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Perception and Social Experience
Learning Objectives

AFTER COMPLETING THIS CHAPTER, YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO

1. Explain the nature of perception and its relationship to reality
2. Describe the perception process in action
3. Explain how schemata, perceptual sets, unconscious bias, ethnocentrism, and stereotypes influence perception
4. Distinguish among the following perceptual barriers: fact-inference confusions, allness, indiscrimination, frozen evaluations, snap judgments, and blinding
5. Discuss how culture and gender influence perceptions of social experience
6. Discuss how media and technology influence perceptions of social experience
7. Identify strategies you can use to enhance your perceptual abilities

How accurate are the quick perceptions we form of each other? And how good are the decisions we make based on these instant perceptions? Consider speed dating, for example. In speed dating, we rely on “thin slicing” — basing our impression of another person solely on an abbreviated behavioral glimpse. During a speed-dating event, we may interact round-robin style with as many as 12 possible partners, with each individual “date” lasting on average from 3 to 8 minutes. While some believe we should be able to make judgments about how close we want to become with a potential dating partner during such a short time — even as short as 30 seconds — others are not so sure.

Interestingly, researchers report that thin slicing produces judgments that are pretty accurate. Within 30 seconds, speed-dating participants find themselves either attracted to someone or not. Speed daters acknowledge a lack of attraction or negative physical qualities as potential partner turnoffs, with women reporting three times as many negative judgments as do men. Reported turn-ons are physical attractiveness and positive behavior and demeanor, including positive perceptions of a potential date’s communication and presentation skills. Participants also are likely to report more attraction for those they perceive themselves to share attributes with, whether or not their perceived similarities are
accurate. And men report that similarity influences their attraction to a potential partner more than do women.

While we are good at forming rapid, relatively accurate perceptions of others when deciding whom to date (consider the popularity of the online dating site Tinder), are we as capable of forming quick and accurate perceptions when it comes to making other decisions, including whether a person is racially biased? What do you think?

WHAT DO YOU KNOW?

Before continuing your reading of this chapter, which of the following five statements do you believe to be true, and which do you believe to be false?

1. Differences in perception are rare.  T  F
2. We can process unlimited amounts of data each second.  T  F
3. We have a tendency to fill in perceptual gaps.  T  F
4. Dividing people into in- and out-groups improves perceptual accuracy.  T  F
5. “The sun will rise tomorrow” technically is not a statement of fact.  T  F

Read the chapter to discover if you’re right or if you’ve made any erroneous assumptions.


To advance the understanding of perception and its impact on us, Paul Allen, cofounder of the Microsoft Corporation, donated US$300 million to a project devoted to mapping the brain’s circuitry of perception and analyzing the billions of cells and synapses at work in vision, memory, and awareness. Because the brain has been described as the “gatekeeper to our interactions with the world,” scientists hope the decoding of these processes advances understanding of perception in action.

OUR PERCEPTION DEFINES OUR REALITY

Should we believe our eyes? To answer this question, researchers study the relationships among perception, reality, and performance. For example, psychologists have learned that when baseball and tennis athletes are playing well, they report the ball looks larger than when they are playing poorly. Golfers playing well likewise report that the cup looks bigger than when they are playing poorly. Perceive the ball, hole, or hoop to be larger, and you may be on your way to improving your athletic prowess—even if what you perceive is not really there.
Today it’s so easy to alter visual images that it’s become normal to be skeptical regarding which are real and representative of reality.11 The yellow line that appears across the football field on your TV screen is added digitally. The ads you see behind home plate when watching baseball on TV are computer-generated effects. Dead celebrities appear in new commercials and reprise their roles in movies. Much of the time we are unable to tell if a photo has been digitally doctored or altered, and if we can tell, we typically are unable to say definitively what’s changed.12 Were they used in court, fake photos could pose real problems. More troubling, eyewitness testimony given during trials is wrong about one-third of the time.13 Our eyes are deceivable.

**DO WE PERCEIVE THE SAME SOCIAL REALITY?**

Our lack of agreement about what we see is particularly apparent when we consider art. For example, take the work of performance artist Marina Abramovic. Would you call a person sitting still in a room “art”? The fact that answers to this question vary illustrates a key aspect of perception—different people do not always view the same situations in the same ways. For the same reason, people do not agree on the meaning of Edvard Munch’s painting *The Scream*, pictured here. Our perception is a consequence of who we are, where we are, and what we choose to see.

Culture, race, age, gender, geographic location, and life experiences combine to create perceptual gulfs between us and those whose culture, race, age, gender, geographic location, and life experiences differ from ours. Confronted with issues such as race relationships, gender equity, an economic crisis, and the political divide, many of us see different realities. It is not uncommon for our perceptions of events and people to conflict. In fact, differences in how we see, hear, taste, smell, or feel specific stimuli—that is, differences in how we perceive—occur all the time. Is it because we cannot perceive what is really there? Is it because we perceive what we want to perceive? Is it because we never experience the exact same reality as anyone else?14

As we learn more about the perception process, we prepare ourselves to handle the interpersonal problems that perceptual variations and

Can we believe the eyes of an eyewitness?

What does *The Scream* mean to you?
disagreements present. By exploring why we experience the same stimuli differently, we may better understand why we think and act differently as well. Only by getting behind the eye of the “I” can we come to understand why “where we stand depends on where we sit.”

Standpoint Theory

Our experiences as members of particular groups shape how we perceive situations, people, and ourselves, at least in part, because of our standpoint. According to standpoint theory, people in positions of power have an overriding interest in preserving their place in the social hierarchy. Therefore, they develop views of social life that are likely to be more distorted than those of people who stand to gain little, if anything, from their positions in the social hierarchy. For example, a recent survey of 1,302 adults found that 82 percent of women believe sexism currently is a problem. Men, in contrast, significantly underestimate the sexism felt by women. It is easier for the powerless to feel inequities than for the empowered. People who occupy less powerful or marginalized positions develop keener insights into how society works, if only because they need to develop these understandings to survive.

By becoming aware of diverse perspectives and interacting with people whose standpoints differ significantly from our own, we can develop better-balanced perception.

THE PERCEPTION PROCESS IN ACTION

Perception is the process we use to make sense of experience. Through perception, we give meaning to the world, making it our own:

- We actively select or choose to focus on relatively few stimuli.
- We organize or give order to the stimuli.
- We interpret sensory data or explain what we have selected and organized.
- We remember what we have observed.
- We respond.

We use our perceptual powers to decide what people are like and to give their behavior meaning. While waiting to order in a restaurant, for example, we may observe two people having lunch, size them up as businesspeople, and decide that they are meeting to close an important deal. When engaging in interpersonal perception, we also ask questions about others regarding their relationship to us, draw conclusions about their personalities, and make judgments about their intentions. According to uncertainty reduction theory, we monitor the social environment to learn more about each other and reduce our uncertainty regarding another person’s intentions. We seek such information because if we lack it, we could fail in our efforts to predict behavior and its consequences. Thus, upon meeting someone, we will choose certain cues to attend to. We might note, for example, that the person is female, older than we are, speaks with a foreign accent, is well groomed, and seems approachable. Our next step would be to organize the information we have
gathered so that we are able to store it and/or use it. This is followed by an effort to evaluate and interpret the meaning of our perceptions, which are placed in our memory for retrieval whenever we need or choose to respond.

**SELECTION**

Although our senses can process approximately 5 million bits of data every second, our brains can handle only about 500 bits per second. Because of our inability to perceive everything, we are compelled to be selective about stimuli. As a result, we focus on certain cues and ignore others. Figure 3.1 illustrates the process of perception in action.

As you read this chapter, stop and look around you. What do you see? What captures your attention? Is it the hum of the refrigerator, the feel of your chair, the color of the walls, or voices coming from another location? Consciously turn your attention to something different. What did you fail to notice initially that now makes an impression on you?

**FIGURE 3.1**
The Perception Process

Since we can attend to only a limited number of stimuli, we choose which people, situations, or events to perceive. When we interact with others, some of us focus on appearance, others on the strength of a handshake, and still others on the sound of the voice or the look in the person's eyes. We direct our attention to certain qualities and not others. Multiple factors influence what we pay attention to, what enters our awareness and what exists unobserved and unnoticed.

Usually we focus on a stimulus that is more intense than others or that reflects our motives or interest more than others. For example, we pay attention to a loud noise that disrupts our concentration. Likewise, we overhear a conversation near us in a diner if the two people are speaking about a topic that concerns us. Our interests influence our perceptions, as do our motives. When, for example, we are concerned with our financial situation, we notice more information about how to save money. When we are hungry, we become more aware of food establishments, or we notice the aroma of what someone else is eating. When we are late for an appointment, we might run right past a close friend without even realizing it.
According to psychologist Herbert Simon, “A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention.” When we direct our attention to some stimuli, while choosing to ignore others, we demonstrate **selective perception**. What are the specific cues you focus on when first meeting someone? What do you look for? What do you listen for? Three components of the perceptual process provide answers to these questions:

- **Selective exposure** is our preference for people and messages that confirm our existing beliefs, values, or attitudes, such as paying attention to messages delivered by a candidate we are supporting.
- **Selective attention** is the means by which we focus on certain cues but ignore others, such as not noticing the look of disgust on the face of someone we like.
- **Selective retention** is the practice by which we recall things that reinforce our thinking and forget things we find objectionable, such as recalling positive qualities of people we like and negative qualities of people we dislike.

In using any of these, we may bias the perceptual process of selection and end up with distorted views of people or events. For example, think about a relationship you once shared but ended. Once you made the “end-it” decision, did you start to notice more about the person that you disliked? This is known as the **horn effect**, which occurs when our perception tends toward the flaws of a person or thing. Compare this phenomenon to what happens when you decide to take a personal relationship to a more serious level. Once you have made this kind of decision, instead of perceiving what is negative about the other person, you are more likely to perceive additional things that you like. The reverse of the horn effect is known as the **halo effect**.

Selective perception helps us create a somewhat limited but more coherent and personally meaningful picture of the world—a picture that conforms to our beliefs, expectations, and convictions.

**ORGANIZATION**

Just as we use a number of strategies to select what impressions we notice, we do the same to facilitate our meaningful organization of these impressions. One strategy is to categorize a stimulus according to the **figure-ground principle**. What we choose to focus on becomes the figure, and the rest of what we experience is the ground. We are able to alternate the figure and ground of what we perceive. In a classroom, for example, if you focus on what a fellow student is doing during your professor's lecture, the student becomes the figure, while the professor recedes into the background. When you focus your attention on the professor, she is the figure, and the rest of the classroom is the ground.

A second organizing strategy is **closure**. Every time we fill in a missing perceptual piece, we employ closure. Look at the stimuli pictured in Figure 3.2. What do you see? Most see a dog and a circle. Because we seek to close gaps, we mentally fill in the incomplete figures. We want to perceive a completed world, as it were, so we supply elements that are not really part of the stimuli or messages we process. For example, the assumptions we make about others’ motivations help us make sense of our own relationships. We might conclude that a friend invited us to a party only because she needed our help in passing a course. Whether the sense we make is right or wrong, justified or unjustified, it fills in certain gaps. Just as what you choose to notice is up to you, you can choose how to organize what you perceive.
A third organizational strategy is **perceptual constancy**—the tendency we have to maintain the same perception of stimuli over time. As a consequence of perceptual constancy, we often see people not as they are, but as we have been conditioned to see them. The constancy principle helps explain why we find it difficult to alter a perception once we form it. A large number of our perceptions are learned and then reinforced over time.

Perceptual constancy is facilitated by our use of **schemata**, which are the mental templates or patterns of thought we carry with us. A **script** is a type of schemata, through which we enact the general ideas we have about people and situations and how things should play out during routine activities. We develop schemata and scripts based on both real and vicarious experiences. By reverting to schemata, we are able to classify people into manageable categories, according to their appearance, psychological traits, group memberships, and so on. Sometimes schemata, as we will discover later in this chapter, also contribute to stereotyping, which can lead us to see what is not there while ignoring what is.

**EVALUATION AND INTERPRETATION**

As we evaluate and interpret experience, the meaning we see in it is influenced by individual affectors—factors that color our responses—including culture, roles, biases, present emotional state, past experiences, and physical limitation or capabilities. If you are looking for a fight, you may perceive an insult. If you are hungry, you may smell food. If you are looking for a date, you are more likely to interpret a statement as a flirtation. The horn and halo effects come into play as affectors shape our perceptions.26

Among other variables influencing the interpretation/evaluation process are the degree of involvement we have or expect to have with a person, the knowledge we have relative to the person's intentions, our feelings about ourselves in relation to the other person, and the assumptions we make about human behavior in general and this person's behavior in particular.
MEMORY

Memory is a composite of what we read, piece together, experience, and/or want to be true. How we interpret and evaluate a stimulus determines whether or not what we experience enters our memory and can later be retrieved. The question is, how reliable are our recollections? Can we count on our perceptual abilities to supply us with accurate memories of experience?

Consider this: When Americans were surveyed and asked to recall their memories of what they observed early on September 11, 2001, 76 percent of those surveyed in New York and 73 percent of those surveyed nationwide recalled watching television broadcasts of the two planes that struck the twin towers of the World Trade Center. These, however, were false memories. In fact, there is no video of the first plane hitting the tower. What people experienced was a “flashbulb memory”—memories that feel as sharp as though they just happened, but are almost always wrong. Memories can be unreliable and often are a mingling of what did happen together with information acquired days or even years after the actual event. Despite this, we often insist that our memories are totally correct.

We do not simply reproduce what we store in our memory. Instead of objectively recalling an experience, we try to reconstruct a memory at the time of withdrawal. However, as we engage in retrospection or backward reasoning, inaccuracies may creep in. While trying to remember, we infer past occurrences based on who we are and what we now believe and know. We tend to recall information consistent with our schemata and discount or forget information that is not. On the other hand, if information dramatically contradicts any of our schemata, compelling us to think about it, this can lead us to revise the schemata we use.

Nostalgia, a special kind of memory, can be defined as a bitter-sweet longing for memories of experiences that we cannot recapture. Experiencing nostalgia inspires us to live fuller lives by reminding us of experiences and people that mattered to us in the past. Nostalgic feelings contribute to our wanting to build and nurture our present social lives.

RESPONSE

Perception is a mixture of external stimulation and a person’s internal state. We actively participate by controlling our responses to stimuli. We are both the cause of perception and its controlling force. The result is how we make sense of the world and relate to others.

Attribution theory helps us understand our response to social experience. It also speaks to the fact that we like to be able to explain why others behave as they do. We assign meaning to the others’ behavior by ascribing motives and causes for their actions. When we attribute behavior to something in the disposition of the people involved, we assume it to have an internal cause—that is, we believe it is caused by their characteristics. When we attribute it to something about the situation or environment, we identify an external cause—that is, we believe the behavior to be caused by something outside of them.
Let’s say, for example, that your date arrives to pick you up early, and you want to figure out why. An internal attribution might be that he was eager to see you or that he did not want you to have to wait for him. Each of these reasons points to an internal characteristic of your date as the cause of the behavior. External attributions might be that the traffic was much lighter than it usually is or that he was able to leave work early. Each of these point to something in the external environment as causing the behavior.

In “Childhood,” by Frances Cornford, a child’s initial perception of old age matures:

I used to think that grown-up people chose
To have stiff backs and wrinkles round their nose,
And veins like small fat snakes on either hand,
On purpose to be grand.
Till through the banisters I watched one day
My grand-aunt Etty's friend who was going away.
And how her onyx beads had come unstrung.
I saw her grope to find them as they rolled;
And then I knew that she was helplessly old,
As I was helplessly young.

How do you account for the change in the child’s perception? Why is it possible to perceive a person, situation, or event one way at one point in time and differently at another? What happened that led the child to discover that what she or he saw at one point in time did not tell the entire story?

Identify challenges that stand in the way of your accurately evaluating people, situations, or events. What steps can you take personally to ensure that what you see in a person, situation, or event is not limited to what you are looking for?


We use four principles as guides when attributing behavior to a particular cause: consensus, consistency, distinctiveness, and controllability. With consensus, we consider commonalities of behavior. For instance, we might ask a question such as “Do the friends of my friend also speak with different accents when they are at home as opposed to when they are at work?” If the answer is no, we are more apt to decide that the exhibited behavior has an external cause—perhaps a concern with their employer’s impression of them.
When focusing on consistency to make an attribution, we look at repeated behavior. For example, if our friend is chronically late, then there is high behavioral consistency, and we are more apt to attribute the behavior to internal causes.

When focusing on distinctiveness, we ask if the person displays similar behavior in different situations. If the answer is yes, we are likely to conclude the behavior has an internal cause.

Finally, when focusing on controllability, we seek to determine if the person’s behavior was under his or her control. For example, if someone is flying in to see you and is delayed because of a mechanical problem with the airplane, the delay was not under his or her control.

**Attribution Errors**

A common error in making attributions is that of assuming that the primary motivation for behavior is in the person, not in the person’s situation, a tendency known as the fundamental attribution error. When, for example, a friend disappoints us by failing to arrive on time for a party, we make a fundamental attribution error if we conclude that the friend is inconsiderate, rather than believe that external factors interfered with his or her ability to attend. The fundamental attribution error causes us to overemphasize internal factors or personality traits, and to de-emphasize or discount the role played by the situation or factors external to the person.

Things change dramatically, however, when we provide reasons for our own behavior. In offering reasons for why we behave as we do, we overemphasize external factors and downplay internal ones. This tendency, known as the self-serving bias, functions as a barrier to accurate perception, while simultaneously helping to raise our own self-esteem. We take credit for the positive and attribute the negative to factors beyond our control.

Another perceptual barrier is over-attribution—the attributing of everything an individual does to a single or a few specific characteristics. For example, we may ascribe a person’s alcohol use, preference for certain kinds of friends, and lack of interest in close relationships to the fact that she or he was sexually abused when young.

When it comes to human beings, accounting for behavior can be complex. To understand our own behavior and that of others, we need to do our best to make accurate, reasoned attributions rather than excuse or blame ourselves or other people based on habitual attribution biases.

**FRAMEWORKS OF PERCEPTION**

The mental templates and life experiences we bring to any situation strongly affect how we process experience and relate to others. Our schemata, when combined with our preconceived ideas (or sets), along with unconscious bias, ethnocentrism, and stereotyping, define our perceptions and reveal our perceptual vulnerabilities. What is more, we often enact our perceptions without any conscious awareness.

**SCHEMATA**

Four perceptual schemata, or cognitive frameworks, help us decide what others are like and whether we would like to get to know them better:

1. Physical constructs enable us to classify people according to their physical characteristics, including age, weight, and height.
2. *Interaction constructs* point us toward their social behavior cues; for example, are they friendly, arrogant, aloof?

3. *Role constructs* focus on their social position; for example, are they professors, students, administrators?

4. *Psychological constructs* lead us to classify people according to such things as their generosity, insecurity, shyness, and sense of humor.

Which of these schemata are you conscious of using when you first meet someone?

### Reflect on This

**Attribution Theory**

Research has confirmed our tendency to attribute another's behavior to internal variables while underestimating the impact of situational or environmental variables. Can you show how this works?

1. Use attribution theory and the fundamental attribution error to provide a rationale for the following lines from a speech by the Reverend Jesse Jackson:
   
   *Most poor people are not lazy. They catch the early bus. They raise other people’s children. They clean the streets. No, no, they’re not lazy.*

2. Using your understanding of the nature of perception, explain this statement:
   
   *We find causes where we look for them.*

Then, draw an example from personal experience to illustrate the statement's meaning.


### Perceptual Sets and Selectivities

The lessons that our family, friends, and culture teach us condition us to perceive stimuli in set ways, effectively helping us to construct our social reality. These organizational constructions are known as *perceptual sets*. They are established gradually over time and help us decide which...
stimuli we should attend to. For example, if we are raised in a family that values education, we are likely to perceive learning-related activities more positively than we would if we had been raised in a family that dismisses education as unimportant. Likewise, if we grow up in a home where a particular religious or ethnic group is consistently demeaned, we would be more likely to believe in that group’s inferiority. Because past lessons and experiences are part of us at every new encounter, our past influences our interpretations and evaluations of the present.

Education and culture also influence perception, helping us make sense of our environment by selecting stimuli significant to us. For example, American culture supports the open expression of opinion, whereas in Japanese culture, talk may be considered a sign of shallowness. Therefore, an American may perceive long silences to be embarrassing and uncomfortable, but a Japanese person accepts periods of silence as perfectly normal. Culture helps to condition us to communicate in distinctive ways. As you will see later in this chapter, it also influences our communication preferences and styles.

Like education and culture, our motivation or internal state also causes us to exhibit perceptual preferences. For instance, hungry people are more apt to see food when shown a series of ambiguous pictures than are individuals who are full. Similarly, our financial position can influence our perceptions of matters such as the U.S. welfare system and clothing fads.

TRY THIS

Lessons Learned

1. To better understand the concept of perceptual sets, quickly read the statements that appear in the following triangles.

   - Barefoot in the park
   - Snake in the grass
   - Busy as a beaver

2. After you have read them, examine each more carefully. Did you notice the second the or a in the statements the first time? Because we are conditioned to see words in groups or clusters and not to read individual words, we actually can fail to see what’s before our eyes. What lessons about social perception can you draw from this experience?

3. How do preconceptions or prejudgments (perceptual sets) affect your ability to relate to others? For example, how might your judging a person to be hostile affect your assessment of behavior the person displays that others might see as ambiguous?

UNCONSCIOUS BIAS, ETHNOCENTRISM, AND STEREOTYPES

Unconscious bias is a bias we are unaware that we harbor. Unknowingly, we take mental shortcuts derived from social norms and stereotypes. Ethnocentrism is the tendency to perceive right and
wrong according to the categories and values of one's own culture. When we are ethnocentric, we formulate categorizations that are familiar and comfortable to our “in-group” and apply categorizations that are unfamiliar and awkward to an “out-group.” Unconscious biases together with more overt feelings of ethnocentrism can lead us to rely on stereotypes that reduce our communication effectiveness.

**Stereotypes** are widely held but oversimplified preconceived generalizations applied to all members of a group regardless of individual variations.36 Once generalizations become rigid stereotypes, they contribute to our losing touch with the real world. Such stereotypes share two key characteristics: (1) They lead us to categorize others on the basis of easily recognized, but not necessarily significant, qualities (for example, a person's ethnicity), and (2) they lead us to ascribe an array of qualities to most or all members of a group (for example, assuming that all people of Asian descent are soft-spoken). When our generalizations harden, we are likely to disregard any differences in individuals that set them apart from the stereotyped group.

Stereotyping and **racial profiling**, a specific kind of stereotyping, have the potential to plague both interracial and intercultural communication. When we stereotype instead of responding to the communication or cues of individuals, we create expectations, assume those expectations are valid, and behave as if they have already occurred. We judge people on the basis of what we believe regarding the group in which we have placed them. We emphasize similarities and overlook differences. Stereotyping leads us to oversimplify, generalize, and grossly exaggerate our observations.

Sometimes we find ourselves in situations requiring a decision based on little information other than appearance. Unfortunately, in addition to making clothing-trait associations, we also are prone to making “feature-trait associations,” relying on physical appearance to make judgments regarding the categories people belong to and the traits they possess. While we may believe we are responding to a specific person, what we are really acting on is a stereotype. For example, certain physical features—dark skin, coarse hair, full lips, and a wide nose—signal to some people that a person is African American. This is a stereotype that produces a stereotypic judgment. And the more “Afrocentric” an individual’s features, the more he or she is ascribed traits stereotypical of African Americans.37 Colorism researchers report that more prejudice and discrimination are directed against dark-skinned African Americans than against light-skinned African Americans; the latter are more likely to have better jobs and to attain higher levels of education than those with darker skin.38 Researchers note that although we may see more African American lawyers and doctors in prime-time television offerings, those characters tend to be lighter skinned. Unconscious bias, ethnocentrism, stereotyping, and lack of diversity are connected.

Lazy perceivers rely on stereotyping as their key perceptual process. Because it discourages careful observation and encourages pigeonholing and categorization, some have observed that stereotyping brings on a malady called “hardening of the categories,” in which we insist on fitting everyone into a niche. When we do this, we fail to recognize that every person is unique in some way and in fact constitutes his or her own category.
Together, schemata, sets, unconscious bias, ethnocentrism, and stereotypes play major parts in structuring our social perceptions. By recognizing their roles and understanding their potential effects, we can prepare ourselves to question whether we are processing experience accurately and are thinking critically and reflectively about our judgments.

MORE BARRIERS TO ACCURATE PERCEPTION

In addition to barriers already discussed, a number of other barriers can interfere with our developing accurate perception by causing us to behave unreflectively—that is, acting only on the basis of our personal interests, making erroneous assumptions, and so forth. Perhaps the best way to eliminate such barriers is to learn to recognize them in our behavior.

REFLECT ON THIS

Stereotypes at Work

1. Jerry Bembry, a sports journalist and senior writer at ESPN, described the following incident that happened a long time ago:

At a basketball media day at the Naval Academy, a ranking Navy official was greeting the news media. Each journalist received a gracious hello, but when the Navy man got to me, I was asked a question.

“So,” the official said, extending his hand. “Where did you play ball at to get this job?”

His assumption: Because I’m an athletic-looking African-American male, my education must have come in combination with an athletic scholarship. It’s a question I’m often asked, although I’ve never played collegiate sports.

No matter how many times such instances happen to me, it’s unsettling.

In your opinion, could something similar happen now?

2. Facebook’s Chief Operating Officer, Sheryl Sandberg, wrote:

Studies show that job applicants with “black-sounding names” are less likely to get call-backs than those with “white-sounding names”—and applicants called Jennifer are likely to be offered a lower salary than applicants called John. And organizations which consider themselves highly meritocratic can actually show more bias.

Where else in professional or social settings have you encountered bias making itself visible? What steps do you suggest we take to increase awareness of it?

AGE AND PERSON PERCEPTION

Throughout the life span, we continually change age-group memberships. How old we are at any point in time influences our perceptions of others. When perceiving an elderly person, younger people may engage in category-based processing. In contrast, if the perceiver is also older and views the target individual as similar in age, he or she would probably rely on person-based processing, rather than on stereotypic category-based processing. Person-based processing reduces the influence of group attitudes on our perceptual judgments. Because we are likely to be more familiar with people in our own age group, we are motivated to use person-based processing when forming impressions of members of that group.

TRY THIS

Age Wise

Imagine yourself in the following situation. You work on campus in one of the chemistry labs from 6:00 p.m. until midnight. It is late in your shift, and you’re alone. You’re a bit more nervous than usual because there’s been an increase in campus crime and students have been warned to travel in pairs. You’re relieved when midnight comes, and you can close the lab and go home. As you are about to lock the door to the lab, you hear someone yell, “Wait! Don’t lock the door!” A person runs down the hall toward you and pleads with you to be let in so that work can be completed on an experiment. The person isn’t carrying any student ID but tells you that it was left in a car. You don’t recognize the individual.

Do you trust what you are being told? Do you let the person in? How would you respond if the person were your age? What if the person was significantly older than you? Would your answer differ if it was a man or a woman at the door? What if the individual was Asian? Latino? Muslim? Dressed shabbily? Wearing designer clothes? Explain your answers.

Young people have the highest level of anxiety about aging. As a result, younger people tend to place older adults into a number of different stereotypes and are likely to perceive them more negatively than they view young and middle-aged adults. Older people, in contrast, have more positive attitudes about their own aging process and perceive other older adults as exhibiting more instrumentality and autonomy. While this may be due to an in-group favoritism effect, the same effect may explain why younger people rate characteristics of people their own age more favorably than do older people.

Gender also affects attitudes toward age. Young women who attribute any negative attitudes toward older people to their own fear of aging tend to stereotype older people less than do other women. In contrast, young men who acknowledge their own fears about aging tend to stereotype older people more than do other men. This may be attributed to the fact that men and women have different mental representations for aging.
FACT-INFECTION CONFUSIONS

A fact is something we know is true on the basis of observation. Unlike opinions or inferences, facts are not disputable. An inference is a conclusion we draw, whether or not it is supported by facts. If you assume your neighbor is having an affair based solely on the fact that an unfamiliar car comes to her house every few days for an hour or so, you are making an inference.

When we mistake what we infer for something we have observed, we experience **fact-inference confusion**. Inferences have varying degrees of probability of being correct; their validity depends on the facts that underlie them. For instance, “The sun will rise tomorrow” is not technically a statement of fact; it is an inference with a very high probability of being correct. In contrast, if you see a friend talking and laughing with another person, and you conclude that the two of them are hooking up, that would be an inference with average to low probability of being correct.

Inferences can have serious consequences for our relationships. They can cause us to jump to erroneous conclusions, create embarrassing moments, and result in our responding inappropriately to others. Thus, we need to take time to evaluate whether we are relying on facts or on inferences when we perceive and interpret another’s behavior. The question is not whether we make inferences but whether we are aware of the inferences we make. If we are aware that we are inferring and not observing, and we can accurately assess the probability that our inferences are correct, we take a giant step forward in improving our perceptions.

**TRY THIS**

Can You Tell the Difference?

To test your understanding of facts and inferences, read the following brief story and the statements that follow it. If you think a statement is true, circle T; if you think it is false, circle F. For an inference that might be either true or false, circle the question mark. (Answers appear below at the bottom of this box.)

You arrive at school one day and see that a number of police cars and an ambulance are parked at the front gate of the campus. Also parked there is a car with “Dr. Smythe” on the license plate.

1. Police cars are parked at the front gate of the campus.  
2. Someone at the college has been shot.  
3. The police summoned the ambulance.  
4. The car with “Dr. Smythe” on its license plate is not parked at the front gate.  
5. The man who owns the car is Dr. Smythe.

Fiction and drama frequently revolve around fact-inference confusion. Think of a TV show, film, or novel plot that is held together by fact-inference confusion. Analyze what occurs in the story and describe what the involved characters could have done or said to avoid it.

**Answers:** 1. T; 2. ?; 3. ?; 4. F; 5. ?
There are other problems with facts. Sometimes indisputable facts are not accepted. In 2016, the *Oxford Dictionary* declared the word *post-truth* its word of the year. Relentlessly repeating false claims somehow helps them stick. Because some people are increasingly willing to dispute facts—labeling them as fake news—fact-checking has grown into its own industry with the goal of identifying lies or errors.43

**ALLNESS**

*Allness*, or thinking that we can know all there is to know about a person, place, or situation, is an attitude that some people carry with them from one relationship to another. These people exhibit very little tolerance for ambiguity, which causes an unwillingness to withhold judgment. Thinking we know it all limits our ability to perceive accurately. When we insist that our viewpoint alone is correct, we in effect are saying that any differing perceptions are incorrect. We would be wiser to open ourselves to alternative ways of perceiving. To correct a tendency toward allness, we could add an implied “et cetera” to each of our perceptions, acknowledging that there is more to be known than what we see.

**INDISCRIMINATION**

When we fail to discriminate among individuals, we may end up discriminating against an individual. When this occurs, we exhibit *indiscrimination*.44 In other words, the more we are discriminating and look for differences in all individuals, the less likely it is that we will be prejudiced against the members of any one group or treat people belonging to these groups unfairly.

Accurate perception depends on our being able to identify differences, not just recognize similarities. Too frequently, however, just the opposite happens, increasing our tendency to stereotype. If you remind yourself that no two people are absolutely alike, that every person is unique, your ability to perceive each as an individual will improve.

**FROZEN EVALUATIONS**

When we assume that situations and people stay the way they are, always, we make *frozen evaluations*. “Once a thief,” we reason, “always a thief.” Such statements fail to acknowledge that people can change. If our perception does not permit us to be flexible, but freezes our judgment instead, then we fail in perceiving the constant change that characterizes all of us.

To avoid making such fallacious perceptions, we should attach a date to every perception we acknowledge. Doing so will also help prevent us from clinging to our first impressions. Maintaining an open mind should be a goal if we are to develop more valid assessments of experience. For example, consider the following initial impression and subsequent reevaluation of perception:

*For years I had seen octopuses as terrible, evil creatures that were intent on grabbing swimmers with their tentacles and dragging them under water to be crushed and drowned. Now I perceive them as being gentle, inoffensive, intelligent creatures, who enjoy playful contacts with swimmers.*

Probably I have changed my perceptions of octopuses because of changes in the filters of past experience and mind-set. My early experiences were reading horror
stories and seeing horror movies. . . . I wanted to believe the horrible stories were true because that enhanced my enjoyment. Later experiences were seeing undersea documentaries by Cousteau. . . . My mindset now is that I respect what scientists tell me. . . . I saw a movie of one of Cousteau's divers doing a little battle dance with an octopus. . . . I saw the octopus and the diver embrace affectionately.45

Can you think of an experience in your life that led you to form an initial impression that you subsequently changed? How challenging is it for you to reevaluate a first impression?

SNAP JUDGMENTS

In the rush to give meaning to our perceptions, we can end up making snap judgments, or instant decisions. Instead of delaying our responses, we jump to conclusions, which are often incorrect or dangerous. For example, if we see a friend talking with a police officer, we may rush to judgment and conclude that the officer was giving him a ticket. Accurate perception usually takes time. Better perceivers do not rush to respond; rather, they try to synthesize as many data as possible, explore alternative evaluations of the situation, and thus increase their chances of understanding what is really going on.

BLINDERING

What we tell ourselves about what we perceive can also limit our ability to perceive accurately. In effect, the act of blinding—that is, forcing ourselves to see people and situations only in certain ways, as though we are wearing blinders—keeps us from seeing who or what is really before our eyes.

Accurate perception depends on the ability to see what is there without being limited by imaginary restrictions or boundaries. When, for example, scientists stopped searching for the cause of malaria in the air (the word malaria comes from the Italian for “bad air”) and looked for other causes, they soon traced the origin of the disease to the Anopheles mosquito and were then able to find a cure. The following exercise can help you understand the concept of blinding:

Draw four straight lines to connect all of the dots below, without lifting your pencil or pen from the page or retracing a line.

Most people have difficulty completing this exercise because they add a restriction that is not actually there—they assume the figure is a square. (See the solution at the end of this chapter.)
JUDGING OTHERS MORE HARSHLY THAN OURSELVES

Point your finger at a person near you. The gesture feels natural, doesn’t it? Now point that same finger at yourself. That doesn’t feel quite so natural, does it?

Related to the self-serving bias discussed earlier in this chapter, when perceptual disagreements arise, we tend to assume that the problem in perceiving lies with the other person, rather than with ourselves. We are quite comfortable evaluating our perceptual capabilities more charitably than we judge those of others.

When asked to compare their ability to communicate with that of their peers, parents, professors, significant others, or siblings, most people report communicating at least as well as if not better than others. Thus, whenever communication goes awry, that finger points outward—directly at another—rather than inward to the self. We shift responsibility for communication problems and perceptual distortions away from ourselves and place it with others with whom we have relationships.

DIVERSITY AND CULTURE: INTERPRETING THROUGH DIFFERENT I’S

Many persist in seeing the world not necessarily as it is but as they have been conditioned to perceive it. Culture and past experience create in us a quest for perceptual constancy—it is easier for us to keep seeing things as we have in the past than it is to revise our perceptions.

The more similar two people’s life experiences, the more similar they tend to perceive things. The more dissimilar our life experiences, the wider the gap between us with respect to how we see and make sense of things. Cultural habits or selectivities ensure that not everyone makes sense out of experience in the same way.

The members of every culture develop particular cultural perspectives or ways of looking at the world. As we have noted, most Americans perceive it to be important to express their uniqueness and independence, whereas in Asian cultures, the group and not the individual is paramount. These contrasting orientations have implications for interpersonal communication. American children are taught to separate from their parents and develop self-reliance, but cultures that value interdependence nurture cooperation, helpfulness, and loyalty instead. Thus, people from these cultures tend to have more close-knit relationships and expect more from others.

We also see these differences play out in the processing of information. The Japanese, for example, develop a wider-angle view of experience than do Americans. They do not see themselves as being at the center of the universe. When students at the University of Michigan and Kyoto University were shown animation of an underwater scene with a “focal fish” and other fish swimming among an array of undersea objects, the Japanese students made more references to the background elements, while the Americans focused on the “focal fish.” Americans believe that each person has a separate identity that needs to be reinforced. They value the ethic of competition. This orientation can cause difficulty for Americans when they need to interact with people from other cultures who do not share this value and may perceive it as threatening.

Culture teaches us a worldview, influencing assessments of reality. Whether we are judging beauty, evaluating the meaning of success, or reacting to someone’s age, culture plays a role. In
the United States, for example, we have a culture that values youth. People in Muslim, Asian, Latin American, Native American, and African cultures do not share this perception. Individuals from different cultures are simply trained to observe the same cues differently; we interpret what we perceive through a cultural lens. Some years ago, researchers used an apparatus resembling binoculars to compare the perceptual preferences of Native Americans and Mexicans. Each subject in the study was shown ten pairs of photographs; one photo in each pair was of an element of Native American culture and one was of Mexican culture. After viewing the paired images through the device, the subjects reported their observations. Results revealed that both the Native American and the Mexican subjects were more likely to report having seen scenes from their own culture.46

Race also influences perception. When it comes to views on how much progress we have made since the days of the civil rights movement, a racial divide persists. For example, when asked who will be hired, whites perceive a level playing field, whereas African Americans believe that discrimination persists. In 2015, a majority (69 percent) of African Americans, compared with 31 percent of white Americans, believed the United States needed to enact new civil right laws to reduce discrimination.47 How might such disparate perceptions affect relationships between white people and black people in the United States?

Because we have not all experienced the same life lessons, even within cultures, we may not attribute the same meanings to the same sets of conditions or behavioral cues. If we are to relate effectively to one another, we need to take steps to eliminate cultural nearsightedness.

GENDER AND PERCEPTION

Would you see things differently if you were a different gender? Gender, like culture, influences how we make sense of our experiences. Men and women are conditioned to perceive different realities, encouraged to perform in different ways, and prefer to use different communication styles. In addition to influencing how men and women perceive one another, beliefs about gender-appropriate behavior influence how we relate to each other.

From early childhood, boys and girls are rewarded for gender conforming behaviors. For example, boys are commended for displaying strength and independence, whereas girls are praised for expressing their feelings and being kind to others. We even categorize them differently—men as rational and women as emotional.48

As a result of interacting with parents, teachers, peers, and others, we internalize the lessons of what others label as appropriate gendered behavior. Such lessons instruct us in how society would like us to behave, framing our perceptions. These constructs, however, can limit our perceptions and may lead to the judging of men and women based on gender expectations rather than on observed cues.

Additionally, we continually monitor ourselves and others. We sort stimuli, selecting
some and rejecting others. The information we store in our internal database helps us build our view of reality and gives our lives a sense of stability. For example, if we develop the perspective that men are persistently more dominant than women, then we use that belief to categorize both genders and predict their actions. However, when our expectations cause us to misperceive others and their intentions, undesirable consequences can result. All too frequently, rigid categorizing creates communication problems and precipitates interpersonal fiascoes.

We do not have to accept the gender prescription our culture provides. We can reject those that limit our development, and in doing so, we can elicit changes in the behavior of others toward us. When we refuse to support a gender-based definition, we in effect participate in redefinition. For example, when one woman encourages another to be more autonomous, she may help that woman to expand her definition of behaviors appropriate for women. As women change their behavior and roles, men may perceive both women and themselves differently and may change as well. In the process, we recast the meanings of masculinity and femininity.

THE MEDIA, TECHNOLOGY, AND PERCEPTION

The media and technology also influence perceptions of social experience. For better or worse, they have the ability to radically change our views of reality. By being mindful of where our perceptions come from—aware of how both media and technology affect our processing of the self, each other, and events—we can better understand and improve our perceptual accuracy.

THE MEDIA AND PERCEPTION

Because the mass media tend to depict us in ways that reinforce cultural views of race, culture, and gender, the more time we spend with media, the more accepting we tend to become of social stereotypes, and the more likely we are to help perpetuate the unrealistic and limiting perceptions presented to us.

How do stereotypes in media influence our expectations and relationships? First, they help us identify and generalize about what we consider to be appropriate behavior. They offer us categories into which people fit, and they provide us with an array of models in action so that when similar situations arise we think we know how to deal with them. Second, they provide us with perceptual shortcuts; they cause us to forget that we communicate with individuals, not stereotypes, and they contribute to our becoming lazy perceivers—too accepting of the inaccurate or false images presented to us. We need to acknowledge our role. An exploration of the web traffic of 148 news organizations demonstrates that publications across the political spectrum report on the same news daily, but we gloss over what we prefer not to see. Quite simply, we prefer information consistent with the beliefs and views we hold and go out of our way to avoid information that’s inconsistent.

What are some of the specific lessons we learn from the media that help shape our perceptions? One lesson, which we glean from the significant underrepresentation of women and older people in leading roles in the media, is that men matter more than women (and younger males matter most). Even in news programming, stories about men outnumber stories about women.
A second media lesson involves our internalization of stereotypic portrayals of gender. Whereas media offerings present men as active, independent, powerful, and sexually virile, they portray women as the objects of males’ sexual desires, incompetent, manipulative, and passive. The media focus on women’s looks and their relationships with family members and others, while men are typically portrayed taking care of business.

A third lesson concerns the extent to which the media lead us to perceive minority groups inappropriately. Minorities have an even smaller media presence than women, for the most part being cast in supporting roles and often depicted as lazy, unlawful, dumb, or, in the case of Muslims, as terrorists. Even positive portrayals are based in stereotypes: The media tend to pigeonhole the Asian character as “the smart one” or the African American as “the athletic one.” There has been some recent improvement on this front, for instance with the success of Marvel’s film recent *Black Panther*, which features an almost entirely black cast, and the rising prominence of directors and creators of color, such as Ryan Coogler, Ava DuVernay, Taika Waititi, and Jordan Peele.

The media also influence our perception by molding our conceptions of the real world and people in ways that are inconsistent with facts. Heavy television viewers are more likely than those who view little TV to be fearful and to exaggerate the amount of violence in the world. Heavy viewers perceive the world to be meaner and a more dangerous place. Research demonstrates that by distorting our perception of risk, the media induce in us a sense of fear that is out of proportion with any actual danger. Such perceptions affect real-life judgments of what is safe, whom we should fear, and whom we are safe with. What steps can you take to counteract the false sense of reality brought to you by media?

Media lessons often cause us to misperceive reality. As they perpetuate what is unreal and untrue (even on so-called reality shows), they encourage us to reach for what is impossible. Because we use the media as reference points for what is normal, we are more likely to perceive ourselves, our relationships, and our lives as inferior by comparison. The media present the human body in perfect form, thus causing us to develop negative images of ourselves in comparison. The media’s unreal images perpetuate unrealistic perceptions of what our lives should be like and cause us to internalize and anticipate unreasonable outcomes from relationships.

TECHNOLOGY AND PERCEPTION

Like media in general, technology has the potential to alter self- and self–other perceptions. Some, for example, see digital social connections pulling us closer into new kinds of communities. Others see them as pulling us apart by separating us from more local, personal interactions. Some contend that the ease with which we can link with others who share our interests and goals only helps to confirm our way of thinking creating communities of sameness. What do you think? Online, are we reproducing real social interactions or creating something altogether different? Might we be sacrificing serendipity for a false sense of companionship?

When digitally engaged, we make judgments of others—just as we do when others are physically present. Often these judgments involve other people’s cultures or gender. According to the *social identity model of de-individuation effects* (known as SIDE), we have different identities that make themselves visible in different situations. When we interact online, the lack of nonverbal cues, especially those related to appearance and sound, cause us to hold on
more tightly to what we know about the other person’s group affiliations. This could compel us to become more judgmental, to make over-attributions (that is, single out one or two characteristics of a person), or to exaggerate the importance of the minimal information we have. We practice closure, often filling in the gaps by using stereotypes. If we assume that people share social categories with us, making them like us, we tend to find them more likable than if we believe they are different.

Technology affects us in other ways, too. Playing violent games online may increase aggressive behavior by causing heavy players to perceive annoying provocations as more hostile. The games also are apt to expand the repertoire of aggressive behaviors of users and emotionally desensitize players to aggression and violence. The potential effects of online gaming are not all negative, however. Playing action games has been found to enhance an individual’s ability to pay attention to objects and changes in the environment. Experienced gamers are 30 to 50 percent better than non-gamers at perceiving everything happening around them. It appears that gaming not only precipitates better spatial skills but also improves attention skills and facilitates the accurate understanding of a visual landscape.

What about virtual reality technology? It may well have transformative effects on perception—widening experience by its use of immersive stories that help enlarge human empathy, simulations that improve observational skills, imagined experiences that can help those affected recover from trauma, as well as opportunities for connection. On the other hand, it could also be used to spread propaganda and be employed to simulate torture that actually feels real.

Because of the vastness of the virtual landscape, interacting online may be affecting our perceptual focus by making it difficult for us to concentrate on any one thing for a sustained period of time. We frequently divide our focus, viewing multiple screens simultaneously, as we watch TV, Web surf for information related to what we are watching, or exchange messages with others about what we are viewing. Typically, we hurry from one stimulus to another, sneaking peaks at people and sites, but not paying close attention to any. Continued decreases in attention is one reason theorists give to account for the migration of younger users from Facebook to Snapchat. When interviewed, younger users complain that interacting on Facebook consumes too much time, while Snapchat is less demanding and allows their minds to move more quickly.

The Internet also affects how we remember. We pay more attention to and are more likely to remember information if we think we will not be able to find it later. For many, the Internet is becoming a primary system for information storage. We have found a new means of outsourcing memory.
GAINING COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE: ENHANCING YOUR PERCEPTUAL SKILLS

Your ability to relate to others is affected by how capable a perceiver you are. Understanding your role in perception, including how and why you perceive people and events as you do, is essential if you are to experience new and healthy relationships, minimize misunderstandings, and broaden your horizons. Take the following steps to improve your perceptual abilities.

RECOGNIZE THE PART YOU PLAY

Because we are all unique, we each experience a reality that is somewhat different from that experienced by others. Until we acknowledge our part in perceiving and making sense of reality, we are apt to experience numerous relational and communication problems. Just because others may not see the world the way we do does not mean their views are wrong. Variations in physiological, psychological, and cultural factors lead us to adopt different perspectives and attribute different meanings to experience. Perception is not something that happens to us. It is something we do.

You may like a person who seems similar to you and dislike someone who seems different. Your friend's jokes may strike you as funny when you are in a good mood and tasteless when you are preoccupied with a personal problem. By taking stock of yourself, including your emotional state and biases, you accept responsibility for what you bring to the perception process.

BE A MORE PATIENT PERCEIVER

Because we tend to live at an accelerated pace in U.S. society, we expect things to happen quickly. Patient perceivers, however, do not jump to conclusions, cling to first impressions, or believe they know it all. Instead, they open their minds to possibilities, look beyond the obvious, and genuinely attempt to check the accuracy of their interpretations.

TRY THIS

Facebook in Focus

Peruse the walls of the Facebook pages of various friends. Then answer these questions:

1. To what extent does each wall contain clues that help others form an initial impression of each person?
2. If you know the person well, how does his or her wall reinforce or contradict your face-to-face perception?
Patient perceivers question their perceptual acuity. Ask yourself if there is any chance you could be wrong. By acknowledging that you might have made an error in judgment or misevaluated observed behavior, you motivate yourself to seek further information. If you make the effort either to verify your judgment or to prove yourself wrong, you increase your chances of forming more accurate impressions of others and of situations in which you find yourself.

**BECOME A PERCEPTION CHECKER**

To avoid treating interpretations as if they were indisputable facts, develop the skill of perception checking: Observe the behavior of another, describe and interpret what his or her behavior means to you, and put your interpretation into words in the effort to determine if your perception is correct.

For example, imagine your friend Leila walks into the classroom and flings her books down on the desk next to yours. As she takes her seat, you notice that her eyes are narrowed, and her face is in a scowl. You might be inclined to ask, “Why are you angry at me?” But a perception checker would quietly say to her, “Leila, I get the feeling that you’re angry about something. Am I right? Can I do anything to help?”

By making an initial statement followed by questions that assume nothing you aim to explore Leila’s thoughts and feelings, not to prove that your interpretation of what you have observed is right. Leila might not even be angry. If you ask, she might state, “I’m not angry. I’m upset with myself for not getting the paper done on time.” By seeking verification of the impression you received from Leila’s nonverbal behavior and giving her the opportunity to share her thoughts and feelings, you take some of the guesswork out of perception.

Keep in mind that perception checking works best with people from low-context cultures. Typically, it involves straight talk and direct statements of observation. People from high-context cultures might become embarrassed if they are asked so directly about their feelings and the meanings of their actions.

**WIDEN YOUR FOCUS**

Keep the big picture in mind as perceptual clues surface. Avoid jumping to a conclusion based on a single piece of evidence. By cautiously assessing what is happening, you refrain from over-attributing meaning to any single behavior or circumstance. We tend to pay extra attention to what we see or hear first (known as the primacy effect) or last (the recency effect), but you should search for more evidence so that you do not draw inaccurate conclusions based on the partial picture to which you have access.

**SEE THROUGH THE EYES OF ANOTHER**

Try to exhibit empathy—that is, experience the world through the eyes of another person by recreating that person’s perspective. This means you need to socially decenter, or take the focus off yourself, and place it on another by considering that person’s thoughts and feelings first. Doing this allows you insight into the other person’s state of mind and lets you see things from his or her perspective.

When you empathize, you also engage in perspective taking—you develop a personal sense of what the person is going through. You imagine what it would be like to be in the person’s position. Through emotional contagion, you experience the same feelings as the person has. Can you imagine, for example, how your significant other feels when you forget his or her birthday? While it is easier to feel empathy for those with whom we identify, it is equally important to be able to put yourself into the shoes of a person with whom you may have little in common. The third ingredient in empathizing is genuine concern.
for the other person’s well-being. Do you find it easy to empathize with others? Some researchers fear that the ability to empathize is on the decline due to social media’s encouragement of self-promotion as opposed to other-understanding. On the other hand, others believe that by engaging in virtual reality simulations and having the opportunity to inhabit the body of someone completely different from ourselves, we can develop new attitudes and understandings. Which position is closer to your own?

BUILD PERCEPTUAL BRIDGES, NOT WALLS

Although perceptual disagreements can drive us apart, if we exhibit a willingness to experience the world from another person’s perspective, we can enhance communication. Rather than argue over whose point of view or behavior is right, it is more productive to understand the factors that create differences in our interpretations and then work to adapt to and bridge those differences.

CONNECT THE CASE

The Case of Dax’s Trial

Dax had not been happy when he received the notice to report to the courthouse for jury duty. He was even less happy when he found that he had no valid reason to be excused from the obligation.

When he reported to the courthouse, things went just fine. He was not called during the morning session, so he was able to finish reading a novel. Then it all began.

Dax was called for the jury selection phase of a murder trial. Before he knew it, he was on the jury, and the trial had started.

Two days into the trial, Dax began to wonder about the entire process. Twelve different witnesses had been called to testify about what had happened on the street corner where the murder had occurred. All twelve described different versions of the event.

Was this possible? How could so many people not agree on what had happened? Dax wished he could have a chance to question the witnesses himself. Was each of them certain of his or her perception? To what degree did the relationship each did or did not share with the defendant or the victim influence the reports? How could the jury decide?

Answer these questions:

1. Do you think several people observing one event will perceive it the same way? Why or why not?
2. What is there about the perception process that enables us to observe different realities?
3. How do you explain the differences in the testimony Dax heard at the trial? Do you think any or all of the 12 witnesses who testified lied?
Chapter 3: Perception and Social Experience

REVIEW THIS

CHAPTER SUMMARY

1. Explain the nature of perception and its relationship to reality.
   We do not all perceive reality similarly. Standpoint theory suggests that people in positions of power have an overriding interest in preserving their place in the social hierarchy. Thus, our view of reality is a consequence of the person we are, where we are, and what we choose to see. Perception is the personally based process we use to make sense of experience. When we perceive, we select, organize, and interpret sensory data in an effort to make sense of and give meaning to our world.

2. Describe the perception process in action.
   Perception is a multi-stage process involving selection, organization, interpretation, remembering, and responding. We rely on a number of strategies to facilitate perceiving. The figure-ground principle addresses our tendency to focus on a particular person or item, while the surrounding context becomes background. Closure is the process we use to fill in missing perceptual pieces or gaps. Perceptual constancy is our tendency to maintain the way we see the world.

3. Explain how schemata, perceptual sets, unconscious bias, ethnocentrism, and stereotypes influence perception.
   Schemata are cognitive frameworks, the mental templates or knowledge structures we carry with us. Perceptual sets are organizational constructions that influence our readiness to perceive in predetermined ways; each set or selectivity helps us decide what stimulus to focus on and how to construct our social reality. Unconscious bias is a prejudice we possess of which we are unaware. Ethnocentrism is the tendency to perceive right or wrong according to the values of one’s own culture. A stereotype is a rigid perception that is applied to an individual because of their membership in a particular group, regardless of individual variations.

4. Distinguish among the following perceptual barriers: fact-inference confusions, allness, indiscrimination, frozen evaluations, snap judgments, and blinding.
   Each of these makes it difficult for us to perceive people and events accurately. Fact-inference confusions cause us to confuse observations and assumptions. Allness leads us to think we know it all. Indiscrimination causes us to emphasize similarities and neglect differences. When we make frozen evaluations, we ignore change. Snap judgments lead us to jump to conclusions. Blinding causes us to add restrictions where none actually exist.

5. Discuss how culture and gender influence perceptions of social experience.
   Culture teaches us acceptable ways of looking at our world, as well as acceptable ways of behaving. Gender conditions men and women to perceive different
realities, exhibit different behaviors, and use different communication styles.

6. Discuss how media and technology influence perceptions of social experience.

The media influence our self-perception, as well as our perception of each other and our social experiences. Because the media tend to reinforce cultural views of gender and ethnicity, they contribute to our becoming more accepting of social stereotypes. Technology is altering the way we perceive social connection, changing our view of what is real, and enhancing our perceptual acuity.

7. Identify strategies you can use to enhance your perceptual abilities.

To improve your chances of developing more accurate perceptions, you need to recognize the part you play in perception, develop patience, become a perception checker, see through others’ eyes, work to bridge perceptual differences, and carefully consider how technological innovations are affecting your perceptions.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

1. Can you provide evidence of your own personal basis of perception? For example, what aspects of your environment are you attending to right now? (See pages 62–63.)

2. Can you offer examples showing how stereotypes have affected your judgments? What do you see as the ethical implications of stereotyping? (See pages 69–72.)

3. Can you describe instances when one or more barriers to perception impeded your response to another person or situation? (See pages 72–78.)

4. Can you offer examples of how attitudes toward masculinity and femininity influence perception? How about media portrayals of race and ethnicity? (See pages 79–83.)

5. Can you describe steps you can take to develop your perceptual ability? In your opinion, is developing accurate perception a moral issue? (See pages 83–85.)

KEY TERMS

Allness 81
Attribution theory 72
Blindering 82
Category-based processing 79
Closure 70
Empathy 89
Ethnocentrism 76
Fact-inference confusion 80
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<td>Self-serving bias</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social identity model of de-individuation effects</td>
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<td>Standpoint theory</td>
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<td>Stereotypes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uncertainty reduction theory</td>
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<td>Unconscious bias</td>
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</table>

Solution to Blinding Exercise on Page 82

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