CHAPTER 2

Perception and Communication: A Matter of Perspective

Chapter Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- Define perception
- Explain the perception process
- Identify the various influences on perception
- Define self-concept and explain how it develops as well as the impact it has on your communication
- Define self-esteem and explain the impact it has on your communication
- Identify the impact our perceptions of others have on our communication with them

PERSONAL: New neighbors move next door and you go over to meet them. You introduce yourself. The husband is very friendly and begins to talk about the move and living in a new area. He seems very outgoing and likeable. His wife, on the other hand, says very little and only smiles occasionally. When you leave, your impression of him is very positive, but you don't have a great impression of his wife. Time goes by and you sometimes see the neighbors working outside or shopping at the local supermarket. Each time, you are struck by how pleasant he is but how aloof his wife seems to be. Little by little, you get to know her, and now you realize your first impression of her was inaccurate. She isn't cold, snobby, or any of those things you previously thought. She is, however, very shy and introverted, and it takes her a while to get comfortable with new people. How could you have been so wrong?

PROFESSIONAL: Your organization has been acquired by a larger corporation, and you are nervous that the new CEO will restructure your department and may lay off some employees, perhaps even you. The CEO has spent weeks meeting with you and coworkers in your department and has asked to examine many documents from the previous years. Although the CEO has said nothing about restructuring or downsizing, you assume that is the possible reason for all of the analysis that is occurring. At the end of the month, the CEO calls the entire department together to congratulate them on their past performance and to indicate what the CEO calls a "better than bright" future. Although you perceived the CEO to be going through this process in order to determine who would stay and who would go, the CEO was simply spending time learning about the company. You are happy for the mix-up and are glad nobody will be let go. You say to yourself, "I was nervous for no reason. How could I have completely misread the situation?"

PUBLIC: You have decided to attend the town meeting because there is an important issue on the agenda. The town needs to vote on the school budget for the upcoming year. Your children are still in the school system, so you are in favor of the expanded budget. You naturally assume that everyone will be in favor of it because a good school system usually increases property values. When you arrive at the meeting, you are stunned to hear that most of the people in the room are opposed to the proposed budget. While you realize it will raise your taxes somewhat, one of the primary reasons you moved to this town was because of the school system, and now you don't want the quality of your children's education to be affected by this. How can anyone be against the budget even if it means higher taxes? Why don't these people see what you see?

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

In our personal, professional, and public lives, there will always be occasions when we see things differently from others. These variations can be caused by a difference in perception. Can one person interpret something one way while another person sees or hears the exact same thing and interprets it in a totally different way? The answer is absolutely "yes." In this chapter, you will learn why we see and interpret things differently and how it influences our communication with others. In addition, you will learn how your own perceptions influence who you are and how you communicate.

PERCEPTION DEFINED

Perception
Process by which we select, organize, and interpret stimuli to make sense of our world.

When two fans watch the same football game, they may have very different perspectives about a controversial play.

Perception is a process consisting of three parts that we use to make sense of messages we encounter. We select, organize, and interpret stimuli so that they make sense to us. This happens constantly in our personal, professional, and public lives. For example, a friend asks you if you would like to go to a concert together. You eagerly confirm that you would like to go, as long as the tickets are not too expensive. Your friend buys the tickets and sends you a text message informing you how much you owe. When you learn the price of the ticket, you are shocked because your perception of "not too expensive" is clearly much different than your friend's perception. Differences in perception may cause minor misunderstandings or even major communication breakdowns.

Since perception is a cognitive process that helps us to understand our experiences, how we receive, filter, and interpret behaviors and conversations may not be the

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same as how someone else will complete the process. In essence, perception is the key to how we assign meaning in our interactions with others and thus, it has a significant impact on how we communicate and how we understand the communication of others. Understanding the perception process will enable you to consider the potential misunderstandings that may occur and help you communicate more effectively.

THE PERCEPTION PROCESS

Selection

The *perception process* has three phases: selection, organization, and interpretation (see Figure 2.1). The first phase is *selection*. Needless to say, at any given moment in our lives, there are many stimuli in our environment that may compete for our attention. We simply cannot focus on everything, so we select those stimuli that we feel are significant. That is why two people may see the same thing but "see" things differently. For example, when two fans watch the same football game, they may have very different perspectives about a controversial play. One fan may have focused on watching one player while the other fan focused on a different player. Because the two fans selected different things to attend to in the game, they may have a difference of opinion about the outcome of the play. Although they have seen the same play per se, they each focused on something different. As a result, the selection portion of the perception process will affect how each of them moves through the next phases of the process. As we discuss later in the chapter, what you select may be influenced by who you are, your relationship with another person, your culture, your expectations or prior experiences, or even your mood at any given time.

Selection → **Organization** → **Interpretation**

Perception process
A three-step process that includes selection, where we focus our attention on something and ignore other elements in the environment; organization, where we form what we have received into meaningful patterns; and interpretation, where we attach meaning to what we have selected and organized.

Selection
The first part of the perception process where we focus our attention on something within our environment.
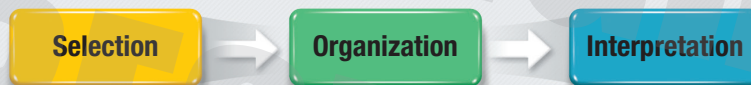
FIGURE 2.1

The perception process.

Organization

Organization is the second phase of the perception process. Once we select or focus our attention on some particular aspect or characteristic of the stimuli we selected, we need to organize it in a way that makes sense to us. We may relate what we receive to something we have already experienced. For example, when you hear someone with a great laugh, you may be interested in getting to know that person because his or her laugh reminds you of one of your friends who also has a great laugh. In our quest to organize what we receive, we use a categorization process. We may categorize people based on the roles we view them as fulfilling or by our assumptions about their personalities. Is this person a student, a teacher, or a parent? Is this person funny, serious, or responsible? Using this organizational process to make sense of others is natural in our interactions; however, we need to

Organization
The second phase of the perception process, which involves categorizing what we have received.

be careful of our assumptions and conclusions, and be cautious of overgeneralizing others. Doing so may prevent us from being accurate in our overall perceptions. In addition, as your experiences change throughout your life, you may alter the way in which you categorize stimuli. Thus, the way you once categorized romantic relationships in middle school is probably very different from the way in which you currently look at romantic relationships. Once we have organized what we have received, we move to the interpretation phase.

Interpretation

> ➤ **Interpretation**
> The third phase of the perception process where we attach meaning to what we have selected and organized.

The final step of the perception process is *interpretation*. This is where we attach meaning to what we have selected and organized. We may interpret what one person says to us differently than if someone else said it based on our relationship with the other individual. For example, if a friend says, "You are crazy!" you would likely assume the friend is joking; whereas, if someone you don't know or barely know said the same thing, you might interpret the same message as an insult. In addition, your personal experiences may also influence how you interpret a message. For example, you had a great relationship with your previous supervisor. It was very relaxed and you would even play jokes on each other. When your new supervisor was hired, you assumed you could approach tasks and the relationship in general in the same lighthearted and humorous way. The new supervisor, however, did not share the same view and told you to "take your work more seriously." The relationship you have with another person, the experiences you have had in your life, as well as other factors may cause you to interpret what you have received and organized in different ways.

Overall, the process of selecting something from the many stimuli received through our senses, and organizing and interpreting them in a way that makes sense, is the cognitive process known as perception. In the next section, we focus on the factors that influence how we go through the perception process.

THE INFLUENCES ON PERCEPTION

There are many factors that affect our perceptions, as you can see in Figure 2.2. These may include characteristics such as our age, gender, physical characteristics, cultural background, past experiences, and even our present mood. Your awareness of these factors will help you understand the perception process more clearly.
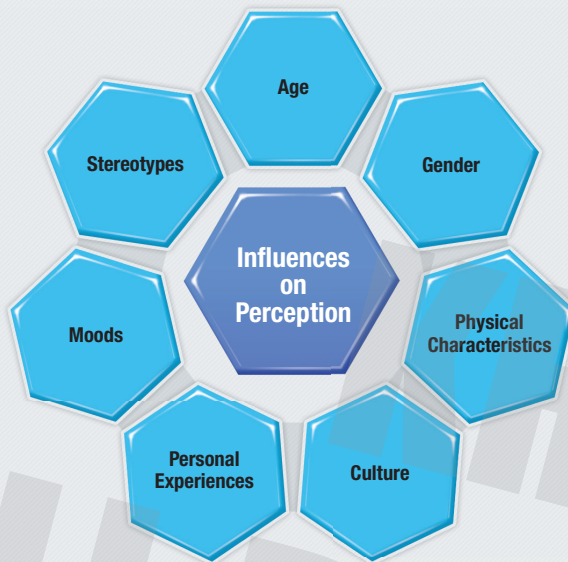
Age

Your age may influence how you perceive something. When you were younger, you may have thought the stories your grandparents told you were repetitive and boring. As you grew older, you realized the importance of these stories and their significance for your family. Things that don't seem important to us when we are one age could become very important at another age. The reverse may also be true. Perhaps when you were younger, you couldn't imagine ever being able to sleep without your favorite stuffed animal. Now, you remember your stuffed animal fondly, but you can sleep well without it. Consider the fact that when you were younger you may have felt uneasy discussing your romantic interests with your parents, but as an adult, you may be much more comfortable sharing information and even asking them for their perspective on your romantic relationships.

Gender

Gender may also influence our perceptions. How we view things may be related to whether we are male or female. While this isn't always the case, males and females may perceive the same thing differently. For example, both males and females in the workplace want to achieve their goals; however, it has been said that females may be more interested in nurturing and enhancing their relationships, while males, on the other hand, may be more interested in simply getting the task completed without as

much concern for the interpersonal relationships in the workplace (Wood, 2003). It may be the case that you are a male who is very concerned about your relationship with those in your department or you are a female who is not particularly concerned about these interpersonal relationships. However, in certain situations, your gender may influence your perception.

In addition to their different views and expectations, we may also have different perceptions of males and females. For example, Brann and Himes (2010) examined differences in how male and female newscasters were perceived when delivering the same message. While the information that both newscasters shared was identical, the perceptions of the newscasters were different. Male newscasters were rated as being more competent, more composed, and more extroverted than female newscasters. Thus, gender may cause us to perceive things differently or to be perceived by others in different ways.

Physical Characteristics

Another factor that has the potential to influence our perception is size or physical ability. For example, one of your authors had a pink stuffed bear as a child. She remembered the bear as being life-sized! Many years later when she found the bear in her parents' attic, she asked her mother if she had washed the bear and put it in the dryer, thus shrinking it. Her mother indicated she had not done that. Clearly, when she was very small, the bear appeared to be much larger than it actually was. While she had grown over the years, her perception of one of her favorite childhood toys had remained unchanged. When we are small, things seem much bigger to us. Imagine what it is like for a child to walk in a crowded store holding a parent's hand. The much larger parent probably doesn't realize that the world looks much different from the small child's vantage point. The same thing might be true for those of you who exercise on a regular basis. Weights that may be considered "light" for someone who has lifted for some time may seem extremely "heavy" for someone new to strength training. As you reflect on these examples, imagine the miscommunication that might occur when your interpretation of something is different from someone else's interpretation.

Culture

Our culture also influences how we perceive the behaviors and messages of others. If you have ever traveled to another country, you have probably experienced firsthand how different things may be. Not only may the language be new to you, but also the types of food, styles of dress, and even smells may be unique. As a result, you probably perceived things differently from someone who was a native of that country.

Culture influences how we perceive the behaviors and messages of others.

If you are from a culture that values direct eye contact, you would most likely perceive someone looking directly at you as being respectful. If, however, the other person is from a culture where it is disrespectful to look someone in the eyes when talking, you may perceive their lack of eye contact as being rude and misinterpret the situation if you don't understand the differences in cultural expectations. Suppose you are from a culture that values punctuality, and you are meeting a business client from a culture that views time as being flexible. She arrives to your scheduled meeting 25 minutes late, and you misinterpret her late arrival as being unprofessional even though it is acceptable to show up 25–30 minutes after a scheduled starting time in her culture. Examples like these occur more often than we realize and can cause individuals to misread a communication situation.

Personal Experiences

As we alluded to earlier, your own personal experiences may affect your perceptions. For example, suppose you hire a contractor to do some work in your home. Upon her arrival, the contractor thanks you multiple times and expresses her appreciation for the work. She explains that the recent economy has resulted in fewer jobs and more competition from other contractors. Her personal experience in struggling to find work has caused her to perceive the opportunity to work on your home differently than she would have if job options were readily available. Her personal experience of the shift in availability of work opportunities has changed the perceptions she had about her livelihood and the customers who pay for her services.

Moods

Our moods also influence our perceptions. Something that you would not usually find upsetting may bother or annoy you because of your present mood. Suppose you typically enjoy having a coworker or neighbor drop by your office unexpectedly to chat. On one particular day, however, you are trying to complete a project by a deadline and don't have time to talk. Due to your stress level, you may perceive that person to be bothersome or annoying on this particular day, whereas on other days, you would welcome the casual conversation. You may try to cut off the conversation, simply stop listening, or say something you might regret later.

If our mood is positive, it may also influence our perception of a situation. Suppose you have just received an "A" on a paper or a promotion at work. If you are in a great mood, something that might bother you on any other day simply does not seem to alter your positive outlook. Thus, whether your mood is positive or negative may influence your communication with others or their communication with you.

Stereotypes

➤ **Stereotypes**
Generalizations we hold about a group or a category of people.

The *stereotypes* or generalizations we hold about a group or a category of people may also affect our perceptions. When we stereotype someone, we apply our general perceptions of a particular group to an individual. This helps us simplify the process of perception and form a quick impression of the person. Reflect on some of your own perceptions of groups of people based on their economic status, cultural background, religious beliefs, education level, or other factors. Perhaps you perceive wealthy people as being self-absorbed and selfish, while someone else may perceive them as being generous and hard-working. Being aware of our stereotypes is important to ensuring effective communication. When we only use our own stereotypes to guide our communication with others, we increase our risk of miscommunication. After all, our stereotypes are not always entirely accurate.

As you can see, there are many factors that potentially alter how you perceive something. Understanding that you may perceive something in a totally different way from others is key to becoming a more effective communicator. Unfortunately, many of us incorrectly believe that the way in which we perceive something is exactly how others perceive it. It is important to realize that others may not share your perception of the same thing and learn to engage in the practice of checking your perceptions.

PERCEPTION CHECKING

How do we make sure that our perceptions are accurate? While you may have heard the advice "Go with your instinct!" checking our perceptions for accuracy is an important step to ensure effective communication. *Perception checking* is the process whereby we validate the accuracy of our perceptions. There are several different strategies you can use to check your perceptions. The following suggestions, which also appear in Figure 2.3, are often used to help us ensure our perceptions are correct.

> **Perception checking**
> The process whereby we validate the accuracy of our perceptions.

Use Our Senses

Your senses include what you see, hear, touch, taste, and/or smell. We often rely on our senses to help us determine the accuracy of what we perceive and how we process that information. For example, if you open the refrigerator and notice that the expiration date on a container of milk has passed, you probably assume the milk has spoiled. If you're brave enough, you might check your perception that the milk is sour by opening the container and smelling the milk. If it smells strange, our perceptions are confirmed. Perhaps you decide to further check your perceptions by pouring the milk into a glass. If you notice that it is curdled, your perceptions are confirmed again. You may even decide to go one step further and taste the milk

FIGURE 2.3

Strategies for checking perceptions.
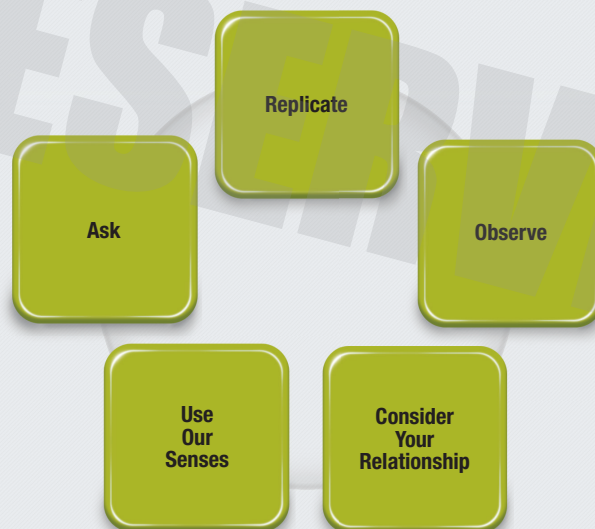
to determine if your perception is correct. In this example, you used a variety of your senses (i.e., sight, smell, and taste) to ensure that you perceived something accurately. While it is easy to judge whether or not our perception of spoiled milk is accurate, it is not always quite as easy to check to confirm that our perceptions in communication situations are accurate. Our ability to check the accuracy of our perceptions to ensure we are on the "same page" as others is vital in our personal, professional, and public lives.

Ask

One way to determine if your perception of something is accurate is to simply ask the other person if your interpretation of the situation is correct. Suppose you are at a party and one of your friends has barely spoken to you all evening. In addition, the last few times you've seen one another, the friend has seemed quiet and standoffish. If you perceive that your friend is angry with you, perceptions might be checked by asking, "I feel like you are upset with me, is that true?" While your friend may respond, "No, I'm okay…," your friend's verbal response may not reveal her true feelings. Thus, it is important to listen to *how* the response is said to help you determine whether your perceptions are correct. Depending on the tone of voice or the facial expressions that accompany the response of "I'm okay…" a variety of meanings could be perceived. It could be that your friend has been preoccupied with a project or a personal issue. If, on the other hand, your friend's response isn't convincing, your perception of the situation may be accurate and you may need to discuss this further. Even if it is difficult to address the situation directly, asking about your interpretation of the situation is a good option to check the accuracy of your perception.

In some situations, we are unable or unwilling to directly ask the other person if our perceptions are accurate. In these situations, consider asking others who have observed the situation or people you trust to give you an honest assessment of the situation. For example, in the example above, you might ask another friend to confirm or reject your perception of the situation. This "third party" may indicate to you that he also has noticed the friend's cool and aloof behavior toward you. In fact, he may be able to share information about why your friend is angry with you, may indicate that the friend has responded in a similar way with other people, or may inform you that the friend has had some personal issues lately. Soliciting feedback from someone you trust can assist you in checking the accuracy of your perceptions, and perhaps provide you with insight regarding how to address the situation.

Replicate

When scientists want to test a finding to confirm their conclusions, they repeat the study. Each time they receive the same results, it helps them know their results were not simply due to chance. In much the same way, you may be able to confirm your perceptions by repeating the behavior. Suppose a supervisor asks an employee to take an additional shift on several occasions, and each time the worker replies "No." The supervisor may perceive the worker as someone who is unmotivated and not a team player. Each time the worker refuses to take on additional responsibility, a negative perception of this worker is reinforced. Furthermore, each time the supervisor asks and receives a negative response, it confirms the supervisor's perception. Of course, there could be other reasons why the worker is unable to accept additional responsibilities. In this example, to further check his perceptions, the supervisor could also implement the strategy mentioned in the previous section and directly ask the employee why he never accepts an additional shift.

Observe

In order to clarify our perception of a situation, we may need to simply observe. As you will learn in Chapter 4, while words may provide us with information about how others are feeling or thinking, nonverbal communication (i.e., tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, etc.) provides valuable cues to assist in perception checking. In the public arena, we may not ever have the opportunity to speak firsthand to a candidate who is running for political office. Instead, we check our initial perceptions of the candidate by observing them. Do they seem genuinely concerned about the issues with which we are concerned? What does the candidate's nonverbal communication say about his or her beliefs? Our observations help confirm or disconfirm our perceptions. It is important to remember that our own actions sometimes speak louder than words. Just as we use our observations to confirm our perceptions of others, they do the same when checking their perceptions of us.

Consider Your Relationship

Your relationship with someone can also help you to check your perceptions. If you have a close relationship, you might understand a behavior more readily than if this person was simply an acquaintance or someone you just met. For example, if you have worked closely with someone in your organization for several years and that person exhibits uncharacteristic behavior, your relationship with the person and knowledge of their typical behavior will assist you in checking your perception of their current behavior.

Overall, there are several strategies that can be used to check our perceptions and to enhance our ability to avoid misunderstandings. It is important to remember that there may be several interpretations of the same behavior, so checking your perceptions will help you interpret a situation more accurately. Think about being in a restaurant and receiving what you consider to be "poor service" from a server. Is your immediate conclusion that the server is terrible? Could it be that the person is just having a bad day? Is this person new at the job? Could the server be stressed because the restaurant has had a sudden influx of customers? Could the kitchen be to blame for not getting all of the orders from one party out at the same time? Might this person be stressed about an issue not related to waiting on tables at the restaurant? Checking your perceptions of a situation will help you correctly interpret a situation and will help you respond appropriately.

Our perceptions of others are only one part of the interaction equation. Another key element is our self-perceptions. Understanding how we see ourselves and the image that we want to portray to others is essential to ensuring effective communication.

PERCEIVING THE SELF

In the previous section, we discussed what perception is, what factors influence our perceptions, and some strategies we may use to check our perceptions. In the next section, we turn our attention to the way in which we perceive our "self" and how this influences the way in which we communicate with others and how they perceive and communicate with us.

Self-Concept

➤ **Self-concept**
A set of perceptions we have about ourselves.

Our *self-concept* consists of the perceptions and beliefs we have about ourselves. It is relatively stable yet it can change and evolve as we grow and gain new life experiences. Self-concept is multidimensional and thus we describe ourselves in a variety of ways. Stop for a moment and consider how you would define yourself. Our gender, race, and ethnicity are some of the more common ways by which we define ourselves. We may also define ourselves by our occupation, roles, education, physical attributes, or personality traits. Each description of yourself contributes to your self-concept. Elements of your self-concept may change over time. For example, at one point in your life, you may define yourself through roles such as sibling, son or daughter, or student. Although some of these roles would not change, you may add new roles throughout your life such as spouse or partner, parent, aunt or uncle, employee, or supervisor to your list.

Some aspects of our self-concept are based on objective facts while other dimensions may be more subjective. For example, the color of your eyes and your height in inches are facts about you. You may say that you are "tall;" however, that is subjective because what may be perceived as being "tall" to one person may not seem very tall to another. Thus, if you are the tallest of your friends and family at 5 feet 7 inches, you may consider yourself tall until you become friends with someone who is 6 feet. If, on the other hand, you say, "I am 5 feet 7 inches," then you are communicating what is factual.

You may perceive yourself as a strong student, a great athlete, or a talented artist. Since we don't always judge ourselves exactly as others see us, others may not see us in this same way. For example, some contestants on *American Idol* auditions explain to the judges that they perceive themselves to be excellent singers. When they actually audition for the show, the judges may disagree with these perceptions.

The Development of the Self-Concept

From the time we are born, our self-concept begins to develop. Our experiences and interactions play an important role in the development of our self-concept. Sullivan (1953) noted that our view of self is created and shaped by how we think others view us. It is our perception of how we imagine others see us. This is known as *reflected appraisal*. Through our interactions with others, our self-perception may be confirmed or changed.

> **Reflected appraisal** Development of our sense of self based on how we believe others view or see us.

Significant others in our lives play an important role in the development of our self-concept. For most of us, our parents or primary caregivers provide the first messages that create our self-concept. When babies cry and their needs are met, a sense of security and love is communicated. As children grow older, they may receive positive or negative messages about behaviors ranging from manners, to athletic ability, to academic performance and these shape their sense of self. Your self-concept continues to evolve as you encounter new relationships and experiences. If we receive positive affirmation, we are more likely to embrace the feedback and enjoy something, thus adding to our self-concept regarding that element of our lives. Generally speaking, if we are told we are good at something, we are more likely to continue to do it and, as a result, often become better at it. For example, when you are learning to dance, if you receive positive feedback, you are much more likely to continue to practice. Because you continue to practice, you become better at dancing. In this sense, we may engage in what is known as the *self-fulfilling prophecy*. In other words, when we believe something is true, we respond in ways to ensure that the prediction is fulfilled. Naturally, there are many things that don't respond to the "think method." It is important to note that just

> **Self-fulfilling prophecy** The idea that when we believe something is true, it may become true. In other words, when we expect a particular outcome, either positive or negative, it is more likely that outcome will occur.

Teachers, coaches, friends, and supervisors also play a crucial role in shaping our self-concept.

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because we "think" something is true, it will become a reality. Recall our earlier example of the *American Idol* candidates. Just because they believe they have talent and perhaps their friends or family members even tell them they sing beautifully, it does not necessarily make it true. We don't become a great singer just because others say we're good and we believe them.

Needless to say, the reverse is also true. If you believe you are not good at something, you may fear or avoid it and then the self-fulfilling prophecy is fulfilled. For example, perhaps you had a bad experience when you were asked to present the results of a team project to another department. From that time on, you avoided speaking in public because you believed you were not good at it. Naturally, avoiding all public speaking situations will perpetuate your belief in your inability to speak in public and hence, this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

As we enter school, our teachers and our peers influence our self-concept as well. For example, if your teacher told you that you were good in science or if you received good grades on your assignments when you were in elementary school, this becomes part of your self-concept. If you receive positive feedback on your science homework and tests, it reinforces this element of your self-concept. In addition, you will most likely feel positive about doing your science homework, which, in turn, will help you maintain this portion of your self-concept. Unfortunately, teachers

may also have a negative influence on the self-concept of their students by saying something negative about their work instead of offering constructive criticism. Hopefully, you have not had this experience but there is a vast difference between someone telling you that you did very poorly versus pointing out the areas that were not strong and indicating how you could have improved upon the assignment.

Likewise, our peers influence the development of our self-concept. Think back to elementary school again. If you were the one that other children invited for play dates in elementary school, you probably viewed yourself as friendly and likeable. Similarly, if you did something funny and your peers laughed, you most likely began to believe you are funny. On the other hand, if you did something you thought was funny and nobody laughed, you also received a clear message from your peers.

In your professional life, your self-concept may also evolve. For example, suppose you are sitting in a meeting with senior management and you make a suggestion that your boss confirms as being valuable and worthwhile. At the next meeting, another suggestion you offer is received with enthusiasm. With each instance, you begin to view yourself as someone who could pursue a higher management position in the organization. When you receive this type of feedback and are praised for certain traits, they are more likely to become part of your self-concept.

Overall, early in our lives, parents and caregivers, teachers and peers send messages that influence our self-concept. As we go through life, our friends, family, supervisors, and colleagues continue to influence our self-concept. In turn, this influences how we communicate with others. In the next section, we discuss some of the barriers that prevent us from having an accurate self-concept.

Barriers Preventing an Accurate Self-Concept

There are several issues that may prevent us from forming a clear and accurate self-concept. As previously mentioned, your self-concept is created and developed through your interactions with others. You tend to construct a sense of who you are based on how others see you and communicate with you. Unfortunately, their perceptions of you may be inaccurate and this can cause you to see yourself inaccurately. For example, what if you are told you are the *best* artist or the *smartest* child by your parents, but when you begin school, you do not receive the same messages? On the other hand, what if you are told you are *worthless* or that you were a *mistake*? Consider the impact these types of messages would have on a person's self-concept. For better or worse, the messages we receive from significant others have an impact on our self-concepts; but these messages may or may not be accurate, and this may cause inaccuracy in our self-concepts.

As we previously indicated, the self-concept consists of perceptions we have about ourselves that are relatively stable. Unfortunately, these relatively enduring perceptions may pose a barrier that prevents us from developing an accurate self-concept since they cause us to be resistant to information that could alter our perceptions. Certainly, having a strong sense of self is a good thing, but if it prevents us from accepting valid messages about who we truly are, it can be problematic. Suppose you have always considered yourself to be poor at expressing yourself when writing. Perhaps you earned good grades in your English courses, but struggled to complete essays and received very little positive feedback from your teachers about your writing. When you entered college, you took the writing course required for all first-year students and was placed in a course with a teacher who inspired a passion for writing. When your first paper was returned with a grade of "A," you thought it was a mistake or a fluke. When you received the next paper back with the same grade, you thought, "This can't be right." On the third paper, your teacher wrote that you had a strong talent for writing and that she hoped you would continue taking writing courses in the future. Despite the positive feedback, it was difficult for you to change your belief that you were only an average writer. The challenge is, once we have a relatively stable sense of self, we find it difficult to change our perceptions. This may prevent us from having an accurate self-concept at times.

Another type of inaccurate perception we have of ourselves is that we may judge ourselves more critically in some instances than others may. For example, a recent college graduate may perceive herself as unmarketable because her final grade point average was lower than many others in her major. She doubts she will get the job she wants due to this. During her interview, the interviewer is impressed with her enthusiasm and sense of responsibility and offers her the job. In this example, she judged herself more harshly than the interviewer judged her.

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, the self-fulfilling prophecy may also prevent us from possessing an accurate self-concept. What if you majored in accounting and took a job at a large public accounting firm that required all employees to pass the CPA examination within the first year of employment? If you believe you will do poorly on the exam because you simply "don't do well on standardized tests of any kind," you may wind up behaving in ways that ensure the fulfillment of your prophecy. For example, you may talk yourself out of going to the review course you signed up to take, preparing for the class, or studying on your own. You rationalize to yourself, "Why bother if I won't do well on this type of test anyway?" If you employ any of these tactics, you are on the path to confirming your own prophecy of poor performance. Having this type of perception can create a barrier to developing an accurate self-concept.

Self-serving bias
The tendency for us to interpret the things we do in the most positive way or deny personal responsibility for the negative things that happen to us.

A final barrier is the *self-serving bias*. This involves a tendency for taking personal credit for the positive outcomes for our actions, and directing the blame toward others

for the negative outcomes. Thus, if you do well on an exam, it is because you studied. If you do poorly on the test, however, you may attribute the negative outcome to the difficulty of the test, to the instructor's poor teaching style, or to the teacher's unfair grading. In a 1982 study of job-seekers in Britain, Furnham found that individuals tend to take credit for their own abilities and skills when they are successful in securing a job, while they blame their lack of success in securing a job on factors that are beyond their control. This self-serving bias, or our tendency to judge ourselves less harshly than we judge others, may again cause us to have an inaccurate self-concept.

Overall, there are several barriers that may prevent us from having an accurate self-concept. Additionally, there may even be elements of our self-concept about which even we aren't aware at a given point in time. Many years ago, one of the authors had a student whose young child was killed by a drunk driver. She became a tireless advocate for stronger laws to help prevent drunk driving. In her work with Mothers Against Drunk Driving, she did a great deal of public speaking. On one occasion she said to the class, "If anyone had ever told me I would be speaking in public and involved with trying to change public policy, I would never have believed it. I have always viewed myself as just a mom." Keeping this information in mind is important as we discuss self-esteem and its influence on perception and communication.

Self-Esteem

Closely related to self-concept is *self-esteem*, the subjective evaluation of our worth. How we feel about ourselves, or the value we place on our abilities and behaviors, is our self-esteem. Whereas self-concept deals with our identity or a description of ourselves, our self-esteem gauges the value or extent to which we are happy or unhappy with the various dimensions of our self-concept. For example, when you feel really good about your ability as an actor, you have high self-esteem about acting. As you audition for various roles, you do so with confidence. When you communicate about your ability to act, you do so in a positive manner. On the other hand, if you have low self-esteem regarding your acting ability, you may shy away from auditions and communicate in a negative manner about your acting ability.

Self-esteem The subjective evaluation of our worth; how we feel about ourselves or the value we place on our abilities and behaviors.

Just as your self-concept is not always objective, neither is your self-esteem. For example, you may have low self-esteem because you do not have accurate information or feedback from others. You may be doing fine in your new job, but you may not be listening accurately to the feedback you receive from your supervisor or colleagues. Your misinterpretation of their messages may lead you to believe you are not good at what you do. On the other hand, even when some people aren't doing particularly well at something, they may ignore negative feedback they receive, and their self-esteem will remain intact despite the contradictory information. When a manager conducts an

annual evaluation, an employee may perceive that he has been doing an outstanding job. If you were to ask the manager, she may view the employee as "unmotivated" because he is simply doing what is required based on his job description and "clocking out" at the end of the day. The employee will likely maintain the perception that he is great at what he does because he is completing the tasks that are required without taking into account the quality of his work performance. Overall, the set of perceptions we have about ourselves, our self-concept, and our self-esteem (i.e., the value we place on our abilities and behaviors) influence how we communicate with others. This, in turn, impacts the perceptions that others form of us. How we present ourselves and how we perceive others is the focus of the next section.

Self-Presentation

>➤ **Self-presentation**
Presenting yourself to another as you would like to be perceived.

Have you ever behaved in a particular way to impress someone? Do you communicate differently with friends than you would with someone you are just meeting for the first time? If so, you are like most people. We tend to present ourselves differently based on the situation. *Self-presentation* influences how we want others to perceive us. Goffman (1959) spoke of the "face," which is the view you want others to have of you. We present ourselves differently as a situation changes, and we change our communication depending on our relationship with the other person. For example, you may present yourself one way as a student speaking with your professor and in another way as a student speaking with a classmate. In the first scenario, you may

A manager and an employee could have an entirely different perception of job performance.

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be polite and positive about the course, commenting to the professor on the relevance of a recent lecture to your future career goals. When speaking with a friend about the course, you may use slang and indicate you are taking the course simply because it fulfills a requirement for your major.

While we willingly present one view of our "self" to the world, we simultaneously hide aspects of our private self by masking certain behaviors (Goffman, 1959). For example, have you ever put on a brave face when you are actually nervous about something? Have you ever been upset about a breakup but smiled and minimized the hurt you felt inside? If so, you have worn a mask to conceal how you truly feel about that part of your "self."

Self-presentation may influence how we present ourselves in personal situations versus professional ones. According to Guadagno, Okdie, and Kruse (2012), "People tend to present and sometimes exaggerate or fabricate their characteristics in an

Shy individuals may be more confident and self-assured when communicating online.

attempt to create their desired impression" (p. 642). In today's world, the notion of self-presentation naturally brings up how individuals present themselves online. If you have ever "met" anyone online, you may have presented yourself in a particular way. In a survey of 80 individuals who had submitted online profiles to a variety of online dating websites, Toma, Hancock, and Ellison (2007) found 81% of those surveyed lied about one or more of their physical attributes including their height, weight, or age. Similarly, individuals who are shy may be more confident when communicating online and present themselves in a much more self-assured manner because the interaction is not face-to-face. In fact, some of our students reported feeling more confident communicating online because they felt they were not being judged on how they look, dress, or sound. Presenting yourself online may not reveal your true self to another and others may wonder if the self you have revealed is accurate.

Is it possible to improve our sense of "self?" Absolutely! Becoming aware of who we are and who we would like to become may help us enhance our self-concept and self-esteem. Through careful reflection, we may be able to focus on the areas of our "self" that we would like to strengthen. Since our sense of self evolves and is always "in process," we have the ability to find ways in which we may improve. This can be

accomplished a number of ways: through the courses we take, the relationships we nurture, or the help we seek from professionals.

Thus far, we have focused on perceiving the self. In the next section, we discuss how we perceive others. Our perceptions of others have an impact on how we interpret their communication and how we communicate with them.

PERCEIVING OTHERS

How We Perceive Others

At the beginning of the chapter, we talked about some of the factors that influence our perceptions such as gender, culture, age, and our past experiences. It is important to keep these in mind as we discuss how we perceive others.

Not only do the words that others say cause you to form impressions, but a person's nonverbal communication may also cause you to perceive that individual in a particular way. Seiter, Weger, Kinzer, and Jensen (2009) studied "whether a debater's background nonverbal behavior affected audience perceptions of her and her opponent's likeability" (p. 1). Four versions of a televised debate were created with the nonspeaking opponent shown on a sub-screen while listening to the speaker shown on the main screen. In one version, the nonspeaking opponent had a "neutral expression." In another, the nonspeaking opponent showed "occasional disagreement." In the third version, the nonspeaking opponent showed almost "constant disagreement" while in the fourth version, both "agreement and disagreement" were displayed by the nonspeaking opponent.

After viewing the debates, the participants rated the debaters' likeability. Analysis indicated that the "background behavior had no effect on perceptions of the speaking debater's likeability ratings. This suggests that, when judging a candidate's likeability, audiences rely on the candidate's own behavior, perhaps not trusting the opinion of the nonspeaking opponent, who may be seen as biased. On the other hand, such behavior was associated with lower likeability ratings for the debater who was communicating nonverbally" (Seiter et al., 2009, pp. 7–8).

Our perception shapes the impressions, or mental images, we form of others. Have you ever met a person for the first time and after only a few minutes of speaking with that individual thought to yourself, "What a friendly person?" You may also have met someone for the first time and not been impressed at all. Perhaps you've heard the phrase, "You never get a second chance to make a first impression." If so,

you begin to realize the importance of first impressions. While first impressions are powerful, we need to keep an open mind and build on our initial perceptions in order to develop an accurate perception of that person.

When we perceive someone to be similar to us, we may decide to develop and maintain a relationship with that person (Wright, 2004). In Chapter 6 we explore the importance of similarity when initiating and developing relationships with others. If you start a new job and meet a colleague at employee orientation who attended the same college and shares a passion for the same professional baseball team, your apparent similarity with this person may cause you to perceive that you both view things in the same way.

Earlier in the chapter we discussed the impact of stereotyping. At times, we form impressions of others based on the stereotypes we hold. Our stereotypes may be positive or negative; however, we always need to be mindful of the fact that just because someone belongs to a certain group, it does not mean that person possesses all of the qualities you have come to expect about that group or that your stereotypes are accurate. Unfortunately, many of us hold on to our first impressions even when we receive information that contradicts those impressions. If you believe someone is insincere, you may maintain that impression even in the face of contrary evidence. Certainly, we need to keep an open mind about others and allow ourselves to move beyond first impressions when we receive new information that helps us obtain more accurate perceptions of others.

Another problem with our perceptions of others is that we may focus on the negative as opposed to the positive. Clearly, if the negative aspects overshadow the positive ones, we have a right to take that into consideration. However, if the individual has several positive qualities and we focus exclusively on one negative aspect, this distorts our perception of that person and influences our relationship.

Finally, when we are forming our impressions of others, we need to keep in mind that not everyone acts or thinks like us. Often, we assume that others hold similar beliefs, values, and attitudes. Have you ever pulled a prank on someone that you thought was funny, but the person became upset by your actions? While you may view your prank as humorous, the person pranked may consider it childish. The differing perceptions of your behavior may negatively impact your interaction with one another.

Improving How We Perceive Others

People may not always form accurate perceptions of others. How can we avoid the potential pitfalls of impression formation and improve our perceptions of others?

First, we need to keep an open mind. Although we may form first impressions, we need to make sure we continue to gather more information and be willing to modify our impressions. Being open to receiving new information about the other person, even if it goes against our first impression, is important.

➤ Empathy
The ability to understand how someone else is feeling or thinking.

Another way to improve how we perceive others is through empathy. *Empathy* is the ability to understand how someone else is feeling or thinking. Seeing something from another person's perspective can help us understand what that individual is experiencing and how it may impact their communication. For example, if a parent and a teenager have a disagreement about a curfew, if they each stop for a minute and consider the perspective of the other, they may better understand one another's concerns and this may help to reduce the potential for conflict. Perhaps the parent could ask herself, "How would I feel if I were a 16-year-old?" in an attempt to see things from the teen's point of view. The teenager could reflect, "I guess if I was the parent, I would probably be nervous that something bad was going to happen to my child." The process of perspective-taking enhances our ability to see things from the other person's point of view and enables us to communicate more effectively.

Finally, as we mentioned earlier in the chapter, it is wise to check your perceptions. This will help ensure that the way in which you have interpreted something is actually how the other person intended to convey it. The same strategies you use to make sure your perceptions of situations are correct can be used to gain more accurate perceptions of others. Overall, increasing the accuracy of our perceptions helps reduce the potential for miscommunication. This approach can help us gain clarification, withhold judgment, and limit defensiveness.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter, we have defined perception and examined its process. As indicated in the chapter, there are various elements including our age, gender, culture, and mood that influence our perceptions. Naturally, the process we go through as we select, organize, and interpret what our senses take in and the various elements that influence our perceptions have a strong impact on how we communicate with others and they communicate with us.

We also defined self-concept as the perceptions we have of ourselves and discussed how the self-concept develops through our communication with significant others including parents or caregivers, teachers, peers, colleagues, and supervisors. We also outlined some of the barriers that prevent us from having an accurate sense of self. Furthermore, we defined self-esteem and explained the impact this also has on communication. Finally, we highlighted the relevance of our perceptions of others in the communication process. Overall, the perceptions we have of ourselves and others and their perceptions of us influence our communication with one another. Understanding the important role of perception in the communication process will enable us communicate more effectively.

KEY WORDS

Empathy The ability to understand how someone else is feeling or thinking.

Interpretation The third phase of the perception process where we attach meaning to what we have selected and organized.

Organization The second phase of the perception process, which involves categorizing what we have received.

Perception Process by which we select, organize, and interpret stimuli to make sense of our world.

Perception checking The process whereby we validate the accuracy of our perceptions.

Perception process A three-step process that includes selection, where we focus our attention on something and ignore other elements in the environment; organization, where we form what we have received into meaningful patterns; and interpretation, where we attach meaning to what we have selected and organized.

Reflected appraisal Development of our sense of self based on how we believe others view or see us.

Selection The first part of the perception process where we focus our attention on something within our environment.

Self-concept A set of perceptions we have about ourselves.

Self-esteem The subjective evaluation of our worth; how we feel about ourselves or the value we place on our abilities and behaviors.

Self-fulfilling prophecy The idea that when we believe something is true, it may become true. In other words, when we expect a particular outcome, either positive or negative, it is more likely that outcome will occur.

Self-presentation Presenting yourself to another as you would like to be perceived.

Self-serving bias The tendency for us to interpret the things we do in the most positive way or deny personal responsibility for the negative things that happen to us.

Stereotypes Generalizations we hold about a group or a category of people.

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