Dr. Menger, a young assistant professor, was excited about teaching her first graduate class. She had gone to great lengths to plan her first lecture so that it would be well-organized and interesting to her new graduate students.

As Dr. Menger began her lecture, she noticed that at first the students seemed a bit subdued, but as the class progressed, most of them began to perk up and become more animated. One student, Shuntaro, however, seemed to be less than enthused. When Shuntaro would get a confused look on his face, he would scribble down comments and shove his notebook in front of the person next to him. This began to irritate Dr. Menger, who found herself becoming more animated in an effort to get her students’ attention and, she hoped, grab Shuntaro’s interest as well. After a while, however, she realized that Shuntaro wasn’t going to get involved in class, so she began to ignore him.

After class, Dr. Menger decided she was going to need to speak to Shuntaro. As the students left for the evening, Professor Menger glared at Shuntaro and shook her head. Shuntaro avoided eye contact and quickly scurried out of the class. When Dr. Menger returned to her office, she sent...
Shuntaro an email indicating her displeasure with his classroom behavior, and asking him to stop by during her office hours the next day.

When Shuntaro knocked on her door the next day, Dr. Menger opened it ready to lecture him on the expected behavior of graduate students. She told Shuntaro that what she observed was rude, insolent behavior that would not be tolerated. The look on Shuntaro’s face was complete shock. He wondered what he had done to cause Dr. Menger to confront him in this manner. When his classroom behavior was described, Shuntaro suddenly realized what was going on. He quickly apologized and told Dr. Menger that he was very interested in her class and enjoyed the lecture and the activity. “I was trying to understand your interpretation of the assigned reading, so I was writing down questions for Brittany and Charles to help me follow along better.”

This caught Dr. Menger completely off guard, so she asked Shuntaro why he didn’t simply ask her for help. “This is my first class with you, and I didn’t want you to think I wasn’t trying or that I wasn’t smart enough to be in your class. I work very hard to fit in, so I don’t typically speak up. Getting others to help me understand some of the more difficult class concepts has been really great. I didn’t know I was upsetting you last night. I really had no idea.”

What perceptions did Dr. Menger have of Shuntaro after her class? Do you think her assessment, based on Shuntaro’s behavior, was accurate? While reading this chapter, consider how you might answer the following questions to help both Shuntaro and Dr. Menger better understand the situation.

1. Based upon Dr. Menger’s comments to Shuntaro in her email message, what do you believe Dr. Menger’s perceptions are?
2. How might Shuntaro’s communication behaviors have created these perceptions?
3. What social or cultural influences might have contributed to Dr. Menger’s perception of Shuntaro’s behavior in her class?

We will revisit Dr. Menger and Shuntaro’s story at the end of this chapter. As you read, see how many concepts you might be able to apply to their situation.
We develop perceptions of others in our initial encounters with them, and these perceptions are invaluable in understanding our communication with others. What many people fail to recognize is that our perceptions are not always accurate. For example, recall a time when you might have decided that people you met were rude and you instantly disliked them. Did you stop and ask yourself exactly what they did that made you feel this way? Did they do or say something that led you to believe they were unfriendly? If you could not pinpoint the cause, perhaps you made a mistake in judging them. It is also possible that the explanation lies within your own self-perceptions. In other words, thoughts about yourself might have been projected onto the other people. For example, people who are unhappy in their personal relationships might hate seeing others getting along and being romantic. They might develop negative perceptions of happy couples that are really about their own unhappy relationships. It is essential to discover the basis of these initial impressions to avoid jeopardizing future relationships.

A primary goal of this chapter is to help you understand the perceptual process, the stages within the process, and the factors that influence it. Everyone moves through steps of the perception process, but not everyone recognizes his or her own inaccuracies along the way. This perspective is largely based on Glasser’s Choice Theory, which asserts that we all have a personal framework for a “Quality World” and we constantly compare our real-world experiences to what we view as quality. Because of this, we might not be able to alter the behaviors of others, but we can change the way we perceive them.

UNDERSTANDING THE PERCEPTION PROCESS

Because humans are social creatures they constantly encounter others who are new and unfamiliar. To determine how to interact with them, we form rapid impressions. We look people over and make snap judgments about their communication behaviors: appearance, posture, facial expressions, vocal characteristics, and so on. We relate what we see to our previous experiences, and this sometimes clouds our perceptions. For example, let’s say you meet a man who is over seven feet tall and you instantly feel uncomfortable around him. As he introduces himself, you recall your third grade teacher, Mr. Davis, who used to stand tall over students and chide at their mistakes as they read aloud in class. As this tall man begins to talk about himself, you remain unresponsive and avoid eye contact. You have no interest in getting to know him because you feel that he is cocky and a bit of a know-it-all. In a split second, you have developed a negative perception of this man. Is your evaluation fair? Is it accurate? Whether you know it or not, your first impressions will guide your future behavior, and until you become more aware of them, your positive or negative biases will prevail. Scholars refer to the self-knowing that fosters competent perceptions as a component of social intelligence or the “ability to act wisely in human relationships.” So if you do not have a clear awareness of yourself and how you communicate, it will be difficult to determine whether your perceptions and subsequent behaviors are accurate and appropriate.
Defining Perception

Perception may be defined as the process of observing things around us and making sense of them through our own frame of reference. Interpersonal perceptions develop when we observe and interpret the communication (verbal and nonverbal) of the people we encounter. Ultimately, we develop perceptions of another person, and these perceptions are either positive or negative. When we make these perceptions, they guide the way we send and receive messages. Research on speed dating, for example, suggests that people accurately evaluate the value of a future date with someone in less than 30 seconds. The concept of “thin-slicing” suggests that speed daters can quickly evaluate others, develop perceptions, and make swift decisions based on attractiveness, similarities, and nonverbal cues. To help you understand your own perceptions of others, let’s now break down the perceptual process into its various stages (see Figure 3.1).
IDENTIFYING PERCEPTION STAGES

Although we can identify and separately depict the stages of the perceptual process, in reality, the stages occur rapidly and are so intertwined that most of us fail to recognize that we are experiencing each of them. Imagine yourself sitting in the airport waiting to board a plane. There are hundreds of people moving all around you. You don’t stop and consciously think, “I believe I’ll watch that man in the corner feeding his baby. He must be a great father.” Your eyes are drawn to him, but more than likely you have no idea why you have decided to observe this scene when there are so many others to choose from. In a split second, you have experienced the three perceptual stages: selecting, organizing, and interpreting.

Selecting. The first stage, when you opt to focus on a specific stimulus in the environment and consequently tune out others, is known as selecting. You might not know exactly why you make this choice, but something draws your attention. You do this constantly throughout the day; you’ve probably even had this experience while you have been reading this chapter. Stop for a moment, and think about the past few minutes. Has there been a noise, a smell, or something that has drawn your attention away from the pages in front of you? If you recall the past five minutes, you will probably discover that something loud, sudden, interesting, or even annoying interrupted your reading. Though there are many reasons to select certain stimuli, the following three are quite common:

- The stimulus is unique and stands out. For example, most people stop and stare at individuals who are vastly different in their dress or behavior. This happens because these people draw our attention away from what we are doing. Neuroscientists explain that our brains are actually wired to alert us to anything unusual.7
- The stimulus appeals to your level of interest or need. If something or someone resonates with you and your interests or needs, you will most likely focus on it. Think about waking up in the morning, wanting to go back to sleep, and suddenly smelling freshly brewed coffee. “This is just what I need to get my day started!” you think. While the coffee might fulfill an early morning need, a newspaper headline or television bulletin running across the bottom of the screen may capture your interest.
- You select on the basis of your expectations. When you are confronted with new and unexpected information, it will capture your attention and elicit either a positive or a negative response.8 For example, if you expect your instructor to come to class dressed professionally but he or she arrives wearing shorts and a tank top, your expectations have probably been violated.

Organizing. The second stage of the perceptual process, in which we find ways to make sense of the stimuli we have selected, is known as organizing. We are bombarded with stimuli; consequently, our world can become quite chaotic. To simplify and eliminate this chaos, also known as entropy, we begin to organize the information or stimuli we have selected.9 To do this, we draw
upon familiar experiences that exist in our minds—our **cognitive schemata**. These are our mental frameworks, or mental file folders, which are filled with our past knowledge and experiences (see Figure 3.2). For example, you might be surprised to see a man wearing an apron and cooking dinner because your experiences since you were young have involved women performing this task. However, your cognitive file folder for this activity has expanded, and you see men on television with their own cooking shows. What this means is that you now have a schema for dealing with this information. Our cognitive schemata allow us to classify and interpret information by associating the unfamiliar with the familiar.

Four schemata are primarily used to organize the information you select: physical, role, interaction, and psychological.¹⁰

- **Physical schemata** help you to classify people you meet on the basis of their physical appearance. Your classification of them is related to your previous experiences. We may recognize beauty, for example, based on what we see on television and in magazines. We recognize when someone is too heavy, wears too much makeup, or dresses inappropriately to meet our socially determined expectations. You have a mental file folder of information to help you organize physical attributes.

- **Role schemata** help you to organize the communication behaviors of individuals in specific roles or social positions. You have mental notes about the verbal and nonverbal communication of doctors, teachers, husbands, wives, grandparents, and so on. If you observe a woman your grandmother’s age exhibiting abnormal behavior for her age, you might have negative perceptions of her based upon your existing role schemata.

- **Your interaction schemata** allow you to organize people according to their social behaviors. As a student, for example, you most likely have a schema for students’ classroom interactions. Context plays a big role in perceptions of interactions because you interpret them according to location, time of day, and so on.
• **Psychological schemata** reflect your personal dispositions and mental states. You can typically look at someone and tell whether the person is nervous, worried, elated, or the like. Though some people are better at hiding their internal states than others, you have a basis for comparison and generally know how people are feeling at a given moment in time.

Though we discuss these four schemata separately, they rarely work in isolation. You draw upon them collectively at times to paint a more complete picture. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, a television program called *Leave It to Beaver* was very popular. In this program about a middle-class family, the mother, June Cleaver, was portrayed as being a typical housewife at the time. Every day, she wore a dress and pearls. She cooked, cleaned, made her kids’ lunches, and, on top of it all, seemed very pleased to do this every day. Mothers at this time imported these elements for their physical and psychological schemata. Though women’s cognitive schemata have likely expanded and most women no longer emulate June Cleaver, mothers and women in general who were exposed to the program might still call upon these schemata to organize their perceptions and assign meaning to them.

The audience was outraged when Kanye West grabbed the microphone away from Taylor Swift during her acceptance speech at the MTV Video Music Awards.

Interpreting. The third stage, in which we evaluate information and determine what it means and how we feel about it, is known as **interpreting**. At the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards show, rapper Kanye West grabbed the microphone from 17-year-old Taylor Swift as she was accepting the award for best female video. He shouted that the video of Beyoncé Knowles (another female singer) was one of the best videos of all time. The people in the audience sat in stunned silence for a moment but eventually began to boo West. How might you interpret his behavior? In regard to role and interaction schemata, is this normal for a music artist attending an awards show? For people who regularly watch such shows, this sort of behavior is unusual for most artists but not new for Kanye West. He had engaged in similar rude outbursts in the past, as in 2007, when he announced that he would never return to MTV after Britney Spears was selected over him to open the awards show, and in 2006, when he stormed the stage at the MTV Europe Music Awards after losing for Best Video. The press interpreted Kanye West’s behavior and described him as an egotistical bully.

Though many factors may aid you in the interpretive process, three are quite common: your previous experiences and expectations, how well you know a person, and your degree of intimacy.
• Your previous expectations and experiences allow you to relate new information to that with which you are already familiar. For example, if you have seen Kanye West misbehave on other television shows, you might determine that he is again behaving inappropriately. In fact, you probably expect him to behave this way, and for him to act otherwise might seem abnormal.

• If you know someone well and are familiar with how that person communicates, you will interpret his or her behavior correctly. Typical interpretations are that the behavior is positive or negative, normal or abnormal, appropriate or inappropriate, and so on.

• The degree of relational intimacy also enhances the interpretive process. If someone you have started dating only recently shows up late to pick you up, you might be skeptical of the reason the person provides for the delay. But if your relationship is more intimate (e.g., you have been dating for two years), you might be more understanding and forgiving. The closer you are to people, the more likely you are to interpret their behaviors correctly.

When you interpret another person’s behavior as odd or unusual, it is common to seek the cause of his or her behavior. The perception process typically involves making attributions in order to explain unexpected behaviors and make sense of things.

**EXPLAINING PERCEPTUAL ATTRIBUTIONS**

When we attempt to determine the cause for someone else’s behavior, we are making attributions about them. This is especially true when someone communicates in a negative or unexpected manner that catches us by surprise. Attributions serve to create a more complete picture of the situation and provide a sense of comfort because we feel we know what is going on, even if our conclusions are incorrect. The attributions we make about others are based upon three critical factors: locus, stability, and controllability. Each of these factors helps us to perceive someone’s communication as positive or negative.

**Locus of Attributions.** Researchers define locus as either the internal or external location assigned to the cause. In other words, you determine whether a person’s actions are within that person’s control and self-directed (internal locus) or a product of fate, destiny, or even good or bad luck (external locus). These sources of someone’s behavior help us to determine the reasons behind the perceptions we hold. For example, if Monica has a date with Richard and he is late, Monica might ask herself, “Is he late because of the storm, or is it because he doesn’t really want to go see the movie I suggested?” One reason—the weather—may be external, while the other—that he doesn’t want to see the movie and decided that if he arrives late, they won’t get there in time to see it—is internal. Locus can make a huge difference in our positive and negative perceptions and eventually can affect our relationships.

**Causal Stability of Attributions.** Another factor that helps to determine the cause behind another person’s behavior is known as causal stability. This element involves the duration of the specific behavior. In the previous situation
with Monica and Richard, if he was late because he consistently loses track of time at work rather than as the result of an inconsistent, unpredictable event such as a ten-car-pile-up on the interstate, she is less likely to be understanding. In this example, you can see that the stability factor can be assigned an internal or external locus, and together they create and exacerbate the positive or negative perceptions. In the classroom, instructors search to explain students’ poor performance. For example, if Janis earns a D and an F on her first two exams, a stable explanation might be that she is unintelligent. However, if she informs her instructor that she did not study, the failing grade will likely be attributed to an unstable cause; she chose not to put forth effort to study. Researchers use the term learned helplessness to explain a person’s inclination to use stable causes as a way to explain why bad things happen to them.

**Controllability of Attributions.** When people attempt to determine whether a person’s behavior is within his or her control, they are making judgments based upon the determined cause. A good example of this is a study investigating perceptions people have of obese individuals. If Daniel’s obesity is attributed to factors outside of his control (e.g., a thyroid condition) people are more sympathetic toward his condition—he can’t help the way he is. However, if the cause for his weight is determined to be something within his control (e.g., eating fast-food every day), feelings of anger and a desire to distance oneself from him typically occurs. Your assessment of whether you believe that a person’s behavior is controllable will decide your attitude.

What you should notice with these three elements of the attribution process is the close link between each of them. In other words, they are rarely used in isolation. Your attributions—and ultimately your perceptions—are clearer when you consider all three. For example, if Jonas is failing sophomore English and his instructor attempts to determine the reason for this, the combined examination of locus, stability, and control may offer an explanation. So if the instructor decides that lazy behavior is the best explanation for Jonas’s failure, an internal, stable, and controllable attribution is utilized (and the instructor is probably quite disgusted and irritated with Jonas). Of course, this does not mean that the teacher is correct. Fundamental attribution errors do occur, and we will discuss them later in the chapter.

**CHECKING YOUR UNDERSTANDING**

**THE PERCEPTUAL PROCESS**

Before reading further, take a few minutes to assess your learning by writing your answers to the following items:

1. What is the definition of perception, and why is important for successful interpersonal communication?
2. What are the three stages of the perceptual process? Briefly describe how they are sequential and work together.
3. What are attributions and the three primary elements in the attribution process? Be able to describe how attributions may be positive or negative depending upon the specific combination of the three elements.
INFLUENCES ON YOUR PERCEPTION OF OTHERS

Another way to understand the factors that influence the perceptual process is to think of these factors as eyeglass lenses that transform the way we view the world. This is the role our culture, our social groups, and our own unique characteristics play in the development of our perceptions. They provide a lens through which we see and understand the behavior of those around us. Think about it this way: Eyeglass lenses can cause you to see things more clearly; blur your vision; or enlarge, reduce, or alter your overall focus. Thus, how you see the world around you and the way in which you perceive others and their communication depend on multiple factors. As you read about each of these influential elements, imagine the role they play in your own life and in the perceptions you develop every day.

PERSONALITY AND SELF

Our personality, our view of ourselves, and how we feel about ourselves all play a significant role in influencing perceptions. Though our perceptions are not always right, these “lenses” influence the way in which we see and interpret the communication of people around us. For example, let’s say that you are an extremely organized person and you routinely fill in your day planner down to the minute. On the first day of class, you are assigned to work on a project with a group of four people. As you and the rest of your group plan your first few meetings together, you notice that one member is writing the dates and times on the palm of her hand. You are shocked and wonder how you will ever be able to work with someone who is so unorganized and obviously a poor student. Your vision of yourself as a conscientious, organized person creates these negative perceptions of this group member. Each of us has elements of our personality, as well as social and cultural influences, that form our perceptual lens.

Because group work is very common today, recognizing how your own communication traits affect your views of others is important to your success within groups.
Personality Traits. The perception process is influenced by personality traits because they predispose us to engage in certain communication behaviors, emotions, and moods that influence our impressions of the people around us. Numerous studies over the past twenty years support the idea that we selectively attend to, view, and understand others in accordance with our own personality traits. This is especially true when it comes to emotional traits such as anger, anxiety, or happiness. In other words, if you have an inherently positive and upbeat personality, you will perceive these traits in others and assume that they are like you. Recall from Chapter 1 the Big Five personality traits: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Recently, scholars have conducted research that looks at the impact of these Big Five traits on our perceptions of others in initial interactions. They found that when we first meet people, our perceptions of them are driven by the characteristics of our own personalities.

- **People who are high in extraversion are sociable, talkative, assertive, excited, and overall very emotionally expressive.** Extraverts elicit the greatest consensus between self and perceptions of others; therefore, they more readily notice their own traits in others. When they meet others who are emotionally expressive, they quickly perceive these others to be similar in the amount of personal self-disclosure and talking that occurs. They view these interactions as smooth and relaxed, but they perceive low extraverts as awkward and interactions with them as forced and strained.

- **People who are high in agreeableness are trustworthy, altruistic individuals who are kind and exhibit overall prosocial behaviors.** They smile, laugh, and look people in the eye when they engage in discussions with them. Agreeable individuals are quick to take note of those who are less friendly and open or who are disagreeable. Their positive perspective causes them to spend a great deal of time drawing individuals out of their shells. So while they might quickly perceive others as disagreeable, they are also able to communicate well with them.

- **People who are high in neuroticism are typically anxious and prone to sadness, irritability, moodiness, and emotional instability.** They do not particularly enjoy interpersonal exchanges and become frustrated with pointless conversations, though still viewing themselves as polite. They perceive others to be poor listeners, probably because they are very apprehensive communicators who have trouble developing accurate perceptions of others. If they must interact with others, though, they typically let the other person’s behavior guide their own.

- **Individuals who are high in openness have a broad imagination and range of interests in individuals with an imaginative outlook on behaviors and events in life.** Because they are open to new experiences and enjoy meeting people, they initiate conversations and are comfortable, verbally and nonverbally, having conversations. They perceive others who are both like and unlike them in conversational style as being behaviorally accommodating and believe that this is a good thing. Higher degrees of openness create a positive vision of others’ willingness to adapt accordingly.
People who are high in conscientiousness focus more on external, environmental cues and are thoughtful, goal-directed, and organized. They perceive individuals who do not have these traits as impulsive and careless and their lives as hectic and chaotic. The perceptual process for them is organized and thus fairly quick as their organizational skills allow them to carefully categorize others’ behaviors and rapidly develop their perceptions of the others.

Self-Concept. As we read in Chapter 2, self-concept is our view of who we are, what our abilities are, and our level of knowledge and skills. Who we believe we are as individuals affects not only our perception of ourselves but also our perception of others and our communication with them. If you believe yourself to be a strong, authoritative person who takes control of situations, then you will compare others to this perspective. You might communicate with a powerful voice, maintain an erect posture, and engage in direct eye contact. On the basis of your self-concept, you would view others who do not have these characteristics as weak and easily influenced, and your communication will reflect these perceptions. It is your reflected appraisal of your self-concept that influences how you perceive and communicate with others.26 Of course, it is possible that you have a strong sense of self but do not feel good about it. This describes your self-esteem, and like your self-concept, it has a direct impact on your interpersonal communication.

The MRI results showed that the females who are high rather than low extraverts have greater brain reactivity when observing positive stimuli rather than negative ones. The frontal parts of the brain that control emotions, such as the frontal cortex and amygdala, received higher blood flow, suggesting greater brain reactivity to these positive images. Women who scored high on neuroticism measures, on the other hand, had greater brain reactivity when observing negative stimuli. In contrast to the extraverts, their reactions did not occur in the brain areas controlling emotions; in fact, they experienced reduced blood flow to these areas.

Ultimately, these results show evidence that the personality controls brain activity and the way in which women perceive emotionally charged stimuli. The researchers summed up the results of this study by saying, “One group saw the cup as being very full while the other group saw it as very empty”.

TURNING ON YOUR BRAIN

Recent research has established a link between our personalities and how our brains respond to environmental stimuli. It has come to light that people with different personalities—primarily within the extraverted and neurotic personality traits—create differential brain responses as detected by magnetic resonance imaging (MRI).25 Dr. Turhan Canli and colleagues from Stanford University reported that brains of people who are either extraverted or neurotic respond differently to stimuli and amplify specific experiences over others. The researchers exposed 19- to 42-year-old women to positive and negative emotional stimuli by showing them positive photos (puppies, a happy couple, ice cream, and a beautiful sunset) and negative photos (people angry or crying, a cemetery, and guns).
Self-Esteem. As we also learned in Chapter 2, our self-esteem, or our positive/negative self-impressions also impact our perceptions. The positive or negative impression we have of ourselves is known as self-esteem. How much we like ourselves is a powerful lens for our perceptions. Individuals who have higher self-esteem levels, for example, form more accurate perceptions of both the positive and negative characteristics of their significant others. There is a more balanced and enduring image of the other person. This is not always the case for people who are lower in self-esteem. Recent research suggests that these people have a tendency to view their relationships as either good or bad, and this varies over time as a reflection of how they are feeling about themselves. So their perceptions of their partners and partners’ communication are distorted. Ultimately, how you feel about yourself affects how you see others.

SOCIAL INFLUENCES

Every day, we play roles that we perceive are expected and accepted in society. We are men, women, sons, daughters, students, employees, and so on, all engaging in behaviors that reflect the roles we have assumed. We know how to communicate in these roles because society provides an abundance of information to influence us and our perceptions. We observe these roles on television, at work, in public, and everywhere else where society infiltrates our life, so the information is inescapable. Because we have opportunities to be influenced by images around us, we develop perceptions of ourselves and others based on societal standards.

Gender/Sex Roles. From the time you were a small child, you most likely noticed (probably subconsciously) what it meant to be a man or a woman. Gender roles are socially learned behaviors. If you had traditional role models, your father was viewed as the “breadwinner” who was strong and made the important decisions for the family, and your mother was loving, emotional, and sensitive. These characteristics, while very stereotypical, also reflect gender traits more than sex or biological traits. Gender roles are not necessarily associated with anatomy. They reflect levels of feminine and masculine characteristics and are typically associated with the biological characteristics of males and females. Thus, the dichotomous sex types can exist on a continuum from masculine men to feminine women. In this view, it is possible for men to have a degree of femininity within their sex role. If a man becomes emotional and cries, that is often thought to be a feminine behavior and unacceptable in a masculine society’s (e.g., U.S.) standards. Social learning tends to guide our sex role perceptions and tell us whether men and women are communicating appropriately according to their understood roles. Gender role differences have been magnified for marketing purposes in the popular press, yet research suggests that the differences in male/female communication are much more modest. Still, small social learning differences can have an impact.

Sandra Bem’s Behavioral Sex Role Inventory depicts four differential gender roles: stereotypical masculine behaviors, stereotypical feminine behaviors, undifferentiated behaviors, and androgynous behaviors. The gender style
of your communication and how well it fits within societal norms impacts your perception of others and the way they view you. Some of the typical masculine communication behaviors are self-reliant, independent, and assertive while examples of feminine communication behaviors are shy, affectionate, and sympathetic. Undifferentiated communication behaviors are neither masculine nor feminine, and androgynous communication behaviors are a combination of highly masculine and highly feminine characteristics. Androgynous individuals are thought to be better communicators and, therefore, have more positive perceptions of themselves and others because they have an ability to reflect on both feminine and masculine characteristics—they can see both “sides” and determine when specific gender roles are most appropriate in specific situations. In a recent book entitled *Code Switching: How to Talk So Men Will Listen*, the authors assert that if men and women hope to get along and better understand one another in the workplace, they need to alter their more traditional masculine and feminine communication styles.29 According to these authors, androgynous individuals are higher in self-esteem, and therefore, more positive in their perceptions of others, because they know how to express themselves around many different types of people and have more communication tools at their disposal.

**Occupational Roles.** Your views of the world are influenced by your occupation and your perception of what is and is not acceptable. Regardless of our occupation, society has informed us of what we can expect from people who fill these roles. The media are some of the biggest contributors to our perceptions of communication behaviors associated with specific occupations, and we know we have expectations because we know when they are violated. For example, we expect most professionals to be well-spoken, articulate, and knowledgeable. When this does not happen, we are confused. Have you ever walked outside a hospital and witnessed nurses or doctors smoking? What was your perception of them? Chances are you developed some negative perceptions of their behavior based upon your view of their occupation as health professionals. There is an abundance of research to suggest that individuals who violate the occupational roles set forth by society engender negative reactions and unfortunate repercussions.30 Ultimately, what this reveals is society’s powerful effects on us. Whom and what we become and how we communicate and perceive others’ communication are determined by societal influences.
Cultural Influences

As with societal influences, cultural norms and values affect your perceptions of others. Every culture maintains a collection of customs, norms, rituals, and language, and these affect perceptions of the culture’s own communication as well as that of other cultures. Cultural perception shapes and guides interactions, as we are easily influenced by our cultural (e.g., American) and co-cultural (e.g., Democrat) groups. When we communicate with others within our culture, we typically share similar attitudes, beliefs, and world-views. We have customs and norms that link us together. Most Americans, for example, cherish the right and opportunity to voice opinions and support for certain political candidates and to vote for those individuals when the time comes. If you were raised in a politically active family and were surrounded by people who were active and involved citizens, you would see the value in emulating their behavior. Because of your cultural influences, you also might be intolerant of people who are apathetic and announce that their vote does not matter. Your perception of them might be that they are lazy, weak, or unintelligent. Your perceptions might even lead you to choose to separate yourself physically from people who do not share your cultural values.

Most of your customs are derived from your cultural and co-cultural groups. People within the U.S. culture are thought to be individualistic (as is true in Canada, Great Britain, and other countries as well) and therefore competitive, self-sufficient, and valuing immediate family. People within collectivistic cultures (e.g., Japan, China, and Korea), who value extended families and prefer to maintain a group orientation, misunderstand individualistic cultural groups. A recent study compared the perceptual differences between Western (American) and East Asian (Chinese) cultures and reported that the collectivist attitudes of the Chinese people enable them to be more adept at interpreting the actions of others. Ultimately, this becomes a fundamental skill for positive social interactions.

New brain research at MIT reveals that culture affects how people see the world—how they perceive others. Brain scanners picked up differential levels of attention and effort for individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Subjects from individualistic cultures (e.g., Westerners) focused more on central objects than on their surroundings, while Easterners focused on both the context and the object. What these findings reveal is that perceptual differences are to be expected. Unfortunately, these differences can lead to negative perceptions and poor communication between individuals in these cultural groups. This is especially important to consider in organizations as the global marketplace expands and intercultural business dealings increase.
Our personalities, how we view ourselves, and our social and cultural experiences are all factors that color what we see around us. They are a reflection of who we are, where we come from, and the people who are important in our lives—and they are often incorrect. If you ask someone from northern portions of the United States how they view people from the South, you might hear responses such as “slow,” “backward,” and “country.” Conversely, people from the South might describe Northerners as “rude,” “aloof,” and even “standoffish.” Of course, we know that these descriptions are not necessarily true, but for some reason, these ideas have been perpetuated and endure. Though it is not always possible to determine the exact source of our perceptions, recognizing that they are often wrong can aid communication in our relationships. The next sections will present examples and effects of inaccurate judgments within our perceptual processes.

**Stereotyping and Prejudice Effects**

Stereotypes are the categories we place people in based upon the groups to which they belong. We do this because it helps us to make sense of the world and plan our communication with others. Most people stereotype at some point in their lives, but if you disagree or find this thought offensive, there are two things you should know. First, stereotyping is not necessarily negative. Second, you probably do it almost every day but fail to recognize it. Although stereotyping might not be negative or mean-spirited, it can create inaccurate perceptions. We “think” we know how to converse with others if we can place them in a category such as a social class, occupation, or sexual orientation. For example, if you meet
a very tall woman, you might instantly think, “I’ll bet she played high school or college basketball.” If it turns out that she didn’t and you are aware that you have misjudged her, you can quickly divert the conversation if you had tried to talk about basketball with her. Unfortunately, more serious stereotypical misperceptions based on gender/sex, race, and occupation can occur, and these can be detrimental to you and the communication with other people you encounter.

**Gender Role Stereotypes.** When we place men and women into certain behavioral categories, this is gender role stereotyping. Though this is extremely common in Western culture, applying these generalizations to specific individuals can be dangerous and even unethical. Common gender stereotypes are associated with personality traits: women tend to be **communal** (e.g., warm, emotional, nurturing) and men tend to be **agentic** (e.g., active, instrumental, competent). If we look at these characteristics across the entire population, we might find them to be fairly accurate. However, when we apply these gender stereotypes to specific individuals, the accuracy of the stereotypes is drastically reduced, and this is when communication is negatively affected.

**Racial Stereotypes.** Just as gender stereotyping is common, so is grouping individuals according to their race. These stereotypes are broad and cannot logically be applied to specific individuals, yet racial stereotypes are extremely common in Western culture. In the United States, for example, race is still understood as a black-white paradigm, with perceived differences in extremely broad categories such as income, motivation, and even overall intelligence. A study conducted with college students revealed that white students perceive black students to be less intelligent. Even when high GPAs for black students were presented, students misremembered the grades and reported them to be lower than white students’ GPAs. The researchers explained that this response helped students to maintain their existing stereotypes and racial expectations.

**Occupational Stereotypes.** Categorizing people in certain occupations and employment positions on the basis of their sex, social status, intelligence, and other attributes is known as occupational stereotyping. Instead of assisting our communication with others, this categorization actually impedes the process. A recent article entitled “’If You Know He Is an Engineer, I Don’t Need to Tell You He Is Smart’: The Influence of Stereotypes on the Communication of Social Knowledge” suggests that stereotypes bias our perceptions to make them consistent with our expectations of social categories. In other words, if Catherine reveals that she is a physician, an engineer, or a corporate executive, chances are you will place her into a category you have created for “smart people.” Because of this presumption, you will communicate with Catherine in a way that matches what you expect from her. Your perceptions may be based on a bit of truth, but this certainly cannot tell you everything you need to know. Research findings in occupational stereotyping suggest their power and perpetuation. These inaccurate and stereotypical perceptions are most common between people who are accepted and typically in control (the in-group) and others who are viewed as outsiders and are unaccepted (out-group members), yet people in the in-groups typically claim that they are not prejudiced.
Though prejudice may or may not be caused by stereotyping, prejudice and stereotyping are often linked. Just recognize that they are not the same concept. Exhibiting prejudice is associating a positive or negative judgment with a specific group of people. For example, after the bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001, many Americans developed a negative view of Muslims, prejudice developed, and incidents of discrimination began to be depicted in the press. Following the invasion of Iraq, even when people in the United States did not know Muslim individuals personally, they determined that Muslims were dangerous and could not be trusted. In 2006, a Gallup poll revealed that approximately 40% of all Americans admitted to being prejudiced against Muslims and believed that Muslims needed to be held to stricter security standards than non-Muslims.

A similar prejudice was held against Japanese-Americans after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941. Although the prejudice began with American farmers’ perception of labor competition with Japanese-Americans farmers along the West Coast, the attack on Pearl Harbor fueled the already extreme negative feelings. On the basis of antJapanese sentiments, approximately 120,000 people (more than two thirds of whom were American citizens) were hauled off to one of ten internment camps across the United States. Though prejudice is not always negative, some of the most common examples typically are (e.g., racism, sexism, ageism, and ableism). If you stop and think a moment about different experiences in your life, you can probably recall a time when either you or someone you know dealt with the difficulty of the prejudice of others. If examples do not come easily to you, perhaps reading the following case study will help. If not, perhaps you will find the next category of perceptual inaccuracies—primacy and recency effects—to be more common.
ETHICS IN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

TO BOOST BUSINESS, HOTEL OWNER FORBIDS SPANISH TO BE SPOKEN

In October 2009, Larry Whitten, a 63-year-old former Marine from Texas, purchased a hotel in Taos, New Mexico, to save it and the jobs of those who worked there. He had saved over twenty other distressed hotels across the country and, eager to continue his mission, he moved to Taos. Two things were different at the Paragon Inn: (a) Most of the employees were Hispanic and spoke Spanish—a language with which Larry Whitten was unfamiliar; and (b) employees were bitter because this was the fifth owner they’d worked for in a short time span.

Whitten felt that he had been successful in saving troubled hotels and was confident that he could do the same with the hotel in Taos. Because of the differences he encountered, he decided to do the following: ask all employees to refrain from speaking Spanish in front of him; request that employees who deal directly with hotel guests change their first names to make them easier to pronounce (e.g., Marcos would change to Mark, and the pronunciation Mahr-TEEN would change to MAHR-tin); and fire insubordinate employees who refused to abide by his rules.

Whitten said that he had made this decision for three reasons: Hostile employees would make the situation worse by speaking Spanish behind his back; making the names of employees easier to pronounce would assist guests with their requests and make them more comfortable interacting with employees; and insubordinate employees would create a hostile work environment and hurt the business he was trying to save.

The reactions to Whitten’s decisions were disturbing. Employees of the Paragon Inn called him “a white” and a racist. Some employees picketed outside the hotel. Employees who were asked to change their names refused, and one man stated, “I don’t have to change my name and language or heritage. I’m professional the way I am.”

Because he is the owner, it does seem that Larry Whitten should have the right to create his own rules for his business. In addition, he has a track record of successfully reviving failing businesses. But does he have the right to ask employees to change their names in a state where Spanish is one of the primary languages and a town in which a large part of the population is of Hispanic origin?

What do you think? Is Larry Whitten displaying his own cultural insecurity by asking his employees to change their names? For example, if guests are uncertain how to pronounce the name “Jesus,” is it ethical to ask an employee who has this name (and considers his name part of his identity) to change the spelling to alleviate their discomfort? Because Larry Whitten can do this as the boss, does it mean he should?

Taos artist Ken O’Neil summed up the situation as follows: “To make demands like he did just seems over the top. Nobody won here. It’s not always about winning. Sometimes, it’s about what you learn.”

PRIMACY AND RECENCY EFFECTS

When you meet someone for the first time, it is highly likely that you make snap judgments about the person’s appearance, trustworthiness, and overall competence. Another choice is to hold off, give a person the benefit of the doubt, and make an assessment after making multiple observations. Both are very common perceptual behaviors, especially in new situations with unfamiliar people.
According to Princeton professor Alex Todorov, we tend to hold onto these initial perceptions, and they become ingrained within us.42

**Primacy Effects.** When we make an instant judgment based on our first impressions about others, it is the result of primacy effects. This is important to consider in your daily communication, for it suggests the need to put your best foot forward and strive to make a good impression at every opportunity. Researchers who looked at jury decisions during trial testimony found that when jurors tentatively (and anonymously) reported their early verdicts (before final testimony and evidence), they stuck to this decision regardless of what was later presented.43 The earliest research on memory and judgment reported significant primacy effects; we place greater weight on the initial information we acquire about individuals.44 In a study supporting primacy effects, Solomon Asch presented a list of descriptive adjectives to participants. The first word in the list was either positive or negative followed by a list of opposite descriptors (e.g., intelligent, impulsive, stubborn, and critical versus critical, stubborn, impulsive, and intelligent). What he discovered was similar to the jury research findings. Participants formed impressions based upon the initial word in the list (intelligent versus critical), and the remaining words had little influence. Thus, positive or negative impressions prevailed at the expense of later information that might actually be more informative.

**Recency Effects.** When we assign greater weight to the most current information we encounter, we succumb to recency effects. Though the power of first impressions cannot be denied, we frequently observe others’ actions over time and change our perceptions of them. The impressions that we maintain, in this case, are the most recent. Research has found that this recent information is more accurate than earlier memories and experiences.45 There is some evidence, however, to suggest people utilize both primacy and recency in their decision making. If you realize that the initial information you have about someone is based on the unknown and there is no point of comparison, you might wait for more recent impressions to form. Therefore, one does not necessarily contradict the other—they work in unison.46

Individuals may be judged favorably or unfavorably on the basis of a single positive or negative characteristic; this is termed the halo effect when the judgment is positive or the reverse halo effect (or the devil effect) when the judgment is negative.47 These effects are cognitive biases in which traits that we initially perceived influence our interpretation of people and our perceptions of the latter traits they exhibit. According to Solomon Asch and current research, physical attractiveness is the most common source of positive, halo effect impressions. Thus, attractive individuals are thought to have additional positive virtues compared to less attractive individuals.48 One of the more powerful factors leading to the halo effect is similarity, frequently referred to as the similar-to-me effect. The more we perceive that others are like us, the more we tend to view them favorably. Homophily is a term coined by communication scholars that refers to the degree to which we believe we are similar to others. Perceived homophily affects whether people will attempt to communicate and whether the attempt will be viewed as successful. In essence, this perception of similarity can open or shut the door to initial communication interactions. The Perceived Homophily Measure was created to help
people understand the degree to which they perceive another person to be similar to them in background traits and attitudes. Take a few minutes to complete the Perceived Homophily Measure. Think of an individual you have recently met but still consider an acquaintance. Complete the instrument as you think of that person. When you are finished, compute your score, and on the basis of your results, consider whether your perceived homophily with the person might affect your communication and elicit the halo effect.

**Understanding Your Level of Perceived Homophily.** The perceived homophily scale was created to help us understand whether the individuals we approach to ask for personal advice (opinion leaders) are similar to us. If a person
were important enough for us to ask for advice, then he or she would probably share
similar attitudes and perhaps even behaviors and background with us. This was
precisely what research discovered. The opinion leaders on whom the participants
reported were perceived as being more similar to the participants than others were.

You were asked to complete the perceived homophily instrument based on a
new acquaintance. This next section will help you to understand your results.
Depending on your score, you might discover that this new acquaintance you
reported on is someone you will get to know better in the future, share informa-
tion with, and seek advice from.

Chances are the more you perceive you are similar to this person, the more
likely it is that you will attempt to communicate and view the person favorably.

- First, because scores range between 4 and 28 on both of the scales (attitude
  and background), you should consider a score between 4 and 14 to indi-
cate that you perceive this person to be dissimilar to you in attitude and/
or background. If you scored between 15 and 20, you consider this person
to be somewhat similar to you; and if you scored 21 or higher, you perceive
this individual to be a great deal like you in attitude and/or background.

- Second, it is possible to score low in one area and higher in the other.
  For example, you might perceive this person to be unlike you in attitude
  but similar in background. Research has revealed, however, that a higher
  perceived similarity in both areas leads to increased perceptions of the
  other person’s credibility and an increase in your interpersonal attrac-
tion, which, in turn, affects your communication attempts and the results
  of your communication experience.

- Third, just because you perceive that you are similar to another person
does not make it so. It is possible that you made these assumptions too
quickly and need more information to determine how alike you really
are. Nonetheless, your perception of similarity will create or deter your
communication interactions.

WHAT CAN I DO NOW?

- You could ask yourself how you feel about this person. Do you seem
  alike in your attitudes and interests?

- You could be careful not to avoid communicating with someone simply
  because you do not feel a high degree of homophily with that person.
  Not everyone will share your attitudes and background.

- You could refrain from making snap judgments (based on primacy
  effects) when someone is different from you.

- You could examine the source of your attributions. Are your homoph-
  ily perceptions due to your internal or external attributions?

- You could try to maintain both cultural and gender sensitivity.
PERCEPTUAL FILTERS AND BIASES

Each of us has a monitoring system in our subconscious that forces information we encounter to “fit in” with what we already know and have experienced. As we discussed earlier in this chapter, our schemata (or mental file folders) for other people’s communication helps us to interpret what we see. But we also use perceptual filters, or defense mechanisms, to alter or distort the intended meaning of messages we receive. We do this because we like to keep things orderly and stable, and if this means that we change the information we are bombarded with daily, we are okay with that. Leon Festinger referred to this desire to keep our perceptions mentally organized as the principle of consistency. We do not like feeling an imbalance, or cognitive dissonance, in our perceptions.\(^5\) According to Festinger, when we feel dissonance, we take steps to reduce it. Even though we might believe that we desire a change and seek to engage in new experiences that might alter what we like or what we know, when we face inconsistencies, we get nervous and feel a sense of dissonance. This is when we call upon our defense mechanisms (selective exposure, selective attention, selective perception, and selective retention) to put things back in order. Because they change the meaning of the messages we receive, defense mechanisms typically lead to inaccurate perceptions and create barriers to communication.\(^1\)

- **Selective exposure.** When we seek out and allow ourselves to be exposed only to messages that reinforce our existing attitudes and beliefs, we are engaging in selective exposure. For example, perhaps you feel that you are experiencing too many arguments in your romantic relationship. You begin to wonder whether the relationship is doomed because you don’t believe that arguing is a good sign for your future. To perceive your relationship differently, you purposefully seek friendships with couples who argue as much as or more than you do. Exposing yourself to similar relationships allows you to view yours as normal.

- **Selective attention.** When you pay attention only to messages that reinforce your beliefs, you are engaging in selective attention. In some cases, we want to believe something so badly that we tune out or ignore what should be very obvious. Using the previous example, you perceive that there is increasing turmoil in your romantic relationship and are fearful that the relationship might end. You pride yourself in being able to maintain healthy relationships, so to rid yourself of these dissonant perceptions, you decide to focus only on the good things in your relationship. When you avoid the negative issues and focus on the positive communication that occurs, the dissonance dissipates.

- **Selective perception.** When messages are understood through our current frame of reference, sometimes to the point of changing the intent of the message, this interpretive process is known as selective perception. If you or someone else has ever said that you “hear what you want to hear,” this describes selective perception. Parents engage in selective perception, for example, when they determine that a teacher is praising their child for being assertive when they are called in to discuss disruptive classroom behaviors.
• **Selective retention.** When you remember only those parts of the message that reinforce and are consistent with your beliefs, you are engaging in **selective retention.** This differs from selective perception, in which words are twisted. In the above example of a parent–teacher conference, if the teacher included some compliments of the child along with the criticism that warranted the conference, the parents would leave recalling the compliments or with any information that reinforced their personal perceptions of the child.

### CHECKING YOUR UNDERSTANDING

**PROBLEMS IN PERCEIVING OTHERS**

Before reading further, take a few minutes to assess your learning by writing your answers to the following items:

1. How do stereotypes differ from prejudice in terms of what is communicated to others? Can you describe why you might view prejudice as negative but view stereotyping as positive in some instances?

2. How is information perceived by people differently when we engage in the primacy effect and in the recency effect? How does homophily lead to the halo effect (or the reverse halo effect) and play an important role in either primacy or recency?

3. Can you name the four defense mechanisms that people use as perceptual filters? How do you use any of these to avoid feelings of cognitive dissonance?

### ENHANCING YOUR PERCEPTUAL ACCURACY

Perceptions drive our communication with others. Therefore, it is essential to discover methods to determine how accurate our perceptions are as well as how to improve them. The final section of this chapter will describe and discuss how to avoid errors in the perceptual attribution process and provide suggestions and tools to assist you in checking perceptions.

### ATtribution ERRORS

Because we might not feel confident in our perceptual abilities, we frequently make mistakes in our attributions of others’ communication behaviors. When we attribute other people’s behavior to either external or internal factors and assume something incorrectly, this can have detrimental effects on our relationships.

**Avoiding Attribution Errors.** Though there are many examples of attribution errors, some of the more common ones that we will discuss are the fundamental attribution error, ultimate attribution error, self-serving attribution bias, and overattribution.
• **Fundamental attribution error.** When we fail to carefully examine all the possible reasons behind another person’s actions, this is a [fundamental attribution error](#). Instead we determine that someone is behaving a certain way because that is simply the “way he or she is.” In other words, internal causes or personality factors are the culprit. So instead of studying the situation carefully to determine whether other influential elements (e.g., context) are at work, people typically prefer to take the easy road and view internal elements as the root cause. Researchers have suggested that these internal attribution errors occur because there are fewer internal factors to examine, making it a simpler conclusion to draw.

• **Ultimate attribution error.** Fundamental attribution errors are especially common when the behavior is negative; these are referred to as [ultimate attribution errors](#). For example, Jesse, a high school senior, wants money to rent a limousine to take him and a group of friends to the prom. His parents say no, and he becomes extremely angry. “Why can’t they understand how important this is?” he asks himself. “They’re so boring. Just because they never do anything fun, they want to ruin my life!” So Jesse determines that the reason his parents refuse to give him the limo money is because they are uninteresting and miserable and they want his life to be just like theirs. There is nothing external in his perceptions. He bases their negative decision solely on internal causes, an ultimate attribution error.

• **Self-serving attribution bias.** When we select attributions on the basis of whether we believe our behaviors will help or hurt us, this is a [self-serving attribution bias](#). There are two types of self-serving biases: The [self-enhancing bias](#) occurs when something positive happens and you take credit for the successes or the positive outcomes experienced. The [self-protecting bias](#) is used when a person, in attempting to explain why things have gone wrong, blames it on factors that are out of his or her control. This example might help you to understand this bias better: You lost your job because your boss said you were constantly late. Your self-protecting bias would tell you that this unfortunate situation occurred because your boss has unrealistic expectations or you live so far from work that you never know how bad traffic is going to be. You determine that external factors cause the lateness, and you perceive that they are out of your control.

• **Overattribution.** From time to time, people who are having negative life experiences with others will latch onto two or three traits and blame everything on them. This is known as [overattribution](#), and it can be a real hindrance to relationships. Married couples who are experiencing problems in their relationships tend to engage in overattribution because they find a few internal characteristics that they determine are primarily responsible for their partners’ negative behaviors. Research on married couples suggests that unhappy couples tend to see the worst in their partners and are able to come up with a list of internal characteristics when problems occur. Research has also reported that poorly performing college students tend to attribute all negative instructor behaviors to internal causes. Thus, a teacher who is late for class might provide a perfectly logical explanation, but students will choose to believe that the lateness is
within the teacher’s control and blame the behavior on traits such as lack of organization, incompetence, and an uncaring attitude.

One of the primary reasons we make attribution errors is because we lack confidence in our overall ability to make predictions about the communication of others. One method to determine whether you may be prone to attribution errors is by measuring your attributional confidence or the level of confidence

**ASSESS YOUR COMMUNICATION PERSONALITY**

**CLATTERBUCK’S ATTRIBUTIONAL CONFIDENCE SCALE**

Assess your own level of confidence in evaluating the behavior of someone close to you using the instrument below. Encourage your close friend or relational partner to do the same. That way, you can compare and contrast your scores and begin to better understand your attributional accuracy and how it might influence your interpersonal communication.

**Directions:**

The questions that follow will ask you to express how confident you are that you know a particular fact about the person who is your good friend. On these questions, the answers should be written as a percentage—anywhere from 0% to 100%. For example, if you are totally confident that you know a particular fact, you might write 100%. If you are slightly less confident, you might put a number such as 83%. On the other hand, if you are not at all confident, you might place a very low percentage, such as 5%, in the answer blank. If you are absolutely unable to answer a question and the answer would be a guess for which you had no basis at all, you might put 0%. Remember, you may use any evidence as a basis for your guess, even if the person has not explicitly told you the answer. The point is for you to report your confidence in the GUESS ONLY; do not give the actual answer to the question.

1. How confident are you of your general ability to predict how he/she will behave? ______
2. How certain are you that he/she likes you? ______
3. How accurate are you at predicting the values he/she holds? ______
4. How accurate are you at predicting his/her attitudes? ______
5. How well can you predict his/her feelings and emotions? ______
6. How much can you empathize with (share) the way he/she feels about himself/herself? ______
7. How well do you know him/her? ______

**Scoring Instructions:**

Sum all the percentages on items 1–7. Divide the sum by 7. This will be the percentage of attributional confidence you feel toward this person.
you have in evaluating the facts about people. Take a few minutes to complete the attributional confidence scale below. It asks you to consider a specific person and report your confidence or certainty in making attributions about them. To complete the scale, you must think of a good friend.

Understanding Your Level of Attributional Confidence. The attributional confidence scale was developed by Glen Clatterbuck as a way to recognize the uncertainty that occurs in relationships. He found that for our relationships to progress, we need to reduce uncertainty by becoming confident in our attributions. In other words, the more confident we are in our attributions, the more we are attracted to others interpersonally and desire to get to know them better. Once you have completed and obtained your score for the instrument, ask yourself, “Am I attracted to this person, and do I feel we have some similar attitudes and behaviors?” If you find that your results agree with the research on this instrument, then this should indicate to you that the more you like someone and feel similar to that person, the more confident you will be in your perceptual attributions. Individuals who score high on the instrument typically have an interpersonal attraction for the other person as well as feeling a sense of interpersonal similarity with them. As was discussed earlier in this chapter, perceived homophily leads to increased communication and, according to studies of intercultural interactions, increased self-disclosure and attributional confidence.

There are several factors to consider when assessing your attributional confidence. Your score will offer insight to your perceived similarity with this particular person as well as your own perceptual attributions of them. Here are some recommendations for making sense of your score based on the various attribution errors and, ultimately, finding ways to correct them.

- First, scores range between 0% to 100% on the scale; you should consider a score under 50% to be low, scores between 50% and 79% to be average, and scores above 80% to be relatively high in attributional confidence.
- Second, if you scored low on the attributional confidence scale, it is important to your friendship for you to determine why this has happened. It is most likely due to one or more of the attribution errors discussed earlier. If you reported that you are not very good at predicting your friend’s emotions or attitudes, this could lead to the error of overattribution or deciding that you know more about your friend than you actually do. If you find yourself engaging in overattribution and or other incorrect assumptions about your friend, this can be very risky to relationships. However, it can be avoided. Take a look at your lowest scored responses, and think of specific ways in which you and your friend might work together to learn more in these particular areas. You should pay particular attention to ways to improve the perceptual process so that you can help others do the same. It is never too late to improve your awareness of the perceptions you have about people and their behaviors and work to alter these perceptions.
One of the clearest means to improving your perceptions and avoiding some of the mistakes previously discussed is to learn how to check them with indirect and direct perception checking. First, however, there are multiple factors to be aware of before actually checking your perceptions. Consider the following three areas to be precursors to the perception process and imagine their value in developing your perceptions and improving communication in your relationships.

- **Question your perceptual accuracy.** Stop and consciously think about your perceptions and feelings about someone, and question your interpretation of the behaviors you observe and can recall. Instead of automatically jumping to negative assumptions, stop and consider exactly what it was you heard, saw, tasted, or smelled. Have you allowed yourself to take in everything by looking for further suggestive cues, or have you stopped short at the simplest, negative response? This can also work with positive perceptions, which should be examined carefully as well.

- **Consider yourself and how you might be getting in the way of accurate social perceptions.** We discussed the importance of self-concept and self-esteem earlier in this chapter, and if you are uncertain of your value for another person, then it is possible your perceptions of that person will be negative. This is especially true if you are unhappy with yourself when you are with this person. In other words, your own self-awareness and management of your life and self can affect the perceptual accuracy you have of others in your life. Similarly, it is important to develop your social intelligence skills, such as having empathy and understanding of others and their experiences. Without this, you may be unable to put yourself in others’ shoes or understand their behaviors and, in turn, might develop inaccurate perceptions of them.

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**WHAT CAN I DO NOW?**

- You could reexamine this relationship and your perceptions of your friend. A low confidence score suggests that you may engage in attribution errors.

- You could try asking yourself what attributes, in particular, you like about your friend.

- You could be aware of the low-scoring categories and work to discover more about your friend in these areas.

- You could engage in self-disclosure to increase your attributional confidence as well as reduce your uncertainty about your friend’s values and behaviors.
• Consider the context, such as which people are present, where they are, and what time of day it is. Most people blot out the context and fail to consider that a person may be engaging in specific communication behaviors because of his or her surroundings. Do not jump to conclusions. You must consider the whole scene; failure to do so will certainly result in flawed perceptions.

**Indirect Perception Checking.** When you take a more careful look at the person you are observing to see whether there might be something you missed, you are engaging in indirect perception checking. This is a sort of “stop, look, and listen” process that will allow you to take in nonverbal cues to fill in perceptual gaps and discover additional and necessary information. Consider this example: Your friends Marty and Bob are arguing, and if your first inclination is to blame Bob, stop for a moment and observe his nonverbal behaviors. What sort of face is he making, and what sort of gestures does he use (e.g., wrings his hands)? You should also listen to his voice, as it is a valuable cue that researchers tell us “leaks” clearer thinking and feeling cues. On the basis of these observations, you change your mind. However, even though you observe Bob’s behaviors carefully, this is still indirect perception checking and therefore, subjective. You are observing behaviors and coming to conclusions without inquiring whether they are, in fact, correct.

**Direct Perception Checking.** Sometimes it is best to come right out and ask whether your perceptions are correct. This more straightforward means is known as direct perception checking. You’re going to miss out on some valuable information by relying solely on indirect observations, so here is a bit of advice: When in doubt, just ask! Though this sounds logical and quite simple, it can also be dangerous. You can never quite predict what someone, especially someone who is unfamiliar to you, will tell you, and if the response does not align with your perceptions, you must figure out how to deal with this. On the other hand, getting a straight answer and confirming or clarifying your perceptions can enhance your communication with others. Speed dating is a good example of a context in which direct perception checking may be risky but also maximizes the time available. If you have six minutes to select a date and the best-looking person in the room is ignoring you, direct perception checking might be the best route to understanding and moving forward to a different date. Ask your speed date whether he or she is avoiding you and is disinterested. You might not like the response, but you will save time and energy.

Ultimately, the most helpful perception checking involves both indirect and direct methods within three simple steps. When you follow these steps, you can avoid attribution errors and perceptual biases.

1. Observe and acknowledge a particular behavior.
2. Create two possible interpretations of the observed behavior.
3. Request clarification for your interpretation to determine accuracy.

If you cannot imagine following these three steps in the course of a conversation, look at the following example and try to identify the three steps:

*Hey, Shannon, I’ve been calling you for the past two days, and I haven’t heard back from you—even when I’ve left you several voicemail messages. I wasn’t*
sure if your phone wasn’t working or if you were irritated that I couldn’t meet you for lunch on Monday. What’s going on? Do you mind me asking?

Can you locate the first step—the observed behavior? If you said it was Jacob’s statement “I haven’t heard back from you,” you are correct. In addition, it has been two days, and Jacob wants to understand why Shannon has not responded. Following step 1, you should be able to find Jacob’s two interpretations: (1) phone malfunction or (2) irritation over the broken lunch date. It is a good idea that he did this for a couple of reasons. First, it gives Shannon an “out” if she has actually been avoiding Jacob. She can simply say, “Yeah, my phone has been on the fritz.” Of course, this might be untrue, but she still has an option and doesn’t feel backed into a corner by Jacob’s interrogation. Second, she can simply admit that she was bothered that he cancelled their lunch date, and she didn’t even have to bring it up because Jacob already figured it out on his own. Jacob is being proactive with this three-step perception-checking process, and it could actually soothe any hurt feelings Shannon might have. Finally, you should be able to locate the third step of clarification and accuracy checking. Frequently, if people are angry, they will avoid confrontations and hide their feelings. This is not an option for Shannon because Jacob directly asks her which perceptual interpretation of his is correct. Of course, there may be a third option that Jacob has not thought of, but at least his feelings are out there for the two of them to deal with.

Following these three steps in the perception-checking process will aid you in your relationships because they serve to clarify communication behavior and, if used correctly, are nonthreatening. If you are asking for clarification (unless, of course, you say it in a threatening tone of voice), it will be rare for the other person to be offended. Of course, you may not be successful with this perception checking method in every single interpersonal encounter, but it is certainly worth a try to improve communication.

**CHECKING YOUR UNDERSTANDING**

**ENHANCING PERCEPTUAL ACCURACY**

Before completing the chapter, take a few minutes to assess your learning by writing your answers to the following items:

1. Because attribution errors are quite common, can you name the four types and provide examples of each one? Which one of these do you think could be most detrimental to your interpersonal communication and relationships?

2. What are three perceptual considerations to address before checking your perceptions?

3. Can you describe the primary difference between direct and indirect perception checking? Under what circumstances might the indirect method be beneficial to you?

4. What are three steps you should follow in the direct perception-checking process? Can you think of an encounter in which you were uncertain of your perceptions of another person’s behavior and outline what you might say in each of these steps?
To complete Dr. Menger’s story, you will recall how Shuntaro exhibited some specific behaviors that led her to make some inaccurate perceptions of Shuntaro. After reading this chapter, see whether you can address these questions about the perceptual process and the attributions Dr. Menger developed.

What do you think?

Dr. Menger obviously developed inaccurate perceptions about Shuntaro. How would you suggest she be more accurate in the perceptual process with him. What are things she needs to consider in the future with students in her class? In addition, how would you suggest Shuntaro alter his communication behaviors so that he can create accurate perceptions of himself? Is it possible that there are some intercultural behaviors that are socially learned and cannot be changed but could be presented differently?

Here’s what we think…

Both Shuntaro and Dr. Menger play roles in the faulty perceptions and attributions that have developed in their first meeting. We determine how we view others and choose to interact with them on the basis of our past experiences. Unfortunately, when we interact with people of different cultures or those who behave in ways with which we are unfamiliar, we fall back on what we know, even though these assumptions or interpretations are probably inaccurate.

Here is the advice we would offer Dr. Menger and advice for Shuntaro to help control “other perceptions.”

1. Shuntaro needs to be more aware. He should carefully consider the culture he is a part of and the cultural group he is entering and becoming a part of. If he had stopped to think about the expectations of students in the college classroom, he might have behaved differently.

2. Dr. Menger needs to avoid jumping to conclusions. She is clearly focusing on her class and the lesson she worked so hard to prepare and fails to recognize the social and cultural differences that may have been affecting Shuntaro’s behavior.

3. Dr. Menger needs to stop, look, and listen. In this process, she needs to ask questions and engage in direct perception checking. Remember that two interpretations should be generated before firming up your perceptions. Dr. Menger could have asked Shuntaro, after class, whether he was nervous or uncomfortable. Dr. Menger might have inquired about social and cultural differences that were possibly influencing classroom behaviors. If she had perceptions of Shuntaro, then she needed to check on whether they were correct before sending Shuntaro such a harsh email message. Shuntaro was clearly bothered by Dr. Menger’s response, and had Dr. Menger been more aware and been more direct with Shuntaro, the incident could have been resolved earlier.

4. Ultimately, Dr. Menger needs to reflect on the three-step process to developing accurate perceptions.
TAKE AWAYS

This chapter focused on increasing your understanding, skills, and knowledge of perceptions and inaccuracies in the perceptual process. There are many factors that we consider when we develop our perceptions, and the elements discussed in this chapter should not be considered exhaustive. However, they are commonly experienced in interpersonal relationships. The following list of knowledge claims summarizes what you have learned in this chapter:

- The perception process and the three stages through which people move to develop their perceptions: selection, organization, and interpretation.
- The four schemata that play a role in how you choose to organize the communication behaviors you observe. These are physical, role, interaction, and physical schema.
- How the three perceptual attributions you use help to explain why someone behaves the way he or she does.
- The influence our individual personality traits, selfconcept, self-esteem, our gender/sex roles, occupational roles, and culture have on our perceptions.
- The inaccuracies in perceptual processes you engage in and the positive/negative effects they have on you and those with whom you interact.
- The power of homophily and fundamental attribution error and their effects on the perceptual process.

Following are some of the ways in which you can enhance your understanding and skills associated with the processes you use to develop your perceptions of others.

- Examine the power of homophily on the perceptions you make about others.
- Use the four defense mechanisms to assess your perceptions and possible inaccuracies in them.
- Use the attributional confidence instrument to assess how sure you are about the behavioral attributions you have made about someone close to you.
- Follow the three steps of the direct perception-checking process to examine the conclusions you draw about the communication of others in your interpersonal relationships.
- Troubleshoot your perceptual accuracy by learning to evaluate the communication in your interpersonal relationships via three important considerations: questioning your own accuracy, yourself, and the context.
THEORY DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When you engage in the three stages of the perceptual process, what role do your schemata typically play? Do you typically favor one of the four schemata?

2. What is the relationship between self-concept and self-esteem? Why are they so powerful in creating your perceptions?

3. Which of the three areas of perceptual influence (individual, social, and cultural) do you believe drive most Americans in forming their perceptions? Considering what you know about Western culture, why do you believe this to be true?

4. Is it possible for people to engage in stereotyping as a defense mechanism to filter their perceptions? Explain how this might be true for someone.

5. Do you believe that personality type (the Big Five) plays a role in a person’s use of either of the two self-serving attributions (self-enhancing versus self-protecting)? Why or why not?
1. Break into groups between four and six people. Assign each person one of the four schema used to organize perceptions. As you sit in a circle, have each person think of and describe aloud an example of how they use their particular schema to organize their perceptions of someone with whom they have interacted with but knew little about.

2. Locate a video clip that displays a common stereotype being utilized. Categorize the probable influence (individual, social, and/or cultural) that you believe is responsible for creating the stereotype. Discuss why this influence is likely and, on the basis of the locus of the attribution, whether or not it is possible to change.

3. Create a “realistic” scenario in which you might engage in the three steps of the direct perception-checking process. Role-play this scenario; afterward, discuss how this can work in all sorts of relationships (e.g., romantic, friends, parents).