your instructor.

Your friend Jim tells you about a problem he's having with his parents. According to Jim, his parents have unrealistic expectations of him. He tends to be an average student, but his parents are angry that his grades aren't better. When he went home last month, his father said this:

Jim's father: I'm not paying for you to go to school so you can party with your friends. You have a free

ride, and you're still just pulling Cs. You just have to study harder.

Jim: I mean, I like to hang out with my friends, but that's got nothing to do with my grades. My dad's this brilliant guy, I mean, he just cruised through college, he thinks it's easy. I don't know how it was back then, but all my classes are hard. No matter how much studying I do I'm not gonna get all As. How do I convince them that I'm doing everything I can?

1. Both Jim and his parents make attributions to explain his grades. Describe the dimensions of Jim's attributions and those of his parents.
2. How might you assess the accuracy of Jim's attributions? What questions could you ask him to help you decide whether his perceptions are well founded or biased?
3. What constructs, prototypes, and scripts seem to operate in how Jim and his parents think about college life and being a student?
4. What could you say to Jim to help him and his parents reach a shared perspective on his academic work?

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Watch the video and do the Interactive Video Activity.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter, we've explored human perception, a process that involves selecting, organizing, and interpreting experiences. These three processes are not separate in practice; instead, each one affects the others. What we selectively notice affects what we interpret and evaluate. At the same time, our interpretations become a lens that influences what we notice in the world around us. Selection, interpretation, and evaluation interact continuously in the process of perception.



Figure 3.6

One Solution to the Nine-Dot Problem

We have seen that perception is influenced by many factors. Our sensory capacities and our physiological condition affect what we notice and how astutely we recognize stimuli around us. In addition, our cultural backgrounds and standpoints in society shape how we see and interact with the world. Social roles, cognitive abilities, and who we are also influence perception. Thus, interpersonal perceptions reflect both what is inside of us and what is outside of us. The pervasiveness of digital and online communication, like f2f communication, both reflects and shapes our perceptions.

Understanding how perception works provides a foundation for improving our perceptual capacities. We discussed the following seven guidelines for improving the accuracy of perceptions:

1. Realize that all perceptions are subjective and partial, so there is no absolutely correct or best understanding of a situation or a person.
2. Because people perceive differently, we should avoid mind reading or assuming that we know what others perceive or what their actions mean.
3. It's a good idea to check perceptions, which involves stating how you perceive something and asking how another person does.
4. Distinguish facts from inferences.
5. Avoid the self-serving bias because it can lead us to perceive ourselves too charitably and to perceive others too harshly.
6. Guard against the fundamental attribution error, which can undermine the accuracy of our explanations of our own and others' communication.
7. Monitor the labels we use. This involves awareness that our labels reflect our perceptions of phenomena and sensitivity to the language others prefer, especially when we describe their identities. Just as we can't see how to solve the nine-dot problem if we consider the dots a square, so we cannot see aspects of ourselves and others when our labels limit our perceptions. Figure 3.6 shows one solution to the nine-dot problem in Figure 3.1.

Flash Cards and Chapter Quiz

MindTap®

Practice defining the chapter's terms by using online flashcards and take the Chapter Quiz.

attribution 86

cognitive complexity 93

constructivism 82

cultures 81

empathy 94

**fundamental attribution
error 88**

implicit personality theory 95

inattention blindness 80

interpretation 86

mind reading 98

Müller-Lyer illusion 81

perception 79

personal construct 83

prototype 82

script 85

self-serving bias 87

standpoint 91

stereotype 83

"With all the weight you've gained, you should stop thinking about groceries." Your roommate looks hurt and leaves the room. Afterward, you think, "Well, I wouldn't have said that if she hadn't been so belligerent."

c. At work, your supervisor criticizes you for filling out forms carelessly. You dismiss the criticism because you think the supervisor requires too much senseless paperwork.

3. Cultural Values

How do values in Western culture affect your everyday perceptions and activities? See whether you can trace concrete implications of the five cultural values listed below.

Example: Competition—This value is evident in concrete practices such as competitive sports, grading policies, and attempts to have the last word in casual conversations.

Productivity

Individualism

Speed

Youth

Wealth

Discuss with classmates the impact of cultural values on your day-to-day perceptions and activities.

4. Virtual Worldviews

To appreciate the distinct ways that social media represent issues and events, do these activities:

a. Select one current political issue (budget matters, international relations, voting rights, elections) or

person (president, senator, candidate for office) that interests you.

b. Google the issue or person and visit the sites provided until you find at least one highly conservative and one highly liberal site. Identify differences in how the two sites represent the issue or person and what information and opinion relevant to the person or issue they present.

5. Monitor Mind Reading

Monitor your tendencies to mind read, especially in established relationships in which you feel you know the other person well. The next time you catch yourself mind reading, stop. Instead, tell the other person what you are noticing and invite him or her to explain how he or she perceives what's happening. First, find out whether the other person agrees with you about what you noticed. Whether or not the two of you agree, find out how the other person interprets and evaluates the issue.

Mind-Reading
Example

Other's
Perception

Other's
Interpretation

6. Use Tentative Language

To become more sensitive to our tendencies to confuse facts and inferences, for the next 24 hours, pay attention to the language you use to describe people and interactions. Listen for words such as *is* and *are*, which imply factual information. Do you find instances in which tentative language would be more accurate?

Now, extend your observations to other people and the language they use. When you hear others say, "She is," "They are," or "He is," are they really making factual statements, or are they making inferences?

Engaging with Ideas

Reflect and write about the ideas in this chapter by considering questions about personal, workplace, and ethical applications, here or online.

Personal Application Think about your interaction with social media. Do you let bright visual and noisy auditory stimuli control what you attend to? For instance, do you favor sites that have vivid images and colors?

Workplace Application Identify an example of the self-serving bias in a workplace. Describe how you engaged in self-serving bias to explain your own or a coworker's behavior, or how a coworker engaged in self-serving bias in explaining your or his or her behavior.

Ethical Application Is it unethical to engage in the self-serving bias? Is doing so a kind of dishonesty, both with others and ourselves?

Thinking Critically

Think and write critically about the ideas in this chapter, here or online.

1. To understand how your social location influences your perceptions, visit a social group that is different from your own. If you are white, you might attend services at a black church or go to a public meeting of Native Americans on your campus. If you are Christian, you could go to a Jewish synagogue or a Buddhist temple. In the unfamiliar setting, what stands out to you? What verbal and nonverbal communications do you notice? Do they stand out because they are not present in your usual settings? What does your standpoint highlight and obscure?
2. Identify an example of the fundamental attribution error in your perceptions. Describe how you explained your own behavior and that of others. Then, revise your explanation in such a way that it no longer reflects the fundamental attribution error.
3. Conduct a survey to find out how students on your campus prefer to define their identities. Ask blacks whether they prefer *black*, *African*

American, *Afro-American*, or another label. Ask whites how they identify their race. Ask Hispanic students what term they use to describe their ethnicity. Compare your findings to those of the U.S. Department of Labor discussed in the section "Monitor Labels." Do students on your campus reflect national preferences? Go beyond the findings discussed in this chapter to ask students from China, Japan, Korea, and other countries how they identify their ethnicities.

4. Use the ladder of abstraction to describe the relationships between perception, communication, and action in one interpersonal encounter in your life. First, describe the total situation as fully as you can (your descriptions won't be absolutely complete—that's impossible). Next, describe the behaviors and environmental cues you noticed. Then, identify the way you labeled what was happening and others who were present. Finally, describe how you acted in the situation. Now, consider alternative selective perceptions you might have made and how they might have influenced your labels and actions.

Additional Interactive Video Activities

Watch the video and do the Interactive Video Activity.