

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION: Competence and Contexts, 2/e

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ISBN13: 9780205663026

ISBN10: 0205663028

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CHAPTER
2

Perception and Communication



“Perception is a guess or estimate of what is ‘out there’ depending on how we read the clues; therefore it can never be absolute and often is unreliable”

EARL KELLEY, EDUCATOR

In this chapter, we will answer the following:



Motivation: How Will This Help Me?

- It is important to study perception and communication because we often communicate on the basis of different perceptions. Additionally, engaging in perspective taking to understand others' perceptions can improve our communication competence.

Knowledge: What Will I Learn?

- How to characterize perception
- The stages involved in the perception process
- Perceptual biases and how they affect communication
- How contexts influence perception and communication

Skill: Why Do I Need To Develop This Skill?

- Describing sense data and perception checking can improve our communication competence

Illusionist David Copperfield influences his audiences to perceive that he can levitate across the Grand Canyon, escape from Alcatraz island, and make the Statue of Liberty disappear. What factors affect how we perceive and what we perceive as “real”? Do you or someone you know perceive that “all [fill in the blank with a particular group] are [fill in the blank with an adjective]”? Have you and a partner ever argued about whose perceptions are correct? In reality, perceptual differences don’t necessarily mean that one person’s version of “truth” is better than another’s. Try to recall some instances of perceptual disagreement as you read the material in this chapter regarding perception in general and how our perceptions of others influence our interpersonal communication. In this chapter, we will increase our motivation to communicate competently by learning why it’s important to study perception and communication. Engaging in perspective taking can increase our motivation to communicate with others who are different from us. We will also increase our knowledge by learning about the characterization of perception, the stages in the perception process, how our perception of reality is biased, how our perception is influenced by contexts, and the challenges of perception and communication as they relate to stereotyping and prejudice. Finally, we will learn two skills that can improve our interactions with others—how to communicate descriptive rather than inferential statements and how to engage in the skill of perception checking.

Motivation
Knowledge
 Skill

Introduction to Perception

Have you ever misjudged the distance between you and another person or something that is inanimate (and therefore accidentally bumped into someone or walked into a wall)? Have you ever thought that someone “looked” unintelligent but revised your opinion after speaking with her or him? These questions concern perception. Perception is learned; it isn’t an innate ability. Perception occurs when sense data—what we see, hear, smell, taste, and/or touch—is transmitted to the brain. The brain almost instantly transforms the sensory messages into conscious perceptions by attaching meaning to the sense data. This process occurs in three stages.

Perception is the process of selecting, organizing, and interpreting sensory information. “Seeing” is not the same as “perceiving.” A man who regained his sight after thirty years of blindness makes clear the difference between sight and perception: “When I could see again, objects literally hurled themselves at me. One of the things a normal person knows from long habit is what *not* to look at. Things that don’t matter, or that confuse, are simply shut out of their seeing minds. I had forgotten this, and tried to see everything at once; consequently I saw nothing.”¹

How can we characterize perception?

Motivation
 Knowledge
 Skill

Why It’s Important to Study Perception and Communication

The study of perception as it relates to communication deserves merit because the relationship between the two is reciprocal and because we often communicate on the basis of different perceptions. Understanding how perception affects communication can motivate us to communicate competently.

Why is it important to study perception and communication?

Reciprocal Relationship

What would you think if a significant other suggested that you “lose a few pounds”? Would you perceive a message designed to help you, or would you perceive a message designed to criticize you? How would you respond to this message? Whether you say, “I know you’re just trying to help” or “You should talk; you don’t look so hot yourself!” will depend on how you perceive the message. This is an illustration of how communication influences perception and perception influences communication. Our perception of reality is created, in part, through communication. For example, suppose a trusted friend tells you about a professor who assigns too much work and treats students unfairly. You may avoid enrolling in this professor’s classes if you believe your friend’s characterization. Although you never personally interact with the professor, you perceive that he or she is unreasonable, and this idea becomes a part of your reality. In fact, you communicate this perception when someone asks what you know about this professor. These examples also illustrate the reciprocal relationship between perception and communication.

Different Realities

Perhaps one semester you are forced to enroll in one of this professor’s classes. Surprisingly, you find the professor’s assignments reasonable and his or her treatment of students



Perception can be distorted.

Source: © BIZARRO – DAN PIRARO, KING FEATURES SYNDICATE.

fair. Maybe you wonder what caused your trusted friend to have such a “distorted” perception of the professor. As illustrated in the “Bizarro” comic, one person’s truth or reality isn’t another’s. Although people perceive the same things differently, we assume that our perceptions are true reflections of reality, and we communicate on the basis of this assumption. We all have different realities, and even the truths we hold dear may be proven incorrect. This creates the potential for problematic communication situations in which we may find ourselves arguing about the “correct” version of reality.

Recall that our culture(s), relationships, gender, and individual characteristics affect our perceptions of communication competence. Competent communication involves speakers and listeners who communicate freely and openly about their and others’ perceptions and what influences their perceptions. Similarly, competent communicators maintain their perspectives yet consider opposing information. Competent conversation partners realize that while their own perspectives may be accurate, they can see the validity in the perspectives of others.

KNOWLEDGE power • Is It a Masterpiece or Something a Child Could Have Painted?

With a partner or in a group, discuss some examples of perceptions that you hold or have held in the past that were at odds with other people’s perceptions. For example, perhaps you and a partner disagreed about perceptions regarding a particular movie, a meal at a restaurant, someone’s character or personality, or a controversial topic. Did any of the

disagreements about whose version of reality was “correct” escalate into an argument? Were you or your conversation partner eventually able to realize some validity in the other’s perspectives and/or conclude that your own version of reality was suspect? How did you or your conversation partner communicate this realization?

The Stages in the Perception Process

The perception process involves three distinct stages that occur almost simultaneously: selection; organization; and interpretation. These stages are illustrated in Figure 2.1, “The Perception Process.”

Selection

Imagine the most recent walk to your communication class. Can you describe all of the people you passed on your way to class? Do you remember the smells you encountered and the sounds you heard? Of course you don’t; it’s impossible to perceive all of the stimuli in your environment. Therefore, during **selection**, the first stage of the perception process, we select from the environment the stimuli to which we will attend. Two types of stimuli tend to be selected from all the stimuli that bombard our senses and compete for attention: stimuli that are salient and stimuli that are vivid.

Salience **Salience** refers to stimuli that are selected from the environment based on their interest, use, and meaning to us. For example, were you ever in a crowded restaurant or store and were aware of others’ conversations but didn’t pay attention to what was being said until, suddenly and without warning, someone from across the room mentioned your name? The reason you selected that particular stimulus from the environment is because your name is meaningful to you. You wouldn’t pick out someone else’s name from the low-level noise of conversation unless that particular name was also meaningful to you.

Vividness **Vividness** refers to stimuli that are selected from the environment because they are noticeable. We tend to pay attention to stimuli that are intense, large, and repetitious and demonstrate movement. The girl who raises her voice, the guy who is 6"10", the student who peppers her speech with too many “y’knows?” and the friend who uses broad gestures and talks with his hands are all likely to be noticed.

Once we have selected material from the environment to attend to, we next organize the material to help us in its interpretation.

Organization

Organization occurs when we categorize the stimuli we have selected from the environment to make sense of it. Researchers have discovered that we tend to organize stimuli in

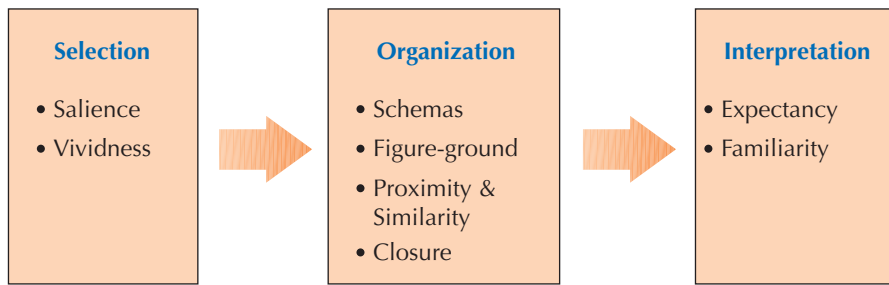
certain ways, particularly on the basis of schemas, figure and ground, proximity, similarity, and closure. These patterns influence how we organize the stimuli we attend to.

Schemas **Schemas** are mental templates that enable us to organize and classify stimuli into manageable groups or categories. Schemas typically are general views of people and their social roles. For example, we may categorize

What are the stages involved in the perception process?

KNOWLEDGE power • **This Offer Won’t Last, So Call Now!**

With a partner or in a group, think about television commercials that consistently “grab your attention,” whether or not you like them. Describe the commercials, and discuss whether you select them from the environment because they mean something to you or because they are noticeable (e.g., they are intense, large, or repetitious or include lots of movement or action).

Figure 2.1: The Perception Process

others based on their appearance (pretty, ugly, fat, thin, etc.) and their group membership (Jewish, Republican, Junior League member, etc.). We may also categorize people according to roles, such as parent, student, or doctor. Schemas are used to determine the origin of a memory when we can't recall the source (e.g., we may attribute a comment about a flu epidemic to a particular person only because she or he belongs in the schema of "medical students").² The various schemas we use each day help us make sense of the world and

KNOWLEDGE ON THE CUTTING EDGE

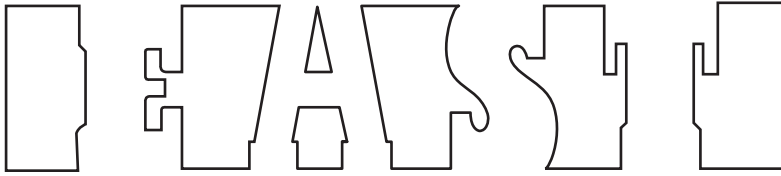
"Rights" versus "Right": Are you a Civil Communicator?

“**W**hatever happened to freedom of speech?
“I can do and say what I want!”
How many times have you heard, read, or communicated these or similar sentiments? Do we have a right to wear offensive phrases on our T-shirts? Is it acceptable for people to boom four-letter obscenities from car speakers? These actions may be constitutionally protected rights, but that doesn't mean they are "right." Simply put, although we *can* engage in such behaviors, it doesn't mean that we *should*.

Recall from Chapter 1 that "civility" entails a sacrifice of our individual desires and passions for the overall greater good of the community. However, respect for others and restraining our desires appear to be losing to what has been described as the "rights talk" that is pervasive in modern society. Because we perceive that we have minimal, if any, obligations to others, we easily confuse desires with "rights" and turn to the Constitution to protect offensive speech and behavior. However, the framers of our Constitution most likely imagined the right to engage in heated political discussions that reflected the value of responsibility to the community. Although the Constitution protects a variety of our rights, our norms or rules of conduct should provide us with the discipline to exercise these rights with respect for others and the larger social community we are part of. Unfortunately, too many of us perceive that our right to engage in uncivil and disrespectful communication makes it right to do so.³

Fortunately, some individuals and groups perceive that having a right to engage in uncivil communication doesn't mean that it's "right." For example, scholars at the First Amendment Center worked with leaders from the Christian Educators Association International (CEAI) and the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Educators Network (GLSEN) to write guidelines for educators and parents on issues concerning sexual orientation in public schools. Finn Larsen, executive director of CEAL, asserted, "We need to be sensitive to listen and show respect for individuals with opinions on all sides of this issue even if we don't agree with them."⁴ Specifically, schools have been encouraged to form task forces of individuals who hold divergent views about homosexuality. Schools are also asked to agree on ground rules for civil debate. Parents are encouraged to realize that school districts not only have a responsibility to meet their needs but also must provide a safe environment for those who hold different views of sexual orientation. CEAI and GLSEN leaders perceive the push for common ground as a breakthrough and suggest that a lack of basic civility is often what leaves people feeling angry, shut out, and ready to fight.⁵

As we increasingly decry rude and uncivil behavior in modern life, we can hope that people will once again perceive a responsibility to community and work to strengthen the norm of civility. It is indeed possible to perceive that "having a right" doesn't mean that it is "right" to act on that right.

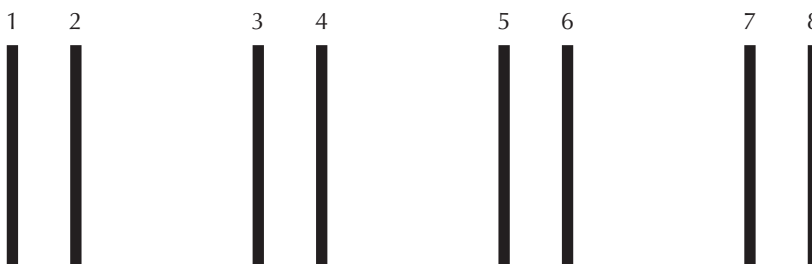
Figure 2.2: Figure-Ground Organization

engaging in stereotyping when our generalizations about others based on schemas ignore the possibility of individual differences. Stereotypes are generalizations that lack validity and are discussed later in this chapter in “Overcoming Communication Challenges: Stereotyping and Prejudice.”

Figure-Ground Organization Figure-ground organization occurs when a portion of the stimuli selected from the environment is the focal point of our attention (“figure”) and the rest is placed in the background (“ground”). For example, what do you perceive in Figure 2.2, “Figure-Ground Organization”? It’s easy to perceive irregularly shaped geometric figures that aren’t quite rectangles in this particular illusion. However, if we place the geometric figures in the background and bring the spaces between them in the foreground, we can see the letters “EAST.” The figure and ground organization also applies to communication situations. Have you ever been in a crowded room and paid attention to various conversations? When we begin to focus on one particular conversation and others recede into the background, we are organizing based on the principle of figure-ground.

Proximity and Similarity We also organize stimuli selected from the environment on the basis of proximity and similarity. We organize on the basis of **proximity** when we group stimuli that are physically close to each other. For example, describe what you perceive in Figure 2.3, “Organization Based on Proximity.” Do you describe this illusion as four pairs of lines or eight parallel lines? If you perceive four pairs of parallel lines, you are organizing based on the principle of proximity. Organization based on proximity also applies to communication situations. Suppose your professor begins your class by saying that far too many students failed the last exam. Your professor then calls your name and asks to speak with you after class. Because these messages occur in close temporal proximity, you may believe that your professor wants to speak to you about your poor test grade. However, your professor may want to talk to you about a topic totally unrelated to the test.

We also tend to group elements together based on size, color, shape, and other characteristics. When this occurs, we organize on the basis of **similarity**. For example, follow the directions and look at the words listed in the “Memory Test.”

Figure 2.3: Organization Based on Proximity

enable us to make generalizations and predictions about others. For example, we may be asked to babysit a friend’s five-year-old child. We may therefore use the schema of “young children typically have short attention spans” to predict that the child will need a variety of activities to occupy her or his time. We risk

The point of the memory test is not to remember as many words as possible but to uncover the method you use to remember the words. Most likely you grouped the words into categories of items that share something similar. You may have grouped items that related to pets, the solar system, shapes, and fruits. This illustrates the idea that we tend to group similar elements together. Organization based

Memory Test

Directions: Read the following words and prepare to remember as many as possible. Turn the page once you have read the words and write as many words as you

can on a piece of scratch paper. Return to the text on this page once you are finished writing the words that you remembered.

Cat	Sun	Square	Apple
Lemon	Bird	Planet	Dog
Triangle	Plum	Fish	Moon
Star	Circle	Orange	Rectangle

on similarity also applies to communication situations. Think back to your days in high school. Were your high school classmates organized into various cliques based on similar interests, activities, and communication styles? Did your high school include the jocks who were loud and aggressive, the popular people who were talkative and happy, and the artists who were introverted and quiet? The proverb “birds of a feather flock together” describes organization based on similarity.

Closure Another way we can organize stimuli is through **closure**, that is, filling in the “missing pieces” to form a whole or complete picture. Figure 2.4 illustrates organization based on closure. How would you describe it?

At first glance, Figure 2.4 looks like a solid grid, but none of the lines touch to actually form a grid. Instead of seeing the empty spaces, we fill in the spaces that “hide” the intersections with illusory rectangles or circles. Organization based on closure also applies to communication situations. Have you ever tried to fill in some missing information to make sense of your communication experiences or to understand people? Perhaps you’ve achieved closure by explaining the actions of an acquaintance who won’t leave a cheating partner by surmising that he or she is emotionally needy or too weak to let go. Although our perceptions of the missing information may be false, we all tend to fill in the blanks to create a complete picture.

So far, we have read that sensory information is selected from the environment and organized in various ways to facilitate interpretation. The final stage in the perception process is interpretation.

Interpretation

we **interpret** stimuli that we have selected and organized from the environment when we assign meaning to the stimuli. For example, we may select from the environment our roommate standing in the middle of a crowd (selection), focus on the frown on her or his face as being in the foreground (organization), and believe that our roommate is unhappy (interpretation). However, friends standing next to

Figure 2.4: Organization Based on Closure

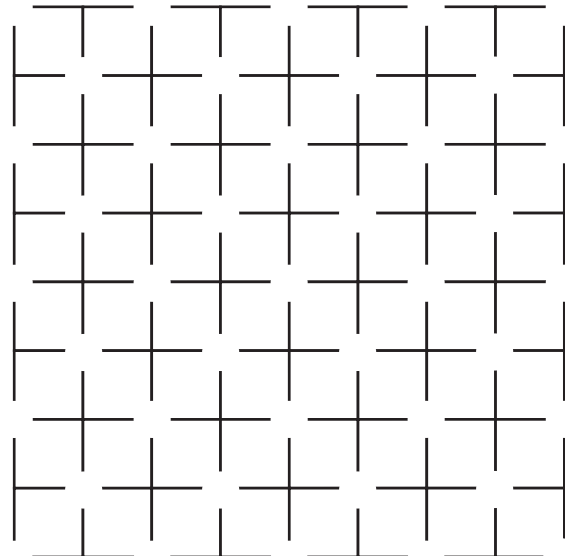
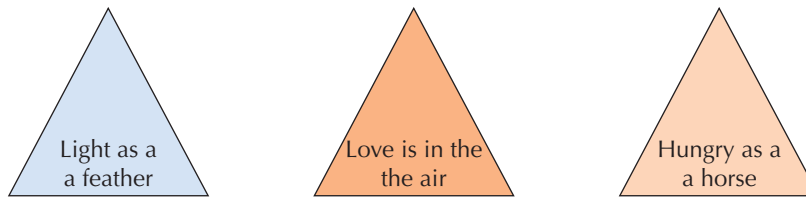


Figure 2.5: Do you know these phrases?

us tell us that they didn't see a frown on our roommate's face. Later that day, we ask our roommate about the sad look and learn that she or he was merely deep in thought. This example illustrates that our interpretations of sense data may be incorrect and that we may select and organize stimuli from the environment (like a frown)

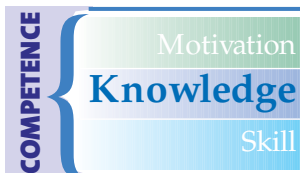
that others fail to perceive. We will later learn the skill of perception checking, which will enable us to determine whether our interpretation of stimuli is correct. For now, note that the interpretation of stimuli is influenced by both expectancy and familiarity.

Expectancy Our interpretation of stimuli is influenced by **expectancy**, or what we expect to perceive. In other words, we become accustomed to seeing stimuli in certain ways and therefore often don't perceive the obvious. For example, have you ever written a paper and, even after proofreading it, later discovered that you overlooked some obvious misspellings? Typically, we focus on our meaning and not the written words while we proofread. However, we still may be surprised when our paper is returned to us because we don't expect to find misspelled words after we proofread it.

Familiarity Our interpretation of stimuli is also influenced by **familiarity**, that is, how familiar we are with the stimuli. This idea is evidenced in Figure 2.5, "Do You Know These Phrases?" Sometimes familiarity adds to what we expect to perceive. Read the phrases out loud, very slowly, one word at a time. Do you perceive a second "a" in "Light as a a feather"? Do you see a second "the" in "Love is in the the air" and a second "a" in "Hungry as a a horse"? Familiarity with stimuli can explain why your professors sometimes hand back your assignments with words, clauses, or even sentences circled in red because you have typed them twice. It may be that you are so familiar with what you have written that you fail to perceive anything out of the ordinary.

Expectancy and familiarity also affect communication situations. Have you ever failed to notice a change in a friend's appearance (a form of nonverbal communication)? You may have been so familiar with your friend that you failed to notice any change. Perhaps you once got your braces off, had your ears pierced, or shaved off a moustache. Did any of your friends fail to notice the change in your appearance? If so, your friends didn't perceive the difference in your appearance because they didn't expect to see a change.

What we perceive is considered to be our reality or our truth; however, our reality may not match the reality of others, even if we perceive the same stimuli. Various perceptual errors and biases can result from the fact that we all perceive differently.



Perceptual Biases

Perceptual biases occur because we all perceive differently. These biases can affect how we communicate with others, how we perceive others' communication, and how we interpret and evaluate others' behavior. For example, suppose an employee is tagged for low productivity. A supervisor may perceive the employee's low productivity to be a result of a personal defect or a negative personality characteristic. This perception may influence the

KNOWLEDGE ON THE CUTTING EDGE

Technology Update: Person Perception and Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)

Do you use email, access personal Web sites, and/or participate in Internet chat rooms? If so, you probably realize that the nonverbal cues that help us form impressions of others are limited in these communication venues in comparison with the cues available in face-to-face communication. Language features tend to be the primary cues for personality perceptions in CMC. One study of CMC-related person perception found that readers can accurately judge the personality characteristics of extroversion and introversion from the text of email messages. Compared to introverts, people who are extroverts tend to use:

- fewer tentative words (e.g., “trying” or “maybe”)
- fewer words that communicate negative emotions
- fewer words that indicate inclusion (such as “with” and “include”)

The study also illustrated a high degree of agreement among the readers who perceived the personality of the email authors.⁶

Researchers have also studied person perception by comparing personal Web sites with other contexts

where personality is expressed, such as bedrooms and offices. “Identity claims” (expressions about our personality that are directed to the self and others) are deliberately manifested in personal Web sites, whereas inadvertent self-expression occurs in physical contexts (e.g., a disorganized CD collection may illustrate a tendency toward clutter, and dirty soccer shoes may indicate a preference for certain athletic activities). Studies have documented that observers can learn at least as much about others by viewing their Web sites as they can from viewing bedrooms and offices. The identity claims on Web sites convey valid information and allow clear and coherent perceptions about an author.⁷

Chat room exchanges are similar to casual interactions with others because of the synchronous nature of real-time communication. People agree more about the personality perceptions of chat room partners in one-on-one chats than in group interactions. The chaotic nature of group chat rooms (in which people tend to type messages simultaneously) may account for this finding, as well as the finding that people in group interactions are perceived less favorably than those in one-on-one interactions.⁸

supervisor to deny the employee a salary increase or consider terminating her or his employment. However, something in the employee’s work situation, such as malfunctioning equipment or unreliable team members, may be the cause of the productivity problem.⁹ The attribution that a personality flaw is the cause of poor job performance is an example of a perceptual bias that can result in serious consequences. In addition to faulty attributions, selectivity and confusing fact with inference can bias our perceptions and cause errors.

What are perceptual errors and how do they affect communication?

Selectivity

Our perception of sense data can be biased in terms of selective attention and selective perception.

Selective Attention **Selective attention** occurs when we ignore certain parts of a stimulus and attend to others. Perhaps you’ve heard the story of the teenager who asks his parents for a car. The parents respond by saying, “We’ll buy you a car, but there are a few conditions: you must purchase your own insurance, pay for your gas, and help us with errands every now and then.” However, the teenager hears only “We’ll buy you a car.” This is selective attention because the teenager perceives just one part of a message.

Selective Perception **Selective perception** occurs when we see what we want to see, hear what we want to hear, and believe what we want to believe. I’m sure you recognize the

KNOWLEDGE power • Love Is Blind

With a partner or in a group, recall instances when you or someone you know was subject to perception based on selectivity. For example, in terms of selective attention, can you think of a time when you or someone else “heard” some parts of a message and ignored others? Has someone ever perceived only a part of a

message that you communicated and missed the rest of it? Have your friends ever perceived some bad qualities in a relational partner that you had not noticed (selective perception)? After you share your examples of selectivity and its influence on perception, discuss ways we can prevent selectivity from biasing our perceptions.

phrase “love is blind,” which means that even though others perceive a partner’s faults, the other person in the relationship may not see any. A person who has fallen in love perceives only the good qualities, even when others inform her or him about the partner’s bad characteristics, and thus demonstrates selective perception.

Confusing Fact with Inference

Another form of perceptual error is confusing fact with inference. Has anyone ever asked you, “Why are you so crabby today?” This is an example of inference (perception based on interpretation); perhaps you hadn’t felt crabby. Were you ever upset by someone who promised to help you with an assignment and then forgot about it? This is also an inference; maybe the person had an emergency. Have you ever thought a good friend was too busy for you because he or she didn’t respond to your email? This is an inference; suppose the friend was out of town. The point is that you can’t be *sure* that someone is “crabby,”

forgot about a promise, or was too busy for you. These are all perceptions; they are your interpretations of sense data. An **inference** is an interpretation based on a fact, such as “She wore an *ugly* red dress” or “He left for the airport *a long time ago*.” Although everyone you ask may agree that her dress was red or that 7:15 A.M. was the time when he left for the airport, not all would share the inferences that her dress was ugly or that he left a long time ago. On the other hand, a **fact** is independently verifiable by others, such as “She wore a red dress” or “He left for the airport at 7:15 A.M.” Facts are often, but not always, based on sense data, such as what we see, hear, taste, smell, and touch. Statements of fact are made after observation and don’t go beyond what is observed. There are at least five ways we can distinguish between a fact and an inference:¹⁰



It’s a fact that this student is sleeping; it’s an inference that he’s a “Slacker.”

- Facts are ascertained only after observation; inferences can be made at any time.
- Facts rest on what is observed; inferences go beyond observation and include information about causality, states of being, and other factors.
- Facts approach certainty; inferences have varying degrees of probability.

KNOWLEDGE power • Truthful Information or Hurtful Gossip

With a partner or in a group, discuss some situations when you or someone you know mistakenly confused a fact with an inference. For example, perhaps you overheard and repeated some gossip or

accused someone of a misdeed without having any factual knowledge about the incidents. After sharing your examples, discuss how you might avoid confusing facts with inferences in the future.

- Facts are limited; inferences are unlimited.
- Facts lend themselves to agreement; inferences lend themselves to disagreement.

Consider an additional example of confusion between facts and inferences. As illustrated in the photo on the previous page, have you ever seen a professor become angry when a student falls asleep in class? The professor isn't angry because of the fact or the sense data that "the student is sleeping in class." The professor is angry because of the interpretation of sense data: "This student is bored with the material, this student doesn't appreciate the time and effort needed to create a good lecture, and this student is lazy, rude, and insubordinate." The problem that results from confusing fact with inference is that we believe and act on our inferences as if they are correct, even though they may be wrong. We believe that our statements of interpretation are actually statements of fact, and we often assume that we have fact-based knowledge that we really don't possess. For instance, perhaps the student who falls asleep in class spent the previous night caring for a sick family member. Maybe the student has to work two jobs to pay college tuition bills. The reason the student falls asleep in class may have nothing to do with the professor, the course material, or the student's personality. Confusing facts with inferences can result in perceptual errors and problematic communication.

Attributional Errors

Attributions concern reasons for or causes of behavior. Psychologist **Fritz Heider**, known as the "father of attribution theory," suggested that we make interpretations about someone's personality based on his or her behavior.¹¹ **Attribution theory** explains exactly how we create explanations or attach meaning to our own or another's behavior. We tend to overemphasize inherent characteristics or personality and underemphasize situational factors when we explain the reasons for others' behavior. This is called the **fundamental attribution error**. For example, have you ever thought that a friend's lack of preparedness and study, laziness, and/or irresponsibility caused him or her to fail a test? You committed the fundamental attribution error if you ignored some situational factors that might have explained the poor grade, such as the friend's illness or need to study for a major test in another class. Besides assigning reasons for others' behavior, we also provide explanations for our own behavior. Specifically, we tend to attribute inherent characteristics or our personality to successful behavior and situational factors to our unsuccessful behavior. This is called the **self-serving bias**. Have you ever done poorly on a test and attributed your results to tricky test questions, questions that covered material that wasn't supposed to be on the test, or a professor who deliberately included difficult questions to fail as many

KNOWLEDGE power • Taking Credit or Assigning Blame

With a partner or in a group, discuss situations involving you or someone you know that illustrate the fundamental attribution error and the self-serving bias. After sharing your experiences, ask your partner or group to identify whether the situations reflect the fundamental attribution error or the self-serving bias. For example, can you remember a time

when you or someone else blamed a victim for his or her misfortunes? Have you or has someone you know ever taken credit for an achievement that was at least partially based on luck or on the work of others? Can you recall a situation when you or someone else minimized personal responsibility for a less-than-optimal outcome?

students as possible? Have you ever done well on a test and attributed your grade to preparedness and good study habits? If so, you committed the self-serving bias. Attribution errors such as the fundamental attribution error and the self-serving bias may lead us to incorrectly perceive that someone is personally responsible for her or his misfortunes, take unrealistic credit for what we do well, and minimize personal responsibility for what we do poorly.

COMPETENCE

Motivation

Knowledge

Skill

Describing Sense Data and Perception Checking to Prevent Perceptual Error

Recall that perception is inherently a subjective activity and that because of differences in selection, organization, and interpretation, we all perceive different realities. We therefore can set a personal goal to understand others' perceptions and to communicate in a manner that facilitates the understanding of our own perceptions. A variety of studies demonstrate that setting goals motivates us to complete tasks and to achieve high levels of success in occupational, academic, and personal contexts. Setting specific and realistic goals and defining strategies for their implementation have been proven to enhance task performance and skill.¹² Remembering our goals can also cause us to pause before communicating in ways that may be perceived as ineffective and/or inappropriate. We can therefore establish goals to recognize the subjectivity of perception, better understand others' perceptions, and facilitate understanding our own perceptions. For example, realistic goals that can help prevent fact-inference confusion are "I will make it a point to consider whether an observation or an opinion is communicated before I offer a response" and "I will communicate my observations of sense data and what I think they mean instead of assuming my partner's reasons for her or his behavior." One way we can achieve these goals is by using the skill of perception checking.

Perception checking suggests that we recognize that no one has a corner on the truth and that each stage in the perception process is influenced by our own biases. A **perception check** has three elements: a description of sense data, at least one interpretation (perception) of the sense data, and a request for feedback. We can improve our

How can describing sense data and perception checking improve communication competence?

SKILL practice • Communicating Descriptions Based on Sense Data

Read the following inferences and consider what sense data may prompt someone to make the inferences. With a partner or in a group, communicate the sense data that may be the basis for the inferences:

- “I guess you forgot about changing my work schedule next week.”
- (*sarcastically*) “Thanks for not inviting me to the party!”
- “Obviously what I say doesn’t matter because you showed up late.”
- “That professor doesn’t care about what life is like outside the classroom.”
- “Boy, are you sensitive!”

perception checking by learning to separate facts from inference. Because the first step of a perception check is a description of what someone says or does, we need to focus on sense data rather than on the inferences we make from sense data. For example, telling someone “I see that you look crabby” is an inference or interpretation based on sense data. We can ask ourselves what causes us to infer that a person is crabby or recall the three stages of the perception process and work backward (i.e., interpretation-organization-selection). A person’s frown and failure to respond to our pleasant “hello” are sense data that can cause us to infer that someone is crabby.

As illustrated in Table 2.1, “Perception Checking,” a perception check includes a description of what someone says or does (sense data), one or two inferences or interpretations about what the sense data mean and a request for feedback. We offer our interpretations in a tentative manner to illustrate we realize our perception(s) may be incorrect, and we can follow our interpretation(s) with a question (e.g., “Am I on the right track?” or “Is it one of these?”) or a rising inflection to indicate that we desire feedback about our interpretation(s). For example, instead of asking, “Why are you so crabby?” we can use a perception check:

- *“I haven’t seen you smile this morning (sense data). Is anything wrong?”* (The request for feedback is included in the interpretation that “something may be wrong.”)

Instead of sarcastically saying, “Thanks for forgetting to help me with my assignment,” we can use a perception check:

- *“When you didn’t show up to help me with my assignment (sense data), I thought that either you forgot or that something bad happened (two interpretations). Am I right?”* (request for feedback).

Similarly, instead of angrily remarking, “I guess you’re just too busy to email,” we can use a perception check:

- *“I sent you an email three days ago and I haven’t received an answer from you (sense data). Have you been busy or is something else going on?”* (This perception check communicates that the perception may be incorrect because it’s possible that “something else is going on.”)

SKILL practice • Perception Checking

With a partner or in a group, practice perception checking by responding to the following situations with sense data, one or two interpretations, and a request for feedback.

Situation One:

You and your relational partner usually surprise each other with small gifts on the monthly anniversary of your first date. Your partner hasn't sent you a note, presented you with a gift, or even mentioned your anniversary this month. You decide to speak with your relational partner and use a perception check.

Situation Two:

You are working on a group project for your communication class. Someone in your group seems to criticize each suggestion you make about the project. You decide to talk to this person and communicate a perception check.

Situation Three:

You are at a coffee bar and are waiting to pay for your drink. Your server appears to glance in your direction yet does not stop when you attempt to make eye contact. When you finally do manage to speak with the server, you decide to use a perception check.

Situation Four:

You ask a classmate to meet you at the library so you can study together for an upcoming test. Your classmate doesn't show up, and you decide to communicate a perception check when you see her or him in class the next day.

Situation Five:

You and a coworker usually meet every Wednesday to have lunch in the corporate cafeteria. However, the coworker has begged off your lunch meetings three times in a row. You decide to perception check to find out why your coworker has "avoided" your get-togethers.

It's important to have a realistic perception of communication guidelines and skills such as perception checking; in other words, they won't always work! One underlying assumption associated with the use of communication skills is that people are rational beings and that rational attempts at competent communication will result in responses that are effective and appropriate. Don't be surprised when this assumption proves false. Although you may engage in effective and appropriate communication that respects your partner and his or her perceptions, your partner may respond in an incompetent manner. For example, consider a perception check such as "I saw you talking to the guy next to you while I made my suggestions during the meeting. Did you disagree with what I suggested,

Table 2.1: Perception Checking

- A description of sense data (e.g., "You slammed the door when you got home")
- At least one interpretation (perception) of the sense data (e.g., "I'm thinking something bad happened at work or maybe you're mad at me")
- A request for feedback (e.g., "Am I completely off-base here?")

or were you talking about something else?” Communicating this perception check may prompt the unexpected reply, “Mind your own business!” There may be nothing we can say or do to convince our colleague that our perception check isn’t a nosy attempt at obtaining personal information. Remember that flexibility and strategy are integral to competent communication. A responsible judgment in this scenario might be to realize that nothing we can say or do will convince our partner of our true motivation. Perhaps we should learn from such an experience and maintain a hopeful vision of communication at some future time.

Contexts and Perception

The various contexts that affect us and our resultant perceptions validate and reinforce our assumptions about people, behavior, and communication. We become sure that our view of reality is objective and correct, and we tend to forget that it is our contexts that help to create our “reality.”¹³ The culture, relationship, gender, and individual contexts filter all the stimuli we select, organize, and interpret from our environment and influence how we communicate our perceptions.

Motivation

Knowledge

Skill

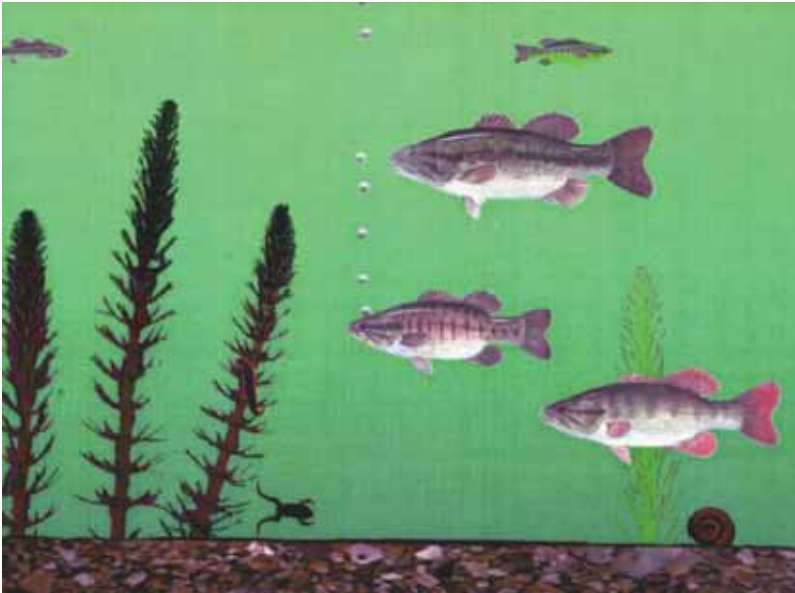
COMPETENCE

Culture Context

Members of cultural groups learn and share similar perceptions based on their shared experiences and what their culture teaches them. In general, our perceptions are similar to those of other individuals who belong to the same cultural and co-cultural groups as we do.¹⁴

How do contexts influence perception and communication?

Cultural Groups Some researchers suggest that the fundamental attribution error is a U.S. phenomenon that reflects the predominant U.S. cultural belief that the individual and her or his actions are the primary force that shapes life outcomes. People from other cultural backgrounds typically don’t make judgments about individuals when they attempt to explain causal relationships or reasons for behavior.¹⁵ For example, people in cultures such as the United States typically believe that we are responsible for our lots in life and may cite individual weakness and poor choices as the reasons for poverty or crime. However, people in cultures such as Africa and the Middle East tend to believe that life is determined by forces outside our control, such as fate or destiny, and typically do not blame an individual and her or his choices and actions for undesirable life outcomes.¹⁶ Similarly, our cultural beliefs can influence our perception of the environment and our communication about it. Recent research suggests that East Asians’ emphasis on collectivism and the belief that the group takes precedence over the individual influences them to perceive more information in the environment than Westerners who emphasize individuality. Japanese and U.S. college students viewed animated artwork in which appeared a large and colorful “focal fish” with background images of smaller fish and animals, vegetation, rocks, shells, and snails (see Figure 2.6 “Focal Fish Artwork”). When asked to recall the objects in the focal fish animation, the Japanese students recalled more background information than the U.S. students. The Japanese students also recalled more relationships among the objects in the environment than the Americans.¹⁷ Our cultural beliefs not only influence our perceptions of the world but also affect our communication behavior. Recall from Chapter 1 that in high-context cultures, much of the meaning of

Figure 2.6: “Focal Fish” Artwork

Source: © Masuda and Nisbett. Masuda, T. and Nisbett, R. E (2001). “Attending Holistically vs. Analytically: Comparing the Context Sensitivity of Japanese and Americans.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 81 (2001): 922–934.

communication is indirect and implicit and that in low-context cultures, communication is direct and assertive. People will be perceived as credible if they communicate in an outspoken manner in the United States because this low-context culture values open and forceful expression. On the other hand, people will be perceived as shallow if they communicate in a direct and assertive manner in Japan because this high-context culture values indirectness and modesty.¹⁸ The same behavior can be perceived differently by persons who belong to different cultures.

Co-Cultures Members of the same culture may perceive an identical phenomenon differently because of the influence of the co-cultures(s) to which they belong. For example, interpersonal aspects of work relationships are emphasized in the Japanese, Indian,

Middle Eastern, and Latin cultures in addition to co-cultures associated with these groups. One study of Mexican Americans and Anglo-Americans illustrated how cultural beliefs can affect a work group’s communication and success. When asked what can be done to improve success at work, the Mexican American respondents perceived that a focus on socioemotional aspects of interactions with coworkers (e.g., social harmony, graciousness, and collegiality) is more important than a focus on task-related considerations. However, the Anglo-American respondents perceived that an increased task focus would increase work group success. These findings suggest that Mexican Americans and Anglo-Americans may perceive and evaluate work groups, coworkers, and communication differently, based on the beliefs associated with their cultural groups.¹⁹

Relationship Context

Perception affects communication and behavior within the family, among friends, and among coworkers. In particular, perceptions of self-disclosure are related to marital satisfaction and attributions for behavior differ in happy and unhappy couples.

Family Attributions for positive and negative behavior affect marital communication. Specifically, if a partner does something negative in a happy marriage, the other partner typically perceives that the negative behavior is situational and fleeting. The attribution in such a case may be a bad mood, excessive stress, and a need for sleep. However, if a partner does something negative in an unhappy marriage, the other partner tends to perceive the negative behavior as stable and internal (“She or he is always rude and selfish; that’s just the way she or he is”). Similarly, if a partner does something positive in a happy marriage, the other partner typically perceives that the behavior results from something internal and stable. On the other hand, if one partner does something positive in an unhappy marriage,

it tends to be attributed to the situation rather than something internal. In general, happy couples engage in relationship-enhancing attributions, and unhappy couples engage in distress-maintaining attributions. Once such attributions are established, behaviors that confirm the attributions receive attention, and behaviors that should disconfirm the attributions tend to be ignored.²⁰

Friends In a similar way, our expectations about friends and friendship can affect our perceptions of others. For example, perhaps you believe that a friend is someone who is reliable and dependable. You may reconsider your perception of a “friend” who is late to drive you to class or completely fails to show up. On the other hand, you may reevaluate your perception of an “acquaintance” who offers to help you with a project, run an errand, or spend time and effort to satisfy your needs.

We also evaluate our friends on the basis of traits we believe they possess. While we tend to form impressions of strangers and acquaintances primarily based on roles or categories to which they belong (e.g., “student, male,” etc.), we perceive our friends in terms of personality traits.²¹ Our perceptions of friends are additionally influenced by their use of disclaimers. **Disclaimers** are used to prevent others from forming negative judgements about a speaker and to disassociate one’s identity from her or his communication and behavior. Recent research illustrates that the use of disclaimers draws more attention to undesired personality traits. Conversation partners will therefore analyze a speaker’s communication for evidence of the negative trait. In other words, if a friend says, “I’m not lazy, but . . .” and follows the disclaimer with a statement about “slacking off” and failing to finish a class assignment, we will perceive our friend as possessing the disclaimed trait even *more* because of the use of the disclaimer.²²

Coworkers Imagine three people who decide to view a film together. One person, a speech pathologist, noticing the actors’ accents and how they pronounce their words, decides overall that the film is “realistic.” The second person, an aerobics instructor, watches the actors chase the bad guys, jump from buildings, and escape from near-death situations without once catching their breath. The aerobics instructor therefore concludes that the film is “ridiculous.” The third person, a computer specialist, notices the advanced software, complicated gadgets, and modern technological devices used in the film. The computer specialist believes that the development of the futuristic technology used in the movie is extremely plausible and therefore perceives the film to be “cutting edge.” “Realistic, ridiculous, cutting-edge;” these perceptions of the same phenomenon can be attributed to the observers’ occupational roles.

Just as our occupational role can influence our perceptions, our position in an organizational hierarchy can affect our ability to engage in perspective taking. You will soon read that perspective taking allows us to see the world as others perceive it and can improve our motivation to communicate in a competent manner. Research suggests that people who hold powerful positions within an organization, such as supervisors and managers, are less likely to take their subordinates’ perspectives. People in management positions may not need to understand how their subordinates perceive the world because they have control over valuable resources and are less dependent on others to accomplish their goals. People in positions of authority may also have increased demands on their attention and it therefore may be difficult for them to engage in perspective taking with their subordinates. Persons who hold powerful positions typically don’t make conscious decisions to ignore the perspectives of others. In fact, failing to engage in perspective taking helps managers to be action-oriented, focus on goal attainment, and enables them to adapt to

a complex organizational world. When people in powerful positions do engage in perspective taking, they tend to make less accurate estimations of how others think and perceive the world than those in less powerful positions.²³

Gender Context

Many researchers who study communication and gender contend that women and men are socialized into separate gender cultures whose members share understanding about communication goals, methods to achieve these goals, and how to interpret each other. Families, schools, and experiences in social life teach us how to interact with others. For example, boys are taught that talk is used to achieve instrumental goals such as negotiating power and position on a status hierarchy, to assert identities, to solve problems, and to argue points of view. Conversation is viewed as a way to demonstrate knowledge and superiority and as a method to gain respect. Consider whether you are comfortable asking others for information and directions. If you are not, it may be because you perceive that such communication places you in a low-status position and suggests that others are more knowledgeable and powerful than you are. In general, boys and men tend to perceive communication as a means to an end. On the other hand, girls are taught that communication functions to build and maintain harmonious relationships that take priority over instrumental goals; communication is perceived to foster intimacy and to be the crux of relationships. Once again, consider whether you are comfortable asking others for information and directions. It may be that you perceive asking for help as a way to “connect” with others and to communicate cooperation and support. In general, girls and women tend to perceive communication as an end in and of itself. Of course, not all men perceive communication as a way to achieve instrumental goals, and not all women perceive communication as functioning primarily to establish and maintain relationships. However, such views of communication can influence women and men to perceive the same situation differently.²⁴



Women tend to view communication as a way to create and maintain harmonious relationships.

KNOWLEDGE ON THE CUTTING EDGE

Putting It in Context: Communication, Sex, and Perception

Study the “standard” configuration of blocks below. Can you ascertain which circle of “responses” is identical to the standard configuration that appears at the left? (The answer is written upside-down at the end of this box.)

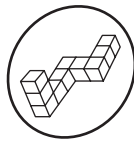
This mental rotation test of spatial ability has been used to study differences in perceptual ability between females and males. Researchers cite sex hormones such as testosterone as the most important factor that contributes to differential perceptual-cognitive abilities between females and males. Males typically perform better than females in perceptual tests in which they are required to imagine rotating or manipulating an object in some way, such as this mental rotation test. Males also tend to outperform females in tests that require navigating through a route and in tests such as guiding or intercepting projectiles. Such differences in perceptual ability are manifested as early as three years of age. For example, studies illustrate that male three- and four-year-olds are better at targeting and mentally rotating figures embedded within clock faces than are girls of the same age. On the other hand, females are better at perceptual tests that entail identifying matching items and performing certain manual tasks that require precision. Females also outperform males in terms of perceiving and recalling landmarks. Researchers conclude that females tend

to use landmarks to orient themselves in terms of location more than men do.

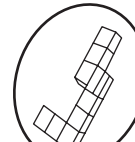
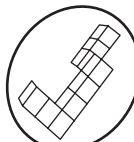
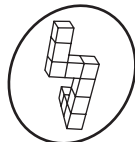
Evolutionary psychologists suggest that we must look beyond modern life to understand differences in female-male perceptual ability. Evolutionary history indicates that 50,000 or more years ago, females gathered food, tended the home, and cared for children. Males hunted and scavenged for food, created and used weapons, and defended a group from enemies and predators. Such role specialization could have put different selection pressures on females and males. In other words, the survival of our ancestral mothers was enhanced by their memory of the location of home and family, a legacy that continues today in females’ superior ability to perceive landmarks. Similarly, skills in navigating with three-dimensional space could have helped our ancestral fathers track and kill prey, a legacy that lives on in males’ superior ability in target-directed motor skills.

Exposure to male hormones during the prenatal period tends to enhance spatial-perceptual abilities. However, sex differences in perception vary from slight to large, and females and males tend to overlap enormously on many perceptual tests. On the other hand, large differences in spatial-perceptual ability between females and males do exist, specifically in males’ high ability to engage in visual-spatial targeting.²⁵

Standard



Responses



Answer to the mental rotation test: the first and fourth responses are identical to the standard configuration.

Source: The mental rotation test is reproduced with permission of authors and publisher from Vandenberg, S. G. and Kuse, A. R. “Mental Rotations, a Group Test of Three-Dimensional Spatial Visualization.” *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 47 (1978): 599–604. © Perceptual and Motor Skills, 1978.

Individual Context

The context of the self or the individual context also affects perception. Specifically, our physiology and self-concept influence our perception.

Physiology Our physiology, including our senses, health, fatigue, and hunger, influences the perception process. Has a family member ever told you to turn down the volume on your radio, CD player, or TV? Did you respond that the volume was set at just the right level, and it wasn’t too loud? Have you ever mentioned that a food was too spicy for you to eat? Did your partner respond that the food wasn’t all that spicy? Can you remember a



Perspective taking can help us perceive the world as others perceive it.

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time when you had difficulty concentrating on your professor's comments because you had skipped breakfast, were tired, or weren't feeling well? Individual physiological factors such as the senses, health, fatigue, and hunger can affect perception.

Self-Concept In addition to physiology, our self-concept affects how we perceive reality. The self-concept refers to perceptions that we hold about ourselves, a topic that is discussed in depth in Chapter 3. For example, people who perceive themselves as lovable and others as trustworthy perceive others and relationships in positive ways. In contrast, people who perceive themselves and others as unlovable and unloving may perceive relationships as harmful and potentially dangerous.²⁶ Additionally, persons with high self-esteem tend to have high opinions of others, and those with low self-esteem typically have low opinions of others.²⁷

Contexts and Improving Communication Competence

One way we can understand how contexts influence others' realities is to engage in perspective taking. **Perspective taking** occurs when we use our imagination to "walk in another's shoes" and perceive the world as others perceive it. Perspective taking can also improve our motivation to communicate competently by understanding how others perceive effective and appropriate communication. For example, suppose we conclude that our parents are overprotective and unreasonable because they won't let us attend an out-of-town party. We can put ourselves in their place and perhaps now perceive that our parents' restriction is motivated by love and concern; they worry about the late hour, alcohol consumption, and impaired driving. Although we may still be angry that our parents deny us the opportunity to attend the party, we now understand where they're coming from. Because we understand the assumptions underlying their restriction, we may be more open to future communication with our parents. The "Non Sequitur" comic also illustrates how perspective taking can help us perceive how others view the world. Danae learns that her horse Lucy perceives that pulling a buggy isn't "fun" when she puts herself in Lucy's place. In general, "the more people understand each other's point of view and inner experience, the better they can accept and adjust to each other."²⁸ Perspective taking can potentially reduce our social anxiety when we communicate with others who perceive the world differently than we do. Perspective taking can also help us perceive as personally rewarding our interactions with those who hold both similar and different perceptions.

How can engaging in perspective taking improve our communication competence?

MOTIVATION & mindwork • Walk a Mile in My Shoes

Think about a disagreement you have had with a conversation partner such as a family member, coworker, friend, or classmate. The disagreement need not be of major importance; perhaps you disagreed about a course of action, an opinion about a person or event, or a particular belief. Attempt to take the perspective of your conversation partner; that is, imagine yourself in her or his place within the culture, relationship,

gender, and/or individual contexts to temporarily perceive the disagreement from her or his perspective. When you are finished, consider whether perspective taking provided you with a better understanding of why your conversation partner's perceptions differed from your own. How can perspective taking help you deal with any future disagreements you may have with others?

OVERCOMING COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES

Stereotyping and Prejudice

Even someone who is perceived as an extremely competent communicator may find herself or himself in situations in which the interaction may be potentially dysfunctional and distressing. Interestingly, those aspects of communication that are typically perceived to be positive may also have destructive forms and applications. For example, although honesty is considered moral, it can also be destructive and embarrassing. Similarly, although empathic listening is considered to be a competent form of communication, the empathic individual may experience emotional distress when others communicate their problems. Moreover, incompetent communication can result when any behavior is used in the extreme. For example, although compliments are generally viewed as a competent form of communication, they may be perceived as attempts at ingratiation or manipulation if used too often. Reading about communication that is difficult and problematic and learning how to cope with such communication will enable us to understand how people function effectively in everyday conversation.²⁹

Stereotyping and holding prejudiced feelings about others may stem from our perceptions and our need to classify and organize the stimuli we attend to. Unfortunately, stereotyping and prejudice may result in dysfunctional, distressing, and potentially destructive consequences. Fortunately, we can learn to minimize the human tendency to engage in stereotypic and prejudicial perceptions.

Stereotyping

Fill in the blanks: "All (include a type of person) _____ are (include an adjective) _____." Can you come up with one or more groups of people and adjectives to fill in the blanks? "All _____ are _____" is an example of a stereotype. **Stereotypes** are generalizations that are often based on only a few perceived characteristics. It doesn't matter if the characteristics are accurate or inaccurate or whether they are positive or negative; stereotyping ignores individual differences and places people in particular groups. Stereotypes occur because we need to quickly organize and remember information that we might need to achieve our goals in our daily lives. But because stereotypes ignore individual differences, they contribute to perceptual inaccuracies.

Communication & Critical Thinking



“THE SAGA OF SUSAN AND JUAN” AND PERCEPTION

Susan and Juan have just finished Thanksgiving dinner at Susan’s home. Juan met Susan’s parents for the first time during the dinner. Susan and Juan appear to have different perceptions about her parents’ comments and the success of the evening overall.

You can view *The Saga of Susan and Juan* by accessing the “Small Group and Interpersonal Videos” on the “MyCommunicationLab” Web site. Answer the following questions about Susan and Juan’s perceptions:

- How do Susan and Juan’s perceptions differ regarding her parents’ reactions to Juan’s employment status?
- How might the various contexts that influence communication affect Susan and Juan’s perceptions of her father’s comments and the outcome of the evening overall?
- How might perspectivetaking have helped Susan and Juan during the Thanksgiving dinner and during their conversation afterward?
- Do you think that Susan and Juan communicated in competent manner as they attempted to resolve the situation? Explain.
- Could perception checking have helped Susan and Juan engage in competent communication? Create a perception check that may have facilitated their interaction.

SUSAN: Oh, I’m so happy with how tonight went. Oh, it was wonderful. If, you know, I was a little nervous going into it, but I think it was beautiful. It was a beautiful Thanksgiving. Wasn’t it?

JUAN: I have a headache.

SUSAN: Well, do you think you had too much wine? I mean, when I drink wine I get a headache. But I guess maybe it could have been something in the food? My mother spices the turkey so much. Juan, actually, you know what, don’t do any more. Don’t help me clean up. No, go sit down, relax, I’ll get you some aspirin. I’m sure . . .

JUAN: No, I don’t—I don’t really need aspirin. I’ just . . .

SUSAN: You know, you’re just like my dad. Go on, go sit, relax a bit, and I’ll get you . . .

JUAN: Let me—let me just . . .

SUSAN: Some aspirin. I’m sure he has an aspirin for you.

JUAN: Let me ask you one thing. I mean, what’s up with your dad?

SUSAN: What do you mean, what’s up with him?

JUAN: I just, you know, I felt like he was asking me so many questions, and—and—and . . .

SUSAN: Well, he’s interested in your life.

JUAN: Oh, yeah. That—that—that I . . .

SUSAN: Same as my mom, you know.

JUAN: Yeah. I was just don’t understanding his questions about work. I mean, does—did you talk of them about me and my job and my job situation?

SUSAN: Well, I mean, I told him that you were looking for a job, a new job, yeah.

JUAN: Yeah, but it didn’t sound like he was concerned about finding me a job, but more about why don’t I have a job anymore. I mean, did you tell him I was laid off? I mean . . .

SUSAN: No, I’m sure I didn’t tell them that you were out of a job, I just told him that you were looking for a new position.

JUAN: But why? I mean, why would . . .

SUSAN: Because it just comes up in natural conversation. That’s what you’re spending most of your time doing. I mean, I didn’t think it was something that I had to run by you, to tell them that you were looking for a new position. I mean . . .

JUAN: It would be nice. It’s the first time I meet your parents, you know? I’m—I’m here visiting, trying to meet the parents of the woman that I’m spending time with. And suddenly I get grilled by your father, just knowing that I don’t have a job. That’s not a good first impression, trust me. Not in any book.

SUSAN: You made a fine first impression on my parents. I’m sure he was just making conversation. I mean, my father is—is—is sweet. And, I mean, I know he’s opinionated, but he’s kind, and he liked you. And my mother, oh, my mother loved you. My mother—what? What about my mother?

JUAN: I don’t know. I just . . . I—I—I didn’t felt quite embraced when I was only asked about my job and my . . .

SUSAN: I mean, that’s the most important thing that’s happening to you right now, your looking for your job. When I shared that with my family, I didn’t share it with them saying that you were out of work. I just shared it that you were looking for a new job, which is great. And you’ll find one.



JUAN: I just would have appreciated more if you would have told me that that happened, that that conversation went through, because I just want to know how much do they know about us? I mean, I just—we've been together for two months, and he already knows I don't have a job? I mean . . .

SUSAN: Well, now he doesn't know that you don't have a job, he knows that you're looking for a job. There's a difference. I didn't tell them that you were out of work.

JUAN: I just don't . . .

SUSAN: I mean, I'm sorry. If I—if I had known that that would have put you in a difficult position, I wouldn't have told them. Juan, my family is important to me, but you're . . .

JUAN: I just—I just want to make sure that in order for us to have a healthy relationship, we just need to talk about what's going on with us, just you and me, before we mention anything that's going on with us to anybody else. That's all . . .

SUSAN: All right.

JUAN: . . . I'm asking.

You may be thinking, “I just read that the second step in the perception process is ‘organization’ and that we can organize on the basis of schemas. Isn't that a form of stereotyping?” The difference between “organizing” and “stereotyping” is that stereotypes are exaggerated generalizations. They may be based on partial truths, but they may also include beliefs that go beyond the facts. For example, the stereotypes “all men are pigs” or “all blondes are dumb” obviously go beyond the facts and leave no room for individual differences. Furthermore, “careful generalizations” (such as the schema example mentioned earlier in this chapter about young children having short attention spans) point out the possibility of individual differences. However, we typically don't consciously consider individual differences when we stereotype.³⁰ Unfortunately, without our realizing it, stereotyping can blind us to the unique attributes and perceptions of a person and to the diversity and variety of people within a culture.

Prejudice

Prejudice can be defined as a negative feeling toward and rejection of others who are not members of our group(s). Prejudice is based on stereotyping and is a fairly common phenomenon. Prejudiced perceptions are based on faulty and inflexible generalizations and include irrational feelings of dislike, biased perceptions, and even hatred for members of “out-groups.” We tend to hold prejudices because they may lead to social rewards such as being accepted and liked by our own “in-groups.” Our prejudice may stem from the need to feel positive about our in-group(s) and to protect our in-group(s) from real or perceived threats. For example, suppose we are not accepted into the college of our choice. It may be easier to blame affirmative action policies for the rejection rather than admit that our scholastic background, extracurricular activities, test scores, and personal essay may be deficient.

Minimizing Stereotypic and Prejudicial Perceptions

Table 2.2, “Techniques for Minimizing Stereotypic and Prejudicial Perceptions,” summarizes the ways we can avoid the harmful effects of stereotyping and prejudice. We can set a

KNOWLEDGE power • All _____ are _____?

Think about the group(s) to which you belong (e.g., cultural, ethnic, and racial groups; sexual orientation; religion, age, physical characteristics, appearance) and some characteristics that might be stereotypically assigned to your group(s). With a partner or in a group, discuss whether the stereotypes are inaccurate or accurate and whether they apply to you. Would you resent being stereotyped on the basis of the identified characteristics? When you are finished, consider whether you have

ever stereotyped others on the basis of their culture, religion, sex, age, physical characteristics, or appearance. Are your stereotypes based on what you have learned from friends and family, from minimal experiences with groups of individuals, and/or from the media? Do you believe that others would resent being stereotyped on the basis of characteristics that you have identified? Could your stereotypes of others be just as inaccurate as the stereotypes of the group(s) you are part of?

goal to minimize stereotypic and prejudicial perceptions by revising or discarding them when we discover an “exception to the rule”; we should change the rule instead of declaring an exception.³¹ We can also use clarifying terms such as “often,” “sometimes,” and “generally” when talking about groups of people. In sum, when we become consciously aware that we may be thinking about people based on a stereotype or prejudice, we will be “less likely to put others at a disadvantage based solely on a label that can be attached to them.”³² Another method to reduce the harmful effects of stereotyping and prejudiced perceptions is to engage in “equal-status contact,” which refers to individuals of different ethnicities, races, and religions who come together as equals to improve intergroup relations and communication. Research demonstrates that if we learn to communicate with individuals who are different from ourselves, we may realize that our stereotyped and/or prejudiced perceptions are no longer useful. This results when our preexisting categories are challenged continuously and in many different ways.³³ Learning about the contexts that affect others and engaging in perspective taking can also reduce the negative results of stereotyping and prejudiced perceptions. Still, changing our stereotypes and prejudiced perceptions is a lifelong process, and we shouldn’t expect change overnight.³⁴

Table 2.2: Techniques for Minimizing Stereotypic and Prejudicial Perceptions

- Revise or discard stereotypes when we discover an “exception to the rule.”
- Use clarifying terms such as “often,” “sometimes,” and “generally” when talking about groups of people.
- Engage in “equal-status contact” between individuals of different ethnicities, races, and religions.
- Learn about the contexts that affect others.
- Engage in perspective taking.
- Remember that changing our stereotypes and prejudiced perceptions takes time; we shouldn’t expect change overnight.

A CASE STUDY IN ETHICS

The Phantom Blogger

Competent communication includes an ethical dimension of well-based standards of right and wrong. Recall from Chapter 1 that a systematic approach to dealing with everyday ethical behavior involves asking a series of questions: Have I practiced any virtues today (e.g., integrity, trustworthiness, honesty, responsibility)? Have I done more good than harm today? Have I treated people with dignity and respect? Have I been fair and just today? Have I made my community stronger because of my actions? You probably now realize that the answers to these questions depend on your subjective perception of reality, that is, what you perceive to be virtuous, beneficial, and respectful. Read the following and consider whether you perceive the SMU professor to have acted in an ethical manner.

Southern Methodist University students became increasingly concerned when an anonymous blogger wrote about conversations students had with an unidentified professor. The unnamed university resembled SMU, and the characterizations of the professor's students were insulting. Phantomprof.blogspot.com included perceptions about the high incidence of eating disorders on campus and about wealthy students who attended the university to obtain a "Mrs. Degree." The blog also offered statements that students uttered in the professor's office during one-on-one conferences:

- "I'm not spoiled! I only drive the cars my dad gives me."
- "I haven't been to your class for two weeks because my doctor diagnosed me with a disease . . . acid reflux."
- "The company offered me 30K—and with what my father gives me, that's only 60K a year. Who can live on that?"

Eventually, an adjunct professor who taught writing and ethics to communication students was unmasked as the Phantom Blogger. Shortly thereafter, the professor was informed that SMU no longer needed her services; however, the reason given was that the university was attempting to rely less on part-time faculty.

Rita Kirk, SMU's chair of corporate communications and public affairs, said that the Phantom Blogger's comments and perceptions angered parents and

students and raised ethical and legal questions. Kirk suggested that students perceive private conversations with professors as confidential. Even though names on the blog had been changed, SMU officials were worried about student statements such as "The girls in my sorority house are all cokeheads" and "Is it date rape if you know the guy?"

The Phantom Blogger defended her site by saying that she never intended to embarrass anyone and that she believed that she was writing funny and odd stories about her experiences as a university instructor. However, SMU students were divided about the Phantom Blogger. One former student characterized the professor as one of her best instructors at SMU. On the other hand, the editor of the student-run newspaper perceived the instructor as a "double agent." Another student asserted that the blog exaggerated and emphasized stereotypes that didn't reflect the entire student body.

Even though the Phantom Blogger offered praise for some of her students, it was the criticism of others that caught the attention of students and administrators. The Phantom Blogger believes that some students who didn't even know her misperceived themselves as the subject of stories about exorbitant budgets for cars and clothes, athletes who could barely read, and students who routinely plagiarized. Stereotypes or not, Kirk contended that such descriptions caused problems in the classroom because students came to her and asked questions such as "Am I being judged because I have good shoes?"

The Phantom Blogger incident started discussions about whether student-professor confidentiality guidelines should be established. Kirk added that she has always been a free speech advocate but that free speech doesn't come without consequences.³⁵

Do you perceive one-on-one conferences between professors and their students as confidential? Is it unethical to post on a blog comments made during private student-instructor conferences? Is your perception of the Phantom Blogger's ethics affected by the idea that she could have influenced stereotyped perceptions of SMU students? The Phantom Blogger perceived that she was merely writing "funny and odd" stories about university life. How would you perceive the stories if you thought that you were a student described in a blog post?

Chapter Review

Motivation: How has this helped me?

- **The importance of studying perception and communication**

Perception affects communication and communication affects perception. We communicate on the basis of perceptions and tend to believe that our perceptions are true reflections of reality. Competent communicators realize that although their perceptions may be accurate, they can also see the validity of others' perceptions.

- **Engaging in perspective taking can improve our communication competence**

Engaging in perspective taking to understand how the culture, relationship, gender, and individual contexts influence us to perceive the physical environment, people, and communication can help us perceive the world as others perceive it. Perspective taking can also improve our motivation to communicate competently by understanding how other perceive effective and appropriate communications.

Knowledge: What have I learned?

- **How we characterize perception**

Perception is the process of interpreting sensory information and experiences. The relationship between perception and communication is reciprocal; that is, communication influences perception, and perception influences communication. Although people perceive the same things differently, we assume that our perceptions are true reflections of reality, and we therefore communicate on the basis of this assumption.

- **The stages involved in the perception process**

The perceptual process includes selecting stimuli from the environment, organizing the stimuli, and interpreting the stimuli. We typically select from the environment stimuli that are salient and vivid, and we organize stimuli on the basis of schemas, figure-ground, proximity, similarity, and closure. The interpretation of stimuli is influenced by both expectancy and familiarity.

- **Perceptual biases, and how they affect communication**

Selectivity, confusing fact with inference, and faulty attributions are examples of perceptual error. We may ignore parts of a message, perceive what we want to perceive misinterpret a message, and make incorrect interpretations of someone's personality and behavior when we communicate on the basis of perceptual errors.

- **How contexts influence perception and communication**

Cultural and co-cultural groups teach us beliefs and values that influence how we perceive "reality." The social context illustrates that perception is influenced by our friends, family, and occupational roles and power. The gender context illustrates that women and men tend to hold different perceptions of communication and how it functions. The individual context, which includes our physiology and self-concept, also influences our perceptions of reality.

Skill: What skills have I developed?

- **Describing sense data perception checking can improve our communication competence**

Descriptions based on sense data (i.e., avoiding fact-inference confusion) and Perception checking (describing behaviour, adding one or two interpretations of the

behaviour, and requesting feedback about the interpretation[s] helps us recognize that no one has a corner on the truth and that each stage in the perception process can be influenced by our own biases and perceptual errors.

Study Questions

1. How does perception relate to communication?
2. Describe and explain the three stages in the perception process.

3. Describe and explain the two types of stimuli that tend to be selected from the environment.
4. What are some of the ways we organize stimuli that we have selected from the environment?
5. Describe and explain two factors that influence interpretation.
6. In what ways does “selectivity” bias our perceptions?
7. What does it mean to confuse “fact” with “inference”?
8. What are some attributional errors that can bias perception?
9. What are the steps in a perception check?
10. How do the culture, relationship, gender, and individual contexts affect perception and communication?
11. Describe and explain stereotyping and prejudice and what we can do to minimize stereotypic and prejudicial perceptions.

Names to Know

Fritz Heider, p. 13 (1896–1988)—psychologist known as the “father of attribution theory;” Heider explored the nature of human relationships. He believed that people

seek explanations for the behavior of others based on their perceptions of specific situations or long-held beliefs.

Key Terms

attribution theory, 000

attributions, 000

closure, 000

disclaimers, 000

expectancy, 000

fact, 000

familiarity, 000

figure-ground organization, 000

fundamental attribution error, 000

inference, 000

interpretation, 000

organization, 000

perception, 000

perception check, 000

perspective taking, 000

prejudice, 000

proximity, 000

saliency, 000

schemas, 000

selection, 000

selective attention, 000

selective perception, 000

self-serving bias, 000

similarity, 000

stereotypes, 000

vividness, 000