

COMMUNICATION: THE HANDBOOK

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COMPETENCE Summary

Competence OBJECTIVES

Your communication competence will be enhanced by understanding:

- how you form perceptions so that you can work toward reducing your tendency to stereotype and instead treat each person as an individual;
- the types of personal biases that inhibit perceptual accuracy so you can become more objective in attributing motives for behaviors;
- the influences on your perceptions—in order to help you to better understand yourself;
- the importance of engaging in perception checking to help you keep the lines of communication open between you and the person with whom you are communicating.

2a

2a Understanding Perception

Perception is the process of assessing information in your surroundings. It is important in your daily interactions. The information you use to form perceptions comes from stimuli that arouse your senses. You might see a hairstyle, smell freshly baked cookies, or hear a familiar voice. You notice how others react to your behavior. These stimuli are interpreted in your brain and become a part of your perception.

In the previous chapter, you learned about the concept of punctuation. As you may recall, punctuation occurs when you attribute a different cause for behavior than another person does. For instance, you might misinterpret a friend's help as a hindrance, while the friend intends merely to help. You might also have a different view of what caused a particular problem. You and a sister could be arguing. From your perspective, there was no nastiness until your sister raised her voice. But from her perspective, it was *you* who started the nastiness by raising your voice. Both of these scenarios represent a difference in punctuation, and thus, a difference in *perception*.

Consider the scene of a car accident. It is highly likely that each eyewitness has a different perception of the events leading to the accident. This will be especially true for the two people involved in the accident—each will probably blame the other for causing the crash.

Why are there so many different sides to each of these scenarios? Because we never perceive stimuli directly. Our senses pick up the stimuli, which are *filtered* through our brain, and subsequently are altered by our previous experiences and knowledge. The altered interpretation becomes a perception. Later in this chapter, we will see how perceptions are altered by various influences on perception. But first, let's look at the three stages of the perception process.



Applying Concepts DEVELOPING SKILLS

Understanding Your Perceptions

Consider an event in your life in which you witnessed a car accident or a crime. Was your account of the event similar or different from accounts of other witnesses? What were some potential influences on your perception of the event?

2b

2b Identifying the Stages of the Perception Process

The stages of perception occur almost simultaneously. Stage models often imply a linear, progressive process that could be stretched over an extended period of time. But, as you read about these stages, you will see how all three can occur within a mere second or two of time (perhaps even less than one second!).

Stage One: Stimulation

Stage One is stimulation in which your senses are activated by a sound, smell, noise, or touch that triggers the perception process. Given all that you encounter in your environment, you cannot possibly pay attention to every stimulus. Try this: Feel the clothes on your skin, the shoes on your feet, the book in your hands; hear the noises in your room; smell the scent of the room; and taste the food or drink in your mouth. Can you perceive all of this at once? Doubtful. Because you cannot attend to every stimulus in your environment, you engage in *selective perception*.

Selective perception. **Selective perception** occurs when you attend to some stimuli and not others. Some stimuli characteristics may capture our attention more than others; here are those we perceive most readily.

- **Intensity.** Typically, we are prone to noticing things that are of greater *intensity* than normal, such as things that are brighter or louder. Advertisers use this behavior to their advantage. Did you ever notice that commercials are often louder than regular programming? Advertisers hope that if you walk out of the room you will still hear the commercial. Commercials often contain loud noises and flash bright objects. The commercial might start with the crashing sound of breaking glass or the loud sneeze from someone with a cold. These louder items draw our attention.

- **Novelty.** We also notice things that are *unusual*. Despite the newer trend toward punk-inspired appearances, most people still react to a person with a bright blue Mohawk hairstyle or whose body is covered in tattoos or piercings. The first author of this textbook has several rabbits as pets. One of the rabbits enjoys playing in the grass outside. To keep him from getting away, she puts a leash on him. Needless to say, this draws many a double-take from passers-by! How often do you see a rabbit on a leash?
- **Repetition.** *Repetition* is another factor involved in selective perception. Things that we see or hear over and over tend to resonate in our minds. That's why seeing someone who looks familiar may catch your attention. Advertisers know that repetition is a key to persuasion. The more you hear something, the more you tend to remember it. The same is true for perception: the more you see or hear something, the more likely you are to notice it.
- **Motivation.** Another factor that determines what stimuli we attend to is our *motives*. Suppose that you are romantically attracted to someone. You likely hang on every word that the person says or every gesture that the person makes trying to determine if that person would reciprocate your romantic desires. Therefore, you are more likely to notice if the person sits closer to you or talks about "future" events together because of your motive; you are interpreting cues to determine, in this case, attraction. Therefore, the motive that you bring to a communicative interaction can skew your attention to all behavioral cues, and/or you could misinterpret cues to fit your motives.

Selective exposure. The second part of Stage One is selective exposure. **Selective exposure** is when we consciously expose ourselves to certain viewpoints that are consistent with our own. This could include maintaining friendships with people who share similar beliefs, or exposing ourselves only to messages that are consistent with our own beliefs. If you are a Democrat, you might visit only Web sites that espouse those ideals. The same is true if you are a Republican. In this instance, you are limiting your exposure to other points of view.



Applying Concepts DEVELOPING SKILLS

Analyzing Your Selective Exposure

Selective exposure is when you consciously expose yourself only to viewpoints that are consistent with your own. List three ways to expand your exposure to viewpoints that are less consistent with your own. Pick one and take steps to do it to widen your exposure.

Stage Two: Organization

During Stage Two, organization, your brain organizes the stimuli into pockets of knowledge called **schemata**. You develop schemata over time based on your experiences, and schemata change as your experiences change. For example, you may refine your “definitions” of expectations for friendships, who you think you are, and characteristics of a loving romantic relationship.

Peter Andersen conducted many research studies examining cognitive schemata. Based on his research, he developed six categories of schemata that guide our interactions: cultural, situation, self-schemata, state, interpersonal, and relational schemata.

Cultural schemata. **Cultural schemata** are based on your ethnic heritage and your familial experiences. According to Andersen (1993), cultural schemata guide what you consider to be appropriate behavior. This knowledge base includes cultural differences that influence how you interact with others. For instance, in the United States, it is considered appropriate to shake hands when you meet someone new or greet someone you know. In some other cultures, it is more appropriate to kiss each other on the cheek. Your cultural upbringing dictates what you consider to be appropriate behavior. Therefore, when you experience behavior that you would consider inappropriate in your culture, you tend to view negatively the person who is violating your cultural norm.

Situation schemata. **Situation schemata** refer to the appropriateness of a behavior in a given context. In other words, are public displays of affection appropriate in church, synagogue, or mosque? In the classroom, is it appropriate to speak without asking permission?

Self-schemata. A third category is **self-schemata**, which enable you to organize stimuli based on your own personality traits. If you consider yourself to be extroverted, then in social situations you will be excited to meet new people. But if you consider yourself to be introverted, then you might avoid social situations. Therefore, you understand your own behavior based on your understanding of who you are and how others relate to you.

State schemata. The fourth category involves **states schemata**, or an individual’s physical or emotional conditions. States include things like anger, happiness, or hunger. State schemata are internal, while situation schemata are external. When you perceive someone’s state behavior, you might adjust your communication accordingly. If the other person is grumpy, you might wait to ask him or her for a favor.

Interpersonal schemata. Interpersonal schemata include other people's characteristics and how you react to them. An important aspect of this category is the *valence*, or positive or negative quality, of the behavior. If you meet someone whose behavior you deem negative, then you are likely to attribute additional negative qualities to the person. For instance, if someone violates your personal space, you will likely react negatively to him or her. You might step backward to regain a comfortable physical distance, or avoid that person in the future because you believe he or she possesses other negative qualities, such as being unintelligent or unfriendly.

Relational schemata. The final category of schemata is relational schemata. When you judge the appropriateness of a behavior, you are more likely to view it from the appropriateness of the behavior in that particular type of *relationship* between the communicators than from any other aforementioned quality. Andersen suggests that relational schemata are the most influential of the six schemata. Relational schemata differ from interpersonal schemata in that relational schemata deal with how you view relationships, while interpersonal schemata concern another person's personality characteristics. Relational schemata allow you to use your understanding of relationship structures to understand behavior. What is the appropriate behavior in a friendship? Is it appropriate to display affectionate behavior toward a new romantic partner in public? The answers to these questions are based on your relational schemata.

To recap, when your senses are stimulated through sight, sound, touch, or smell, your brain must categorize that stimulus in order to make sense of it. Schemata offer the brain a means for quickly organizing the stimuli you encounter. If it were not for schemata, you would spend a large part of your day attempting to understand each stimulus as a brand new piece of information rather than being able to understand the stimulus quickly by comparing it to previously categorized stimuli.



Applying Concepts DEVELOPING SKILLS

Analyzing Your Schemata

How are your schemata influential in how you organize stimuli? What factors of your culture influence your interpretation of stimuli? As you read, Andersen considers relational schemata to be the most influential of the six schemata on your formation of perceptions. Which of the six do you consider most influential? Why?

SIX CATEGORIES OF SCHEMATA

Schemata category	Explanation	Example
2b <i>Cultural Schemata</i>	Guide what you consider to be appropriate behavior based on your heritage and your familial experiences.	Using appropriate nonverbal communication for greetings
<i>Situation Schemata</i>	Guide your behavior based on the appropriateness in a given context.	Exhibiting appropriate behavior in the classroom or at a funeral
<i>Self-Schemata</i>	Guide how you understand your own behavior based on your own personality traits.	Avoiding social situations, if you are introverted, or seeking them if you are extroverted.
<i>State Schemata</i>	Guide your interpretation of behavior based on an individual's physical or emotional conditions.	Understanding what it means to be sad, angry, or anxious
<i>Interpersonal Schemata</i>	Determine your reaction based other people's characteristics and valence of the behavior.	Adjusting your personal space based on whether you view a person positively or negatively
<i>Relational Schemata</i>	Concern your view of relationships and allow you to use your understanding of relationship structures to understand behavior.	Behaving appropriately in a friendship or a new romantic relationship



Cultural CONNECTIONS

Perception of Time

A cultural difference with regard to perception is the perception of time. In the United States (and most Western cultures), time plays an important role in our daily lives. We live by schedules. If you have an appointment at 1 p.m., you are expected to arrive at the designated meeting place by 1 p.m. However, not all cultures are “clock watchers.”

Asian Indian cultures have a different perspective on time. An Indian student who takes classes at a U.S. university may show up late for class. Naturally, this might cause a problem with the professor who expects students to show up to class on time. The Indian student knows that he must be at class, but time is relative for him and his culture. He will show up somewhere near the appointed time.

Some Hispanic cultures are also less restricted by the clock when it comes to social gatherings. If a Hispanic family holds a celebration for Cinco de Mayo, for instance, they will tell the guests to be there one hour earlier than they want guests to arrive. They know that if they tell the guests that the party starts at 2 p.m., guests will not arrive until 3 p.m. So if they want guests to arrive at 2 p.m., then the invitation will say that the party starts at 1 p.m.

Application

Other cultures that are less bound by time include Turkish and Italian cultures. Do you know of any other cultures that have a different perception of

Stage Three: Interpretation-Evaluation

The third stage is interpretation-evaluation. Once you categorize the stimulus, you interpret and evaluate the information by comparing the new stimulus to previously experienced stimuli, which are stored in schemata. This stage is referred to as interpretation-evaluation (with a hyphen in between) because it is impossible to interpret stimuli without simultaneously evaluating them. It is in this stage that you engage in generalization and stereotyping—two ways that you interpret and evaluate stimuli.

Generalization. When you generalize stimuli, you are comparing the stimuli to previously experienced stimuli. The **generalization** is a statement in which you categorize something as representative of an entire group. For instance, Canadians like hockey. Generalizations are not problematic until you take them to an extreme and treat every similar stimulus as if the generalization were a fact.

Stereotyping. A generalization taken too far is a stereotype. **Stereotyping** is when you react to a person by assuming he or she is a representation of a generalization. Let's use the Canadian example again. Instead of making a statement that Canadians like hockey (generalization), a stereotype would be treating every Canadian you meet as a hockey fan. You might meet a person who says he is from Canada and say, "Then you must love hockey!" That response represents a stereotype. You have evaluated the Canadian based on a generalization. Not every Canadian likes hockey. Every person possesses unique qualities. By stereotyping someone, you treat the person as a member of a group rather than as an individual person with independent thoughts and behaviors.

Influences on interpretation. There are several possible influences on your *interpretation* of events.

- **The degree to which you are involved with a person or the event.** If you like someone and you are interpreting his or her behavior toward you, you might assume that the mere fact that he or she is talking to you must mean that the attraction is mutual. However, if you were not attracted to the person, perhaps you wouldn't concern yourself with whether the person is attracted to you.
- **Relational satisfaction.** When you are happy with a relational partner (whether it is a friend or romantic partner), his or her annoying habits are endearing. But, if you are unhappy with the relationship, the annoying habits are unbearably irritating, and might contribute to you ending the relationship.

- **Past relational experiences.** If you have had trust issues in previous friendships or romantic relationships, then you might misinterpret a new friend or romantic partner's behavior as untrustworthy.
- **Your expectations about the other person's behavior.** If you expect that your roommate is going to be mad at you, then you might interpret her coming home and slamming doors to be directed toward you. In actuality, she might have just received a bad test grade or had a bad day.



Applying Concepts DEVELOPING SKILLS

Analyzing Your Interpretations

For any given day, make a list of the instances where you have engaged in a generalization. Did any of the generalizations cross the line to stereotyping? If so, what could you have done to avoid the stereotype?

THE STAGES OF PERCEPTION			
	STAGE ONE: STIMULATION	STAGE TWO: ORGANIZATION	STAGE THREE: INTERPRETATION- EVALUATION
Explanation of stage	Senses are activated by sound, smell, noise, or touch	Brain organizes stimulus into schemata	Interpret and evaluate information by comparing new stimulus to previously experienced stimuli
Attributes of the stage	Selective perception Selective exposure	Schemata: Cultural Situation Self-schemata State Interpersonal Relational	Generalizations Stereotypes

2c Understanding Perceptual Biases

In the previous section, we examined the issues and events that might influence your formation of perceptions. But what might influence the perceptual process as a whole? In this section we will examine how perceptions can become biased.

Halo Effect and Reverse Halo Effect

The process of inferring additional positive qualities to someone based on a known positive quality is called the **halo effect**. For example, if you know that someone is a volunteer for a nonprofit organization, you might conclude that she must also be friendly, intelligent, and caring. The positive quality of volunteerism could cause you to infer those additional positive characteristics of the person herself.

The reverse is true as well. When you infer additional negative qualities about someone based on a known negative quality, you are engaging in the **reverse halo effect**.

What is the problem with relying on the halo effect or the reverse halo effect? While the observations might help you to make a quick evaluation of another, it causes you to focus on only a few qualities of that person. Our initial impressions are typically the result of someone's appearance. Based on this initial observation of a person's appearance, you assign positive or negative adjectives to the person, and this dictates your assumptions about other characteristics before you have a chance to learn more.



Applying Concepts DEVELOPING SKILLS

Analyzing Perceptual Biases

Too often we rely on our assumptions about people based on one or a few known characteristics. What if the volunteer mentioned above donated money to charities for the sole purpose of getting a big tax break? Would that change your perception of her?

Similarly, if you assume that someone has negative qualities because of an initial negative impression, you usually try to avoid interactions with him or her. Therefore, you could miss out on cultivating a relationship with the person.

Can you think of a situation in which you used the halo effect or the reverse halo effect? Did you ever change your perception of the person with continued communication? Explain.

Perceptual Accentuation

Perceptual accentuation occurs when you see only what you expect and want to see. The phrase “rose-colored glasses” illustrates this perceptual bias. Research has shown that we consider people that we like to be more physically attractive than those people we do not like. In this case, we want to believe that our friends are attractive because they are our friends! Therefore, we may see more (or less) than what actually exists.



Attractiveness Bias

2c

A number of specials on television news magazine show over the past decade have examined employer bias toward hiring the more physically attractive candidate for a job. In fact, scholarly research findings are consistent with the hidden camera “eyewitness” footage of the more attractive candidate being hired. Unfortunately, the attractiveness bias, in which one person is overlooked in favor of a more attractive person, still exists.

Luxen and Van de Vijver (2005) report that both men and women favor attractive opposite-sex candidates. Interestingly, women prefer less attractive female candidates over more attractive (“highly attractive” according to the authors) candidates. Chiu and Babcock (2002) found similar results for employers in Hong Kong. They discovered an “attractiveness bias” for entry-level positions. In other words, the more attractive candidate was hired in the entry-level positions. Additionally, Chiu and Babcock report that female candidates are preferred over male candidates.

Application

Given what you have learned about perceptual bias in this chapter, are these ethically acceptable situations? Would you consider hiring someone based solely on her or his looks? What are some of the consequences of attractiveness hiring?

Primacy Effect and Recency Effect

The order in which we receive information also can bias our perceptions. Primacy and recency effects are opposites. **Primacy effect** explains the impact of first impressions—what we see first exerts the most influence on our perception. Therefore, if your professor was in a bad mood on the first day of class, you might have the perception that he or she is mean and unapproachable. The power of the primacy effect is important to keep in mind when you meet someone for the first time.

The **recency effect**, on the other hand, says that what occurs most recently exerts more influence on our perceptions. One venue in which this effect is evident is a political debate. Each candidate has time to make a closing statement. The candidates want to give their statement last because it will likely be the information voters will remember because of its recency in their minds. The same is true for court cases. Defense attorneys get the advantage of making closing statements last, which allows their arguments to be most recent in the mind of the jury.

2d Examining Influences on Perception

We have already noted that you never directly perceive anything. Many elements in your environment influence your perceptions. Those elements are categorized below.

Self-Perception

There are several components that comprise your self-perception. Let's look at these components and see how they influence how you perceive yourself. Figure 2.1 should help you to visualize how the components work together to form your self-perception.

Self-concept. **Self-concept** is how you describe yourself subjectively. Your self-concept is created by others' perceptions of you. You reflect on the statements and behaviors others make about you when you examine who you think you are.

Social comparisons. Your self-concept is also shaped by **social comparisons**, which is when you judge yourself against your peers, siblings, friends, and others. When you get a graded test returned, what is the first thing you want to know? Probably the class average on the test! Why? You want to compare *your* grade to the *average* grade of the class. You are comparing yourself to the average person in the classroom. In another context, you might judge your sense of fashion by comparing your clothing to the clothing worn by your friends or the clothing worn by supermodels.

Self-esteem. Another aspect of self-perception is **self-esteem**, or the value that you place on yourself. People with high self-esteem have a high degree of self-confidence and self-worth. People with low self-esteem have a low degree of self-confidence and self-worth. In the book (and movie based on the book) titled *A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, a robot named Marvin the Paranoid Android has low self-esteem. He believes that no one likes him and that he has bad luck. His self-esteem drives his behavior. He places little value on himself and, therefore, he often puts himself in harm's way because he doesn't care if anything happens to him.

Self-awareness. **Self-awareness**, the third aspect of self-perception, represents the extent to which you know yourself. You might think that you would never run into a burning building. But have you ever been faced with that situation? What if there were children screaming in the building? However, you might also know your limits. You might know for certain that

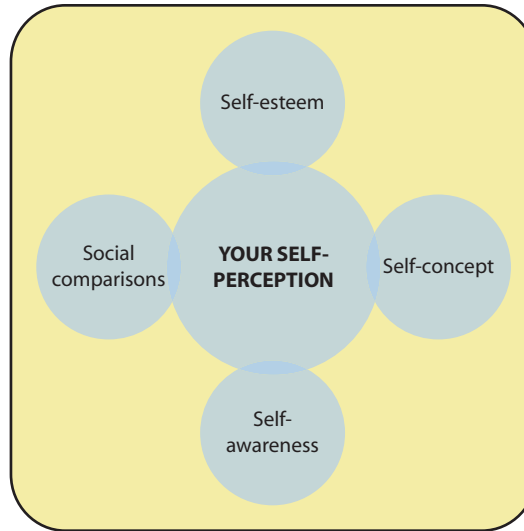


Figure 2.1
Components of
Self-Perception

you would never bungee jump off of a 500-foot cliff. Or you might know that you would do anything necessary to save the life of an animal. All of this self-knowledge culminates in your self-awareness, which can influence your perception of yourself. If you know that you would never intentionally do anything unethical, but you find yourself having behaved unethically, how will you modify your self-perception?

Personal Experiences

If you were once homeless or know someone who was homeless, then you might perceive a homeless person on the street differently (perhaps feeling more sympathy) than someone who has no personal experience with homelessness (who might look at the person as a menace). As you go through life and experience a variety of occurrences and behaviors, you'll notice that your personal experiences shape your perceptions.

Third-party Influences

Parents. The likes and dislikes of your parents shaped your perceptions when you were a child—perhaps they still do.

Friends. Friends influence our perceptions in that their opinions are important to us. Suppose that Jane finds someone she is romantically interested in. Jane thinks that the guy is extremely attractive. She asks her friend Martha what she thinks of him. Martha points out that he has really hairy arms and big ears, and she professes to find him unattractive. Martha's opinion

influences Jane's perception of the previously attractive guy. Before she only noticed his blue eyes, nice build, and cool clothing. With Martha's observations, Jane now perceives other aspects of the guy's appearance as less attractive.

Professors. Feedback from teachers can help shape how we perceive ourselves. A professor might approach you and suggest that you think about pursuing a graduate degree. You never thought much about your ability to succeed in grad school. But now that an esteemed, credible person has told you that you would be the perfect graduate student, your perception of your abilities changes for the better!

Media. The media influence our perceptions. *Agenda setting theory* states that the media don't tell us what to think, but rather what to think about. They serve as the gatekeepers of newsworthy information. They tell us what they believe we need to know. How a news story is framed can greatly influence our perceptions of the event or situation. For instance, many soldiers and civilians come back from Iraq talking about how much has been accomplished since the fall of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship. They become dismayed at the media coverage of the Iraq war because the media focuses almost solely on the violence and deaths of U.S. soldiers. With the focus solely on violence and death, the audience's perceptions of the war can be easily influenced.

Media influence doesn't stop at news coverage. Think of how much television programming has changed just in the past decade. With shows like *Ellen* and *The L Word*, the gay lifestyle is becoming more acceptable. The media (in the form of television executives and television studios) have changed many people's perception of gays.

Physical Conditions

Personal comfort. Your comfort level in terms of room temperature, seating, and hunger, for example, can determine what aspects of your environment you attend to. If you are sitting in a classroom that is too warm and has uncomfortable desks, you are less likely to attend to the professor's lecture and more likely to attend to your uncomfortable physical state. Thus you miss out on important information.

Physical limitations. People who use a wheelchair are likely to have different perceptions of various campus locations. Ease of access to buildings can influence how they perceive the administration of the school. Of course, there are building codes that dictate wheelchair access to buildings, but that doesn't always mean that those entries are easily maneuvered or in the most convenient locations.

Psychological Conditions

One of the more profound influences on perception in romantic relationships is psychological condition. If you are smitten with someone, you are more likely to notice the person's positive nonverbals and positive statements about you than his or her negative ones. Likewise, if you dislike someone, you are likely to perceive what he or she says as negative. Or, more likely, you will avoid that person altogether.

As we noted earlier, Marvin the Paranoid Android in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* is always depressed. His depression taints his perception of everything that goes on around him. The same is true for humans who are depressed or unhappy. Think of the times when you are with people who are in a bad mood. They often allow their bad mood to taint their perceptions of everything all day long.

Self-fulfilling Prophecy

A **self-fulfilling prophecy** occurs when you make a prediction about the outcome of a situation and you act on that prediction as if it were true, thus making the predicted outcome more likely to occur. If you have heard the phrase “self-fulfilling prophecy,” it likely existed in a negative context. Self-fulfilling prophecies actually can have positive or negative consequences. For example, when you predict that you are not going to pass a test, you are likely to act on that prediction causing you to fail the exam. By internalizing the prediction, you could freeze when you get the test, causing the failing grade.

It is also possible to make a positive prediction, act on it as if it were true, and create the positive outcome. Suppose that Gene is attending a party that he knows Barb, the woman he is attracted to, will be attending. During the day of the party, Gene might predict that if he gets the opportunity to talk to Barb, she will be attracted to him, too. At the party, Gene's confidence works to his advantage because he is able to create and sustain a meaningful and interesting conversation with Barb. The result is that she accepts his request to go on a date. This self-fulfilling prophecy comes true!

You can also influence the behavior of others through **other-imposed prophecies**, in which your predictions about their behavior cause you to act toward them as if the prediction were true. Gene could have started with a negative prediction—that Barb would not be interested in talking to him—and ended up not meeting her because he was emitting negative nonverbal cues that caused Barb to stay away from him. The other person reacts to your behavior, causing the prediction actually to come true.



Applying Concepts DEVELOPING SKILLS

Examining Your Perceptual Influences

Which of the perceptual influences—self-perception, third-party influences, physical conditions, psychological conditions, or self-fulfilling prophecies—do you more easily notice throughout your day? Are there one or more influences that are almost unnoticeable to you? What makes some of these influences more apparent than others?

2e

2e Engaging in Perception Checking

Given the number of influences on your perceptions, it is best to engage in perception checking. **Perception checking** involves asking others for clarification or validation of your perceptions. Typically, the need for perception checking involves the observation of a person's repeated behavior. Let's look at an example:

Vicki is normally smiling, laughing, and happy. Lately, her IM away message contains lyrics to songs about how hard life is and other depressing topics. After noticing this behavior for several days, Joan calls Vicki to remind her that if she ever needs to talk, she is always available. Vicki thanks her, but reveals nothing. Vicki continues to sound depressed on the phone and in person. If you were Joan, what would you do?

Unfortunately, many people would respond by asking Vicki, “Are you mad at me?” or “What did I do wrong?” Such responses are self-centered and not focused on the other person. They create a defensive situation in which the other person might feel accused of doing something wrong or might be angry with you for being so self-centered. When asking these types of questions you are engaging in mind reading. You are essentially telling Vicki that you *know* that her problem involves you. So what should Joan say to Vicki?

- **Describe the behaviors you are encountering.** The key to beginning a conversation in which you check your perceptions is to use descriptive language. Therefore, Joan might say, “I have noticed that your away messages have been regularly depressing. And I have noticed that your nonverbal cues mirror that depression.”
- **Suggest possible reasons for the behavior.** After you have made descriptive statements (and not accusations or statements that create defensiveness), you should suggest possible reasons for the behavior. Joan could suggest, “I know you have been under a lot of stress with your coursework lately. I also know that your grandmother has been in the hospital.” By providing some suggestions, you are showing that you have

noticed other aspects of Vicki's life experiences, but also that you do not necessarily consider her behavior to have anything to do with you.

- **Ask for clarification.** When you have suggested reasons for the behavior, you need to ask for clarification. So Joan might follow her suggestions about the origin of Vicki's behavior with, "Is anything bothering you that you would like to talk about? I am worried about you."

When you are uncertain of the purpose of someone's behavior, it is important to seek understanding. Perception checking allows you to verify your observations and interpretations of the behavior. Perception checking involves describing the behavior, suggesting reasons for the behavior, and asking for clarification. When you ask for clarification, you are giving the other person an opportunity to elaborate on his or her thoughts and feelings.



Applying Concepts DEVELOPING SKILLS

Practice in Perception Checking

Write a role-playing script that would effectively check the characters' perception(s) in these situations.

- Your partner walks into the room and turns on the TV without even saying "hello." You assume she must be annoyed with something you said.
- Your co-worker walks by your desk and puts down a stack of papers. He only utters a sigh as he walks away. You wonder if you forgot a deadline.
- You approach your instructor after class to ask a quick question about an upcoming assignment. The instructor snaps an answer at you before walking out the door. You wonder if you said something insulting to him or if he doesn't like you.

Competence SUMMARY

In this chapter, you have learned the following concepts. Check to be sure you have achieved each of the communication competencies.

2a Understanding Perception

- Perception is the process of assessing information in your surroundings.
- We do not directly perceive stimuli, but rather we examine it through our previous experiences and knowledge.

Competence. Can I define perception?

2b Identifying the Stages of the Perception Process

- The three stages in the perception process are stimulation, organization, and interpretation-evaluation.
- The perception process begins when you receive a stimulus—you hear, see, or smell something, for example. Two components of the stimulation stage are selective attention and selective exposure.
- Once you have received the stimulus and paid attention to it, you must understand what you are hearing, seeing, or smelling. In the organization stage, your brain compares the stimulus to your schemata to determine how to react.
- When you understand what you are sensing, you can interpret and evaluate it. The brain naturally generalizes stimuli in order to shortcut the understanding process. However, assuming generalizations to be true for each person you meet is called stereotyping.

Competence. Am I able to interpret stimuli accurately (from sensing a stimulus to evaluating the stimulus), and in the process reduce my stereotyping and treat each person I interact with as an individual?

2c Understanding Perceptual Biases

- Other perceptual biases include halo effect and reverse halo effect, perceptual accentuation, primacy and recency effects.

Competence. Am I able to understand how I attribute meaning to my own behavior and the behavior of others? Recognizing my perceptual biases can help me attempt to be more objective in attributing motives for behaviors.

2d Examining Influences on Perception

- You never directly perceive anything, but several elements influence your perceptions.
- Your perception of yourself is shaped by others' perceptions of you and your own perception of yourself. Self-perception is one influence on your general perceptions.
- Personal experiences, third-party influences, physical and psychological conditions, and self-fulfilling prophecies can influence your perceptions.
- Self-fulfilling prophecy occurs when you make a prediction about the outcome of a situation and then act on that prediction as if it were true. As a result, your prediction is more likely to occur.

Competence. Do I understand what influences my perceptions and therefore better understand myself? Do I have the self-knowledge that enables me to gain more confidence in myself? Has this confidence transferred to my communication with others, which can also be enhanced?

2e Engaging in Perception Checking

- The best way to know if you have accurately attributed motives for someone's behavior is to engage in perception checking.
- Perception checking involves more than simply asking "Am I right?" It involves describing the other person's behavior(s), suggesting potential reasons for that person's behavior(s), and asking for clarification of the behavior(s).

Competence. Do I second-guess the motives for someone's behavior, or do I communicate with that person based on accurate attributions that I verify by engaging in perception checking?

Review Questions

1. Explain the stages of perception.
2. What is the difference between selective attention and selective exposure?
3. What is the difference between a generalization and a stereotype? How are schemata related to generalizations and stereotypes?
4. Name three influences on perception.
5. What are the differences between "self-concept," "self-esteem," and "self-awareness"?

Discussion Questions

1. You develop schemata over time based on your experiences. Therefore, schemata change as you expand your experiences. What are some factors that influence how, when, and why your own personal schemata change?
2. A self-fulfilling prophecy occurs when you make a prediction about the outcome of a situation and act on that prediction as if it was true, thus making the predicted outcome more likely to occur. How does self-esteem affect the self-fulfilling prophecies that we make?

Key Terms

cultural schemata *p.34*

generalization *p.37*

halo effect *p.39*

interpersonal schemata *p.35*

perception *p.31*

perception checking *p.45*

perceptual accentuation *p.39*

primacy effect *p.40*

recency effect *p.40*

relational schemata *p.35*

reverse halo effect *p.39*

schemata *p.34*

selective exposure *p.33*

selective perception *p.32*

self-awareness *p.41*

self-concept *p.41*

self-esteem *p.41*

self-fulfilling prophecy and
other-imposed prophecy *p.44*

self-schemata *p.34*

situation schemata *p.34*

social comparisons *p.41*

states *p.34*

stereotyping *p.37*