

### LECTURE 3: The Self, Perception, and Communication

This topic will address the way we perceive ourselves and others, and the factors that influence the perception of our selves either positively or negatively.

#### Learning Outcomes



1. How common perceptual tendencies and situational factors influence perception.
2. The influence of culture on perception and the self-concept.
3. The importance of empathy in communication.
4. The communicative influences that shape the self-concept.
5. How self-fulfilling prophecies influence behavior.
6. How the process of identity management can result in the presentation of multiple selves.
7. The reasons for and the ethical dimensions of identity management.

### PERCEIVING OTHERS

#### Common Perceptual Tendencies

We are influenced by what is most obvious.  
We cling to first impressions, even if wrong.

We tend to assume others are similar to us.

We tend to favour negative impressions over positive ones.

We blame innocent victims for their misfortunes.

#### Common Perceptual Tendencies

Shared narratives may be desirable, but they can be hard to achieve. Some of the biggest problems that interfere with understanding and agreement arise from errors in what psychologists call *attribution*—the process of attaching meaning to behavior. We attribute meaning to both our own actions and to the actions of others, but we often use different yardsticks. Research has uncovered several perceptual errors that can lead to inaccurate attributions—and to troublesome communication. By becoming aware of these errors, we can guard against them and avoid unnecessary conflicts.

**We often judge ourselves more charitably than we judge others**

In an attempt to convince ourselves and others that the positive face we show to the world is true, we tend to judge ourselves in the most generous terms possible. Social scientists have labeled this tendency the **self-serving bias**. When others suffer, we often blame the problem on their personal qualities. On the other hand, when we suffer, we find explanations outside ourselves.

### **We are influenced by what is most obvious**

Every time we encounter another person, we are bombarded with more information than we can possibly manage. You can appreciate this by spending two or three minutes just reporting on what you can observe about another person through your five senses.

(“Now I see you blinking your eyes . . . Now I notice you smiling . . . Now I hear you laugh and then sigh . . . Now I notice you’re wearing a red shirt . . .”) You will find that the list seems almost endless and that every time you seem to near the end, a new observation presents itself.

There are three factors that cause us to notice some messages and ignore others. For example, we pay attention to stimuli that are *intense* (loud music, brightly dressed people), *repetitious* (dripping faucets, persistent people), or *contrastive* (a normally happy person who acts grumpy or vice versa). *Motives* also determine what information we select from our environment. If you’re anxious about being late for a date, you’ll notice whatever clocks may be around you; if you’re hungry, you’ll become aware of any restaurants, markets, and billboards advertising food in your path.

### **We cling to first impressions, even if wrong**

Labeling people according to our first impressions is an inevitable part of the perception process. These labels are a way of making interpretations. “She seems cheerful.” “He seems sincere.” “They sound awfully conceited.” If they’re accurate, impressions like these can be useful ways of deciding how to respond best to people in the future. Problems arise, however, when the labels we attach are inaccurate, because after we form an opinion of someone, we tend to hang on to it and make any conflicting information fit our image.

Given the almost unavoidable tendency to form first impressions, the best advice we can offer is to keep an open mind and be willing to change your opinion as events prove that the first impressions were mistaken.

### **We tend to assume others are similar to us**

People commonly imagine that others possess the same attitudes and motives that they do. For example, research shows that people with low self-esteem imagine that others view them unfavorably, whereas people who like themselves imagine that others like them, too.

The frequently mistaken assumption that others' views are similar to our own applies in a wide range of situations. For example: You lost your temper with a friend a week ago and said some things you regret. In fact, if someone said those things to you, you would consider the relationship finished. Imagining that your friend feels the same way, you avoid making contact. In fact, your friend feels that he was partly responsible and has avoided you because he thinks you're the one who wants to end things.

Examples like these show that others don't always think or feel the way we do and that assuming that similarities exist can lead to problems. How can you find out the other person's real position? Sometimes by asking directly, sometimes by checking with others, and sometimes by making an educated guess after you've thought the matter out. All these alternatives are better than simply assuming that everyone would react the way you do.

### **We tend to favour negative impressions over positive ones**

Research shows that when people are aware of both the positive and negative traits of another, they tend to be more influenced by the negative traits. In one study, for example, researchers found that job interviewers were likely to reject candidates who revealed negative information even when the total amount of information was highly positive.

Sometimes this attitude makes sense. If the negative quality clearly outweighs any positive ones, you'd be foolish to ignore it. A surgeon with shaky hands and a teacher who hates children, for example, would be unsuitable for their jobs whatever their other virtues. But much of the time it's a bad idea to pay excessive attention to negative qualities and overlook positive ones. This is the mistake some people make when screening potential friends or dates. They find some who are too outgoing or too reserved, others who aren't intelligent enough, and still others who have the wrong sense of humor. Of course, it's important to find people you truly enjoy, but expecting perfection can lead to much unnecessary loneliness. The moral, then, is clear: Don't assume that your first judgment of a person is accurate.

### **Perception and Culture**

Perceptual differences make communication challenging enough between members of the same culture. But when communicators come from different cultures, the potential for misunderstandings is even greater. Culture provides perceptual filter that influences the way we interpret even the simplest events.

This fact was demonstrated in studies exploring the domination of vision in one eye over the other.<sup>18</sup> Researchers used a binocular-like device that projects different images to each eye. The subjects were twelve Americans and twelve Mexicans.

Each was presented with ten pairs of photographs, each pair containing one picture from U.S. culture (e.g., a baseball game) and one from Mexican culture (e.g., a bullfight). After viewing each pair of images, the subjects reported what they saw. The results clearly indicated the power of culture to influence perceptions: Subjects had a strong tendency to see the image from their own background.

The same principle causes people from different cultures to interpret similar events in different ways. Blinking while another person talks may be hardly noticeable to North Americans, but the same behavior is considered impolite in Taiwan. A “V” sign made with two fingers means “victory” in most of the Western world—as long as the palm is facing out. But in some European countries the same sign with the palm facing in roughly means “shove it.” The beckoning finger motion that is familiar to Americans is an insulting gesture in most Middle and Far Eastern countries.

Even beliefs about the very value of talk differ from one culture to another. North American culture views talk as desirable and use it to achieve social purposes as well as to perform tasks. Silence in conversational situations has a negative value in this culture. It is likely to be interpreted as lack of interest, unwillingness to communicate, hostility, anxiety, shyness, or a sign of interpersonal incompatibility. Westerners are uncomfortable with silence, which they find embarrassing and awkward. Furthermore, the *kind* of talk that Westerners admire is characterized by straightforwardness and honesty. Being indirect or vague— “beating around the bush,” it might be labeled—has a negative connotation.

On the other hand, most Asian cultures discourage the expression of thoughts and feelings. Silence is valued, as Taoist sayings indicate: “In much talk there is great weariness,” or “One who speaks does not know; one who knows does not speak.” Unlike Westerners, who are uncomfortable with silence, Japanese and Chinese believe that remaining quiet is the proper state

when there is nothing to be said. To Easterners, a talkative person is often considered a show-off or insincere. And when an Asian does speak up on social matters, the message is likely to be phrased indirectly to “save face” for the recipient.

It is easy to see how these different views of speech and silence can lead to communication problems when people from different cultures meet. Perceptual differences are just as important right at home when members of different co cultures interact. Failure to recognize co cultural differences can lead to unfortunate and unnecessary misunderstandings.

Cross-cultural differences can be quite subtle. For example, when meeting with academic counselors, Latinos preferred to be respected as members of their own culture as well as individuals. On the other hand, blacks preferred to be acknowledged as individuals rather than being identified as members of an ethnic group.

### **PERCEPTION CHECKING: The importance of empathy in communication**

Good intentions and a strong effort to empathize are one way to understand others. Along with a positive attitude, however, there is a simple tool that can help you interpret the behavior of others more accurately. To see how this tool operates, consider how often others jump to mistaken conclusions about your thoughts, feelings, and motives:

“Why are you mad at me?”(Who said you were?)

“What’s the matter with you?”(Who said anything was the matter?)

“Come on now. Tell the truth.” (Who said you were lying?)

The skill of **perception checking** provides a better way to handle your interpretations. A complete perception check has three parts:

- \_ A description of the behavior you noticed
- \_ At least two possible interpretations of the behavior
- \_ A request for clarification about how to interpret the behavior.

Perception checks for the preceding three examples would look like this:

“When you stomped out of the room and slammed the door [*behavior*], I wasn’t sure whether you were mad at me [*first interpretation*] or just in a hurry [*second interpretation*].

How did you feel [*request for clarification*]?”

“You haven’t laughed much in the last couple of days [*behavior*]. I wonder whether something’s bothering you [*first interpretation*] or whether you’re just feeling quiet[*second interpretation*].

What's up [*request for clarification*]?" "You said you really liked the job I did [*behavior*], but there was something about your voice that made me think you may not like it [*first interpretation*]. Maybe it's just my imagination, though [*second interpretation*]. How do you really feel [*request for clarification*]?"

Perception checking is a tool for helping us understand others accurately instead of assuming that our first interpretation is correct.

## PERCEIVING OURSELVES

### *Self-Concept Defined*

The **self-concept** is a set of relatively stable perceptions that each of us holds about ourselves. The self-concept includes our conception about what is unique about us and what makes us both similar to, and different from, others. To put it differently, the self-concept is rather like a mental mirror that reflects how we view ourselves: not only physical features, but also emotional states, talents, likes and dislikes, values, and roles.

It is valuable to gain a personal understanding of how this theoretical construct applies to you.

You can do so by answering a simple question:

"Who are you?"

How do you define yourself? As a student? A man or woman? By your age? Your religion? Occupation?

There are many ways of identifying yourself. Take a few more minutes and list as many ways as you can to identify who you are. You'll need this list later in this chapter, so be sure to complete it now. Try to include all the characteristics that describe you:

- \_Your moods or feelings
- \_Your appearance and physical condition
- \_Your social traits
- \_Talents you possess or lack
- \_Your intellectual capacity
- \_Your strong beliefs
- \_Your social roles

Of course, not all items on such a list would be equally important. For example, the most significant part of one person's self-concept might consist of social roles, whereas for another it might consist of physical appearance, health, friendships, accomplishments, or skills.

An important element of the self-concept is **self-esteem**: our evaluations of self-worth. One person's self-concept might include being religious, tall, or athletic.

That person's self-esteem would be shaped by how he or she felt about these qualities:

<b>PERSON WITH HIGH SELF ESTEEM</b>	<b>PERSON WITH LOW SELF ESTEEM</b>
Likely to think well of others	Likely to disapprove others
Expect to be accepted by others	Expect to be rejected by others
Evaluate their performance more favourably.	Evaluate their performance less favourably.
Perform well when being watched: not afraid of others' reactions.	Perform poorly when being watched: sensitive to possible negative reaction.
Work harder for people who demand high standards of performance.	Work harder for undemanding less critical people.
Inclined to feel comfortable with others they view as superior in some ways.	Feel threatened by people they view as superior in some ways.
Able to defend themselves against negative comments of other.	Have difficulty defending themselves against others' negative comments; more easily influenced.

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### **Communication and Development of the Self**

So far we've talked about what the self-concept is; but at this point you may be asking what it has to do with the study of human communication. We can begin to answer this question by looking at how you came to possess your own self-concept.

Our identity comes almost exclusively from communication with others. As psychologists Arthur Combs and Donald Snygg put it:

*The self is essentially a social product arising out of experience with people. . . . We learn the most significant and fundamental facts about ourselves from . . . “reflected appraisals,” inferences about ourselves made as a consequence of the ways we perceive others behaving toward us.*

The term **reflected appraisal**, coined by Harry Stack Sullivan, is a good one, because it metaphorically describes the fact that we develop an image of ourselves from the way we think others view us. This notion of the “looking-glass self” was introduced in 1902 by Charles H. Cooley, who suggested that we put ourselves in the position of other people and then, in our mind’s eye, view ourselves as we imagine they see us.

As we learn to speak and understand language, verbal messages—both positive and negative—also contribute to the developing self-concept. These messages continue later in life, especially when they come from what social scientists term **significant others**—people whose opinions we especially value. A teacher from long ago, a special friend or relative, or perhaps a barely known acquaintance whom you respected can all leave an imprint on how you view yourself. To see the importance of significant others, ask yourself how you arrived at your opinion of you as a student, as a person attractive to the opposite sex, as a competent worker, and so on and you will see that these self-evaluations were probably influenced by the way others regarded you.

As we grow older, the influence of significant others is less powerful. The evaluations of others still influence beliefs about the self in some areas, such as physical attractiveness and popularity. In other areas, however, the looking glass of the self-concept has become distorted, so that it shapes the input of others to make it conform to our existing beliefs.

### **Culture and the Self-Concept**

At the dawn of a new millennium, the challenges and opportunities that come from cultural diversity are becoming more apparent. But the power of culture is far more basic and powerful than most people realize. Although we seldom recognize the fact, our whole notion of the self is shaped by the culture in which we have been reared.

The most obvious feature of a culture is the language its members use. If you live in an environment where everyone speaks the same tongue, then language will have little noticeable impact. But when your primary language is not the majority one, or when it is not prestigious, the sense of being a member of what social scientists call the “out-group” is strong. At this point the speaker of a non-dominant language can react in one of two ways: either to feel pressured to

assimilate by speaking the “better” language or to refuse to accede to the majority language and maintain loyalty to the ethnic language.

Cultures affect the self-concept in more subtle ways, too. Most Western cultures are highly individualistic, whereas other cultures—most Asian ones, for example—are traditionally much more collective.

If you ask Hindus for their identity, they will give you their caste and village as well as their name. The Sanskrit formula for identifying one’s self begins with lineage and goes on to family and house and ends with one’s personal name. These conventions for naming aren’t just cultural curiosities: They reflect a very different way of viewing one’s self. In collective cultures a person gains identity by belonging to a group. This means that the degree of interdependence among members of the society and its subgroups is much higher.

### **The Self-Concept, Personality, and Communication**

Whereas the self-concept is an internal image we hold of ourselves, the personality is the view others hold of us. We use the notion of **personality** to describe a relatively consistent set of traits people exhibit across a variety of situations. We use the notion of personality to characterize others as friendly or aloof, energetic or lazy, smart or stupid, and in literally thousands of other ways.

Despite its common use, the term *personality* is often an oversimplification. Much of our behavior isn’t consistent. Rather, it varies from one situation to another.

You may be quiet around strangers but gregarious around friends and family.

You might be optimistic about your schoolwork or career but pessimistic about your romantic prospects. The term *easy going* might describe your behavior at home, whereas you might be a fanatic at work. This kind of diversity is not only common; it’s also often desirable. The argumentative style you use with friends wouldn’t be well received by the judge in traffic court when you appeal a citation. Likewise, the affectionate behavior you enjoy with a romantic partner at home probably wouldn’t be appropriate in public. As you read in Chapter 1, a wide range of behaviors is an important ingredient of communication competence.

In this sense, a consistent personality can be more of a liability than an asset—unless that personality is “flexible.”

### The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

The self-concept is such a powerful force on the personality that it not only determines how we communicate in the present, but also can actually influence our behavior and that of others in the future. Such occurrences come about through a phenomenon called the self-fulfilling prophecy.

A **self-fulfilling prophecy** occurs when a person's expectation of an outcome makes the outcome more likely to occur than would otherwise have been true. Self-fulfilling prophecies occur all the time although you might never have given them that label. For example, think of some instances you may have known:

\_You expected to become nervous and botch a job interview and later did so.

\_You anticipated having a good (or terrible) time at a social affair and found your expectations being met.

\_A teacher or boss explained a new task to you, saying that you probably wouldn't do well at first. You did not do well.

\_A friend described someone you were about to meet, saying that you wouldn't like the person. The prediction turned out to be correct—you didn't like the new acquaintance.

In each of these cases, there is a good chance that the outcome happened because it was predicted to occur. You needn't have botched the interview, the party might have been boring only because you helped make it so, you might have done better on the new task if your boss hadn't spoken up, and you might have liked the new acquaintance if your friend hadn't given you preconceptions. In other words, what helped make each outcome occur was the expectation that it would happen.

There are two types of self-fulfilling prophecies. The first type occurs when your own expectations influence your behavior. The same principle operates for anxious public speakers: Communicators who feel anxious about facing an audience often create self-fulfilling prophecies about doing poorly that cause them to perform less effectively.

A second type of self-fulfilling prophecy occurs when the expectations of one person govern another's actions. This type of self-fulfilling prophecy has been shown to be a powerful force for shaping the self-concept and thus the behavior of people in a wide range of settings outside of the schools. In medicine, patients who unknowingly receive placebos—substances such as injections of sterile water or doses of sugar pills that have no curative value—often respond just as favorably to treatment as do people who actually receive a drug. The patients believe they have taken a substance that will help them feel better, and this belief actually brings about a “cure.”

The self-fulfilling prophecy is an important force in communication, but it doesn't explain all behavior. There are certainly times when the expectation of an event's outcome won't bring about that outcome.

As we keep these qualifications in mind, it's important to recognize the tremendous influence that self-fulfilling prophecies play in our lives. To a great extent we are what we believe we are. In this sense we and those around us constantly create our self-concepts and thus ourselves.

### Self, Perception, and Communication

Self-concept is how you think about and value yourself. Self-concept comes from three sources: reflected appraisals, social comparisons, and self-perception. Scripts, roles, and self-fulfilling prophecies also influence your self-concept. If people are willing to give up some of their psychological safety and take some risks, their self-concepts will become more positive.

There are several ways to improve your self-concept. Decide what you want to change about yourself, consider your circumstances, take some chances, set reasonable goals, use a program of self-discipline, find people who will support you, and act positively toward others.

While self-concept is how you look at yourself, perception is how you see others and the world around you. Your perceptions come from interactions with others and from your cultural background. In the perceptual process you select information, organize it, and interpret it. Your education and experience will influence how you carry out this process.

There are a number of things that can be stated with certainty about the self-concept and perception including that they are intimately and intrinsically linked, each affecting the other in both subtle and profound ways. Your perceptions are essential to the building, maintenance, and sustained support of your self-concept.

Any perceptions you have are less than perfect because of deletions, distortions, and generalizations. Also, perceptual filters such as your biologic make-up, culture, values, and beliefs, coping with and tolerance for stress, conflict resolution strategies, previous experiences with failures and successes, illnesses, traumas, and surgery will all have an effect on your perceptions. Because there are so many influences, and because these influences are likely to combine in unknown ways and even have some cumulative effect, there is no way to predict or know the effect of the influences neither on your perceptions nor on how your self-concept is altered.

There are a number of ways to adjust to perceptual influences. The first is to stay healthy and get rest and exercise. The second is to avoid hasty conclusions. The third is to take more time. Be available and be committed are four and five, and the sixth way to adjust to perceptual influences is to be prepared to change. But just because you have adjusted to perceptual influences, keep in mind that it is common to come to wrong conclusions; thus, it is extremely important to continually check out your interpretations of reality.

**Summary and words and concepts to look for when reading the two articles provided:**

- i. The Self, Perception, and Communication
- ii. Communication and the Self
- iii. Self-Concept Defined
- iv. Communication and the Development of the Self
- v. Culture and the Self-Concept
- vi. The Self-Concept and Communication with Others
- vii. The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

- viii. Perceiving Others
- ix. Steps in the Perception Process
- x. Narratives and Perception
- xi. Common Perceptual Tendencies
- xii. Perception and Culture
- xiii. Empathy and Perception

### Summary



Perceptions of others are always selective and are often distorted. The chapter began by describing how personal narratives shape our perceptions. It then outlined several perceptual errors that can affect the way we view and communicate with others. Along with universal psychological influences, cultural factors affect perceptions. Increased empathy is a valuable tool for increasing understanding of others and hence communicating more effectively with them. Perception checking is one tool for increasing the accuracy of perceptions and for increasing empathy.

Perceptions of one's self are just as subjective as perceptions of others, and they influence communication at least as much. Although individuals are born with some innate personality characteristics, the self-concept is shaped dramatically by communication with others, as well as by cultural factors. Once established, the self-concept can lead us to create self-fulfilling prophecies that determine how we behave and how others respond to us.

Impression management consists of strategic communication designed to influence others' perceptions of an individual. Impression management operates when we seek, consciously or unconsciously, to present one or more public faces to others. These faces maybe different from the private, spontaneous behavior that occurs outside of others' presence. Identity management is usually collaborative: Communication goes most smoothly when we communicate in ways that support others' faces, and they support ours. Some communicators are high self-monitors who are highly conscious of their own behavior, whereas others are low self-monitors who are less aware of how their words and actions affect others.

Impression management occurs for two reasons. In many cases it aims at following social rules and conventions. In other cases it aims at achieving a variety of content and relational goals. In either case, communicators engage in creating impressions by managing their manner, appearance, and the settings in which they interact with others. Although impression management might seem manipulative, it can be an authentic form of communication. Because each person has a variety of faces that he or she can present, choosing which one to present need not be dishonest.

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