



Defining Perception

In this chapter we focus on perception, the self, and communication. Differences in perception affect the way we understand ourselves, situations, stories, events, and others. Consequently, perception affects the way we view ourselves and the way we present ourselves. In turn, perception acts like a filter that influences our experiences, our assessment of others, and our communication with them. The way you sense the world—the way you see, hear, smell, touch, and taste—is subjective, uniquely your own. Nobody else sees the world the way you do, and nobody experiences events exactly as you do.

The uniqueness of human experience is based largely on differences in **perception—the use of the senses to process information about the external environment**. Since our perceptions are unique, communication between and among people offers opportunities and challenges.

Contemporary approaches view perception as an active process. **Active perception means that your mind selects, organizes, and interprets what you sense**. Another way to think about this is to think about the last time you and your friends took pictures with your phones. Perhaps you uploaded your picture to Instagram and changed the hues and colors and one of your friends used the vignette editing tool to draw attention to a particular part of the image. Much like in this example, each person's perceptual lens is different. Perception is subjective because you interpret what you sense; you make it your own, and you add to and subtract from what you see, hear, smell, and touch based on your lived experiences or lack thereof. **Subjective perception is your uniquely constructed meaning attributed to sensed stimuli.**

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Consider how much your inner state affects your perceptions. If you have a bad headache, the pain probably will affect the way you treat your children, the way you respond to your coworkers, and even the way you see yourself in the mirror. Perhaps your general resting facial expression usually looks happy, but if you have an “off” day and are not smiling as much as usual, people may ask you repeatedly if you are okay. This might be frustrating to manage emotionally, especially if you are feeling fine. In contrast, some people have facial expressions that can be perceived as “grumpy” or “mean” when in fact that is not the case at all. For example, some might say that San Antonio Spurs head coach Gregg Popovich always looks like he is in a bad mood or that music mogul Jay-Z looks unhappy. Both men have expressed during interviews that they sometimes don't like the media attention, so this may account for their facial expressions. Yet this does not mean that they are upset or mean people. For example, do you have friends who are asked regularly, “Are you okay?” just because of how other people perceive their facial expression? How have you reacted when people have misread your facial expressions?

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How do you see the world around you? Perhaps comparing the way your mind works to the way a computer works will help you answer this. Think of your conscious experiences as the images that appear on your laptop or tablet. Think of what you sense with your eyes, nose, tongue, ears, and fingertips as that which is read off information in the cloud. The picture you see on the screen is not the same as the bits of data in the cloud; instead, an image is generated from the bits to create something you can see.

Differences in Perception

Perception is a subjective, an active, and a creative process. Differences in perception may be the result of identity factors, people's past experiences and roles, their present feelings and circumstances, and current social and political events.

IDENTITY FACTORS

You are not identical to anyone else. People differ from each other in terms of biological sex assigned at birth, gender, height, weight, body type, senses, ableness, and ethnicity, to name a few factors that make up an individual's identity. How important these aspects of your identity are to you can influence how you perceive and communicate with others. You may be tall or short, have poor eyesight, or have impaired hearing; you may be particularly sensitive to smells; or your body temperature may be colder than those of the rest of your family. Similarly, age, hair color, height, and attractiveness greatly affect the way you feel about yourself and the way others treat you.

Gender identity is another factor that can influence perceptions. Gender identity relates to how you feel about and express your gender. Expressions of gender identity can occur through how we talk, act, and dress, which can challenge societal perceptions that are often tied to gender roles.³

TEMPORAL CONDITIONS

Differences in perception also may arise from temporary conditions. A headache, fatigue, or a pulled muscle can cause you to perceive a critical comment when a friendly one is being offered. You may not see a stop sign if you are walking while texting or tweeting. Other physiological needs, such as hunger and thirst, may also affect your perceptive skills. Once you are aware of all the conditions that can affect your perceptions, you might be amazed that we can communicate with each other at all.

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PAST EXPERIENCES AND ROLES

Just as your size, biologically assigned sex, and senses can affect your perceptions, so can your past experiences and the various roles you occupy. The concept that best explains the influence of your past experiences on your perceptions is perceptual constancy—the idea that your past experiences lead you to see the world in a way that is difficult to change; your initial perceptions persist. “A perceptual characteristic that affects my communication with others,” said a male student, “is that I am very well-mannered. I am an only child, and my parents raised me very strictly to always treat others with respect and put them before yourself. I also attended a Catholic elementary, middle, and high school where the golden rule of ‘treat your neighbor as yourself’ was always endorsed and upheld.”⁴ What happened to you in the past

influences your current perceptions. A bad experience in a given situation may cause you to avoid that situation in the future. Your experiences affect how you respond to professors, police, and politicians.

Roles also influence perceptions. A **role** is the part you play in various social contexts. Jason observed that being “the boss” was effective at work, but not in his student role. “When I worked as a manager for a retail store, my assertiveness and confidence were viewed in a positive light. Many of my subordinates saw these characteristics [as] typical for a leader in my position. If I treated my fellow classmates with the same level of assertiveness that I did at work, I would come across as ‘cocky’ or ‘full of it,’ and my communication would be affected negatively.”⁵

Your roles affect your communication: to whom you talk, how you talk to them, what language you use, and how you respond to feedback. A good example of how perceptual constancy and role are related is parents’ treatment of their children. Even after some people become adults, their parents treat them as they did when they were growing up. Roles also tend to change with context: in your parents’ home you are their child; in your own home you may be a roommate or a mother or father; in the classroom you are a student; and at work you may be a product manager, a server, or a retail associate.



- Differences in perception that are created by cultural differences can be changed and challenged in our interactions with others.

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PRESENT FEELINGS AND CIRCUMSTANCES

How you feel at the moment affects your perceptions and alters your communication. Your child kept you up all night, so you are tired and stressed. Your friend’s “How are you?” releases a torrent of whiny complaints that are not your usual response. A headache, great news about your mother’s health, a brief fight before class—all these life experiences influence with whom and how you communicate.

Now that you have seen a few examples of how feelings and situations can impact perception, how can you apply this information to your communication skills? Imagine you are talking to a classmate about an assignment during class. She looks away from you, looks at her phone, and

does not respond to your attempts at conversation, but she does ask an occasional question. You might think that she is acting distant and disinterested. Yet she might be trying to listen to the instructor or trying to take notes on her phone and is uncomfortable talking. Or maybe she has had the experience of helping other classmates with their work with no gratitude on their part. It turns out she is confused about the assignment as well and was hoping to ask the instructor to clarify what is due this week for the project. She also is waiting for a text message from her mom to hear if her sister is going to need eye surgery. As you can see, present circumstances and internal states influence your communication with others.

CURRENT SOCIAL AND POLITICAL EVENTS

Your thoughts and feelings about, and involvement with, various current social and political events can affect how you see yourself and how you view and communicate with others. There are any number of issues and causes that you may be or will become passionate about during your college career. In fact, you'll likely be asked to think about an issue or event for a persuasive speech in this class. Do you care about the environment, social justice issues, mental health issues, or animal rights? For example, how do you feel about animal rights? Should student loans be forgiven? What concerns, if any, do you have about occurrences of blackfishing, the practice of white women using makeup to appear black on social media? (You will learn more about this phenomenon in [Chapter 14](#).) What current events are being talked about through public dialogue (for example, on social media, during classes, or on your favorite podcast) that you care about?

The stance you take on these and other social and political issues cultivates a perception within you and others about what it means to be passionate about that cause. Likewise, your stance influences how you view other people who care about that issue and those who you believe do not. For example, if you believe the government should not fund free preschool education, you will form opinions about your classmates who do, which may impact how you communicate with them during class activities. Ultimately, our perceptions do not exist in isolation from the content we consume.

communicating with agility

Growth Mindset and Change

The human brain is like a muscle; given new challenges, it can become stronger. When you are facing challenges and struggles, adopting a growth mindset improves physical and psychological health and well-being and can help you adapt to setbacks.

To cultivate a growth mindset, try these approaches the next time you face a challenge:

1. See challenges as an opportunity to grow and learn something new.

2. Recall times you have successfully done something new. One of your textbook authors uses the phrase “It’s only hard until it’s not” to work through difficult situations.
3. Write a letter to a real or an imagined person going through the same struggle. What advice would you give that person? Now take that advice for yourself.

Changing how we think takes repetition and consistency. Over time, fostering a growth mindset will increase your resilience and confidence.

Source: Mayo Clinic. (2021). Change your mind to grow. www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/change-your-mind-to-grow/art-20342132

The Perceptual Process

Every day we are flooded with an abundance of stimuli from multiple sources. Some of the content we actively seek, create, and curate, while other content simply creates unnecessary noise and frustration. Through all of this, the perceptual process helps us engage in sense making and guides us to focus on some stimuli over others. You engage in three important yet separate activities during perception: selection, organization, and interpretation. You are likely unaware of these processes because they occur quickly and all at once.

SELECTION

People do not perceive all the stimuli in their environment at all times. Through selection, you neglect some stimuli and focus on others. For example, when you commute to school, you are bombarded with sights, sounds, smells, and other sensations. You don't remember every car you saw on the road, nor do you focus on every person you pass on the sidewalk. Instead, you choose to pay attention to some things while ignoring many others. At school you probably scan students passing by so that you can pick out any friends or classmates who deserve a nod, wave, or other greeting. While awake, you are always actively engaged in selecting which stimuli to which you will respond—or not.

You also select the messages to which you attend. You may tune out one of your teachers if your phone vibrates or check your text messages during a break instead of reviewing your class notes. You might not listen to your roommate nagging you about cleaning the kitchen but listen to every word of praise from your boss. You hear and see thousands of ads, social media posts, and news stories, but you choose to view only the ones that you find most interesting.

Four types of selectivity are selective exposure, selective attention, selective perception, and selective retention. In **selective exposure you expose yourself to information that reinforces, rather than contradicts, your beliefs or opinions.**⁶ Selective exposure explains why you hide videos on TikTok from someone who has opinions that you don't agree with or want to be exposed to. In other words, conservative Republicans are more likely than liberal Democrats to listen to Fox News and read articles in the *National Review*. Liberal Democrats, by contrast, are more likely to watch MSNBC and listen to NPR. Selective exposure has the value of reinforcing and validating our positions, but it has the downside of protecting our biases that can lead to increased polarization.

In **selective attention, even when you do expose yourself to information and ideas, you focus on certain cues and ignore others.** On the train, you might notice the new outfit your friend is wearing but not the prosthetic leg the person in the next row is wearing. At a buffet table, you might be drawn to familiar foods while avoiding anything unfamiliar. In an elevator, you might notice the conversation between the two other passengers but not the music that's being piped in overhead.

In communication, you do not treat all sounds, words, phrases, and sentences equally. You almost always respond to your name or a command, such as "Watch out!" If there are certain words or phrases that you find offensive, you might respond negatively to television shows or people using those words. In classes you don't like, you drag through the course without learning much at all, whereas in your favorite class you are highly attentive. Selective attention is in full-time operation during your waking hours, and your use of this aspect of perception affects your communication in many ways.

After you expose yourself to a message and pay attention to it, you see that message through your own lens. **Selective perception is the tendency to see, hear, and believe only what you want to see, hear, and believe.**⁷ Suppose you are watching your favorite football team and your favorite player gets called out of bounds while diving for the end-zone pylon, rendering a reversal of a called touchdown. Despite the numerous rounds of instant replays, you insist to your roommate that the player was in bounds and the touchdown call should be upheld.

We see another example of selective perception in the way teachers observe signs of confusion or frustration from students. A study exploring how different types of teachers respond to the unique needs of people who are English language learners (ELLs) found that some are more adept than others at perceiving nonverbal signals of confusion from ELL students.⁸ Teachers who tend to use more interaction and dialogue in their classrooms are quick to observe nonverbal behaviors signaling a lack of understanding; in contrast, teachers who rely more on lecture tend to miss such signals. These findings illustrate how selective perception, perhaps driven by past experiences and roles, can cause some teachers to selectively perceive and react to such nonverbal signs while others do not. Although these findings point to the need for all teachers to be more observant of students' nonverbal behaviors, they may also suggest that ELL students can be more active in telling teachers when they have difficulty understanding specific terms or ideas.

Finally, you selectively remember some things while selectively forgetting others.

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Selective retention is the tendency to better remember the things that reinforce your beliefs than those that oppose them.⁹ Even a loving parent or parental figure may have put you in "time out" now and then, but your dominant impression of that person as positive gets reinforced by your selectively remembering happy family holidays, vacations, and graduations. Often any negative events are suppressed, unless they were unusually traumatic.

How does selective retention function in your everyday communication? At a local coffee shop you unexpectedly run into a former classmate who disagreed with you about government spending. You immediately remember the person as someone you perceived to be assertive and who dominated the discussion. Do you greet your former classmate or head in the other direction without a word? If you do speak, what do you say? Your selective retention of previous encounters greatly influences your choice.

You remember traumatic events and experiences that you found threatening. You remember when someone was unfairly critical of you, when someone of importance praised your work, or

when a family member commented favorably about your Instagram post about donating to a charitable cause. You size up people every day. Based on your memories of your experiences with them—your selective retention—you treat them with respect, talk with them, or avoid them. Such is the power of your selective retention. Next you will learn how organization functions in perceptions and affects communication.



- Perception is affected by our choice of which messages to attend to and which to ignore.

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ORGANIZATION

The abundance of stimuli that we encounter every day can be overwhelming. For this reason, your brain helps process information in ways that organize what your senses tell you about your surroundings. **Organization in perception is the grouping of stimuli into meaningful units or wholes. This process typically occurs through four organizational methods: figure and ground, closure, proximity, and similarity.**

Figure and Ground

One organizational method helps you distinguish between figure and ground. **Figure is the focal point of your attention, and ground is the background against which your focused attention occurs.** When looking at  **Figure 2.1**, what do you see first? Some people might perceive a vase or a candlestick, whereas others perceive twins facing each other. People who see a vase identify the center of the drawing as the figure and the area on the right and left as the ground (background). Conversely, people who see twins facing each other identify the center as the ground and the area on the right and left as the figure.





OF TWINS:

How do figure and ground work in communication encounters? In your verbal and nonverbal exchanges, you perform a similar feat of focusing on some parts (figure) and distancing yourself from others (ground). When you hear your name in a noisy room, your name becomes figure and the remaining noise becomes ground; with Facebook or Reddit comments about a political topic, you may focus on the ideas you agree with as the figure, and the opinions you don't agree with become the ground.

Here's another example. During a job performance review, your manager may talk about your areas in need of improvement and your strengths, but the so-called areas in need of improvement might make you so angry that you don't even remember the strengths. The messages about needed improvements are figure, and the ones about strengths are ground. What gets lost when we focus only on the figure or the ground? In what ways could attending to one or the other more fully give you additional information or allow you to see things from another person's point of view?

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Closure

Another way of organizing stimuli is through **closure, the tendency to fill in missing information to complete an otherwise incomplete figure or statement.**

One example of closure happens with text. Can you read these lines?

I cdnuolt blveiee that I cluod aulacity uesdnatnrd waht I was rdanieg. The phaonmneal pweor of the hmuan mnid! It deson't matter in what oredr the ltteers in a wrod are; the olny iprmoatnt tihng is that the frist and lsat ltteer be in the rghit pclae.¹⁰

You can read these words in spite of the spelling because of your mind's ability to achieve closure. Closure is the reason you can make sense of the incorrectly worded text message your friend sends you when the auto-correct feature changes the words without asking for approval.

Closure functions in your communication interactions with others. For example, your uncle retweets an article in support of stricter border-control policies. You therefore believe he is likely against pathways to citizenship for children of undocumented immigrants. Or, a public speaker begins a speech by saying, "I've had many blessings in my life," and you conclude that the person is religious. In both cases, closure may cause you to misperceive aspects of the people to whom you are listening and respond based on those faulty assumptions. In some cases, however, closure can be helpful. For example, seeing a pothole when you are driving helps you conclude that your car might become damaged if you drive through it. On the first day of class, you might see people make eye contact with you and smile, leading to the perception that they want to talk with you. In that instance, correct or not, closure might lead you to new friendships.

Proximity

You also organize stimuli on the basis of their proximity. According to the principle of **proximity**, people or objects that are close to each other in time or space are seen as **meaningfully related**. This principle is at work in [Figure 2.2](#). You are most likely to perceive three groups of three lines, rather than nine separate lines.

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Figure 2.2 An example of proximity: three groups of lines or nine separate lines?

Proximity works verbally and nonverbally in communication. A nonverbal example is thinking that the two people arriving at a party or event at the same time are dating. A verbal example is if your boss announces that, due to an economic downturn, she is forced to lay off 25 employees. Fifteen minutes later, she calls you into her office. The proximity of the messages leads you to believe that you will be laid off.

Similarity

Similarity is probably the simplest means of organizing stimuli. On the basis of the principle of **similarity**, elements are grouped together because they resemble each other in size, color, shape, or other attributes. In [Figure 2.3](#), you probably perceive circles and squares, rather than a group of geometric shapes, because of the principle of similarity. The saying “Birds of a feather flock together” can hold true as well for human groups, who are often organized by their ethnicity, religion, politics, or interests.

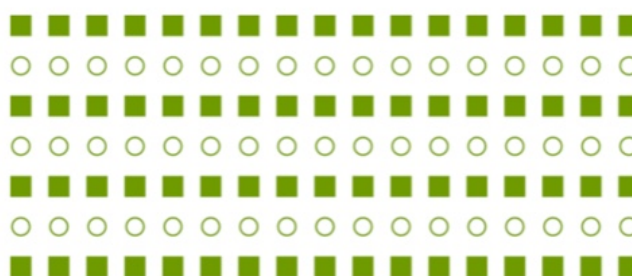


Figure 2.3 An example of similarity: squares and circles or a group of geometric shapes?



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The **intergroup perspective** is one theory that guides research on how people identify and categorize themselves or others in terms of their social group membership, such as race and ethnicity, and how those categories shape perceptions and the ways people interact with others.¹¹ Typically, members of an **in-group**—a group that people belong to that gives them a source of pride, self-esteem, and sense of belonging to a social world—engage in activities and hold attitudes that promote a positive image for the in-group compared to the **out-group**, the group marginalized by the dominant culture. This theoretical lens also suggests that people want to view their own social groups positively and tend to favor those in their in-group.¹²

How does similarity work in our relationships and our interactions? Generally, we seek intimate partners, friends, and work colleagues based on similarity. Because our perceptions are egocentric, we choose to interact with people who are similar, in some dimension, to ourselves. In other words, our friends tend to represent some part of ourselves.¹³ We tend to reject, or are certainly less interested in interacting with, people who are highly different from the way we see ourselves. The Netflix show *Stranger Things* illustrates the concept nicely: Mike, Dustin, Lucas, and Will initially bond over their shared interest in fantasy gaming through Dungeons and Dragons. In other words, they perceive each other to be in the same common in-group of players, and being part of this group is important to their identities.

INTERPRETATION

The third activity you engage in during perception is interpretation, the assignment of meaning to stimuli. **Interpretive perception**, then, is a blend of internal states and external stimuli. When interpreting stimuli, people frequently rely on the context in which the stimuli are perceived, or they compare the stimuli to other stimuli. Sometimes context helps, but other times it can create confusion in interpretation.

You can become so accustomed to seeing people, places, and situations in a certain way that your senses do not pick up on the obvious. Perhaps this is why we have a false sense of security when we walk and text. We think we won't stumble because we know the path in front of us so well. In a similar way, people who read the following sentence will overlook the problem with it:

The cop saw the man standing on the the street corner.

We achieve closure on the sentence and interpret its meaning without being conscious of the details, so we overlook the repeated *the*. Context provides cues for how an action, an object, or a situation is to be interpreted or perceived. Not seeing the double *the* in the sentence would be no problem for a reader trying to comprehend meaning, but an editor's credibility would be in question if such an error were missed often.

How does interpretation work in our interactions with others? Imagine that you are working in a group in one of your classes. One member of the group always comes prepared and seems to dominate the group interaction and to dictate the direction the project is taking. Another

member of the group frequently misses agreed-upon group meeting times, arrives late when he does come, and is never prepared. How do you interpret the behavior of these two people?

Suppose you are more like the first group member than the second. On the one hand, you might feel that the first person is challenging your leadership in the group. On the other hand, you consider the enormous contributions she makes by bringing a great deal of research and planning each time. You dismiss the second person as lazy and unmotivated and as a poor student. You are worried that he will bring down the group grade.

Now suppose you are more like the second group member than the first. You miss meetings, arrive late, and do virtually nothing to prepare. You might interpret the first person's behavior as showing off, but, at the same time, you are glad she is going to lead the group to a good grade. You see the second person as laid-back and fun. In fact, you decide you would like to hang out with him. Thus, our own behavior can lead us to very different interpretations.



Errors in Our Perceptions

Once we understand the active nature of perception and recognize that people hold unique perceptions as a consequence, we can see that we might make errors when we perceive other people. Although many types of errors exist, we discuss only two of the most common errors here: stereotyping and relying on first impressions. Detailed discussions of the many types of errors are beyond the scope of this release of *Human Communication*, but you may discuss them in class.

STEREOTYPING

Stereotyping occurs when we offer a hasty generalization about a group based on a judgment about an individual from that group. How does stereotyping work? First, we categorize other people into groups based on a variety of criteria—age, assigned sex, gender, race, sexual identity, occupation, nation of origin, region of the country, or physical abilities. Initially, this type of categorization is a natural process that helps people interpret their surroundings. Yet stereotyping becomes an issue when we refuse to let people move from these perceived categories. Next, we infer that everyone within that group has the same characteristics. For instance, we might conclude that all lesbians are masculine, that all visually impaired people want help crossing the street, or that all older adults don't know how to use social media. The trouble with stereotyping is that we practically insist that our stereotypes are correct through selective attention (we see what we want to see) and selective retention (we selectively sift through our past for memories that reinforce our stereotypes when they may not be accurate or true). Our expectations and interpretations of the behavior of others are then guided by these perceptions. When we observe people from other groups, we exaggerate or overestimate how frequently they engage in the behaviors that are stereotypically associated with them. We also ignore or underestimate how frequently they engage in the behaviors that are not stereotypically associated with that group.

Unfortunately, our stereotypes of people from different groups are often negative.¹⁴ Working dads may have negative views of dads who stay at home with their children. If you are able-bodied, you might not think someone in a wheelchair can play sports. Researchers have found that these negative stereotypes created different communication patterns when white and Black individuals, for example, interacted. They suggest that “macrolevel interpretations between interracial speakers may be problematic.”¹⁵

Our explanations for the expected and unexpected behaviors of people are frequently in error because we assume situational reasons for unexpected outcomes and personal reasons for expected outcomes. Stereotypes can also be attributed to age differences. For example, older generations may believe that millennials are lazy and entitled and have no interest in societal

meaningful change and 29% say that civil rights and racial discrimination are key social issues for them, followed by employment and healthcare reform.¹⁶

Finally, we often work to differentiate ourselves from people and groups we stereotype. Differentiation occurs when we positively evaluate our own groups and negatively evaluate other groups. For example, those with a particular religious orientation might negatively evaluate other religions, including worshipers of those religions, while favorably evaluating their own group of religious followers. Such differentiation could occur in many ways; one group could assert that it follows religious doctrine more closely, or that the rituals used in its religious ceremony are more appropriate. In another example, college degree holders may assume that their degree affords them greater status and wealth potential than non-degree holders. The point is that, through stereotypes, we construct perceptions that result in even greater assumed differences between groups and people.

Stereotypes can lead to prejudices. **Prejudice refers to an unfavorable predisposition about an individual because of that person's membership in a stereotyped group.** Throughout history and around the world, people have held negative stereotypes, and they have been prejudiced against others. However, such perceptual problems can stand in the way of fruitful communication among people who are different from each other.

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Prejudice interferes with our accurate perceptions of others, and it can lead to discrimination. For example, women might not be hired for particular jobs because of prejudice against them. People might be disallowed housing because of their religious beliefs. People might fear others because of their racial or ethnic background. The color of people's skin, the texture of their hair, the shape and size of their body, and their clothing are sometimes used to identify an out-group.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

When you meet someone for the first time, you seek to form a **first impression**—an initial opinion about people upon meeting them. Frequently, first impressions are based on other people's appearance and may form in as little as three seconds.¹⁷ The nonverbal cues they offer are particularly powerful. We notice clothing, height and weight, physical attractiveness, and interaction skills. From these nonverbal cues we make judgments about others. Research suggests that our brains process a great amount of verbal and nonverbal cues when we meet someone, or simply look at the person's photo on Instagram, and we make fairly accurate first impressions based on this limited information. This means that the pictures you post (and even what you choose not to post) on TikTok convey a first impression of you to others who are viewing your social media sites for the first time. Now you have to ask yourself, is this the impression you want others to have of you? See [Chapter 9](#) to learn about personal branding and how to create the "brand" you want for yourself in your in-person and mediated interactions with others.

As we form our first impressions of others, we also compare the new person with ourselves.

This can be especially true in business settings. For example, if others appear to be of a professional or social level comparable to our own, we may admire them and cultivate them as valuable contacts.

Our first impressions are powerful, and sometimes they lead to errors in our assessment of others. Often these initial impressions are based on perceptions of attractiveness and trustworthiness. Imagine a businessperson who has traveled all day and arrives late for a meeting. Her flight was delayed, her luggage was lost en route, and she arrives in jeans and a T-shirt. New business acquaintances might dismiss her simply on the grounds of her appearance. First impressions can be affected by specific situations or circumstances that make our initial assessment inaccurate. Just the same, we tend to cling to these impressions in future interactions. Rather than altering our opinion, we filter out new information that disputes our original appraisal.

A study on how facts don't change first impressions found that even when people were told the sexual orientation of someone, and it contradicted what they initially thought, the participants still identified whether the person was gay or straight based on their first impressions of how the person looked. Even though snap judgments are natural cognitive responses, they can lead to stereotyping, which we discussed earlier in the chapter.¹⁸

Our perceptions of others rest on a subjective, an active, and a creative perceptual process. Our perceptions of others are unique, and we perceive individuals in multiple ways through multiple interactions. We can more fairly appraise others and their behavior by understanding common attribution and perceptual errors and the extent to which we are engaged in them.

One way to reduce these perceptual errors is through **perception checking**, a process of describing, interpreting, and verifying that helps you understand others and their messages more accurately. Perception checking has four steps. *First*, you describe to the other person the behavior—including the verbal and nonverbal cues—that you observed. *Second*, you describe how that behavior is making you feel. *Third*, you suggest plausible interpretations. *Fourth*, you seek verification through asking questions or observing for clarification, explanation, or amplification. (See [Chapter 3](#) for more on the process of perception checking.)

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Perception checking may be even more important in our business interactions. Suppose a coworker interrupts you several times during a meeting. You begin by describing the behavior: "I've noticed in our last two meetings that you have been interrupting me when I am sharing my ideas." You then share your feelings: "This behavior is making me frustrated." You then suggest alternative interpretations: "Perhaps you disagree with me" (first interpretation). "Maybe you are really excited about this project and can't wait to share your ideas" (second interpretation). Finally, you ask if your interpretations are correct or allow your coworker the opportunity to offer a different reasoning: "Can you tell me what you intended?"

In perception checking, you must suggest interpretations that do not cause the other person to be defensive. In the first instance, imagine that you offered as one explanation "Maybe you are just a rude person." The other person is most likely to become defensive. In the second

Who Are You?

Discussing perception naturally leads us to look at self-perception. How you perceive yourself plays a central role in communication, regardless of whether the communication is face-to-face, on social media, or in a text message. An early step in considering yourself a communicator is to think about who you are.

HOW YOU BECAME WHO YOU ARE

What you know about yourself includes your past, present, and future. Your family is one of the most influential factors in your life, and because of this your family helped shaped how you think, believe, and behave.

The **personal identity** that you have developed influences your perceptions of others.²⁰ If you see yourself as a shy person who keeps to yourself or likes to spend time with just a few close friends, then you may perceive others who are more outgoing as attention seekers. Your self-perception will have a profound effect on your communication with others. Importantly, your self-perceptions are not static.

Personal identities can be changed, and people can improve their behavior as a result. For example, some teens who came from low-income backgrounds and struggled academically were taught strategies that allowed them to develop a “new academic possible self.” These students then achieved higher grades, scored higher on standardized tests, and showed greater academic initiative. At the same time, their levels of depression, absenteeism, and in-school misbehavior declined.²¹ Also, students who perceive that their parents or parental figures are involved in their school experience are more satisfied with school, believe in their abilities, and perform significantly better on national exams such as the ACT.²²

How can personal identity research be applied to communication? When a speaker creates a message that highlights shared values with listeners, then the listeners perceive a social group identity match and are more likely to be persuaded by the message. Other factors may interfere with this cause-effect relationship, however. For example, if the shared values are unexpected because of someone’s political party membership or other social group affiliations, the message may be rejected and the persuasive attempt may fail.

Your awareness of who you are develops in your communication with yourself—that is, your intrapersonal communication. In this way, intrapersonal communication includes self-perceptions, memories, feelings, attitudes, options, and mood. Intrapersonal communication can be viewed as talking to ourselves; it is also synonymous with thinking. Intrapersonal communication appears to be the most common context of communication, the foundation for the other contexts.

Your awareness of who you are also develops in your communication with others. Once you mastered language, **symbolic interactionism**—the process of development of the self through the messages and feedback received from others²³—shaped you in ways that made you what you are

today. You may have been rewarded for athletic skill or overlooked for speaking too little in class. The result is the person you see in the mirror today.

To explore who you are, you may be assigned a speech of self-introduction. This speech Page 44 may be the first one you deliver in class. Since you know more about yourself than does anyone else in the classroom, you may feel less anxiety about this assignment. Of course, you will want to provide some basic information about yourself—your name, where you are from, and your current major in college—but do so in a way that showcases your personal identity.

Instead of beginning your speech of introduction with basic information, consider providing some information that is provocative and that will gain the attention of your audience. For example, one student began, “How many people do you know who fly an airplane and have also jumped out of one?” Another speaker stated, “I’ve been in 40 of the 50 states.” A third noted, “I have two children and am going back to school to advance my career possibilities.” These three students found some aspect about themselves to be unique. In one case, the student was adventuresome and a risk taker; the second student had enjoyed a great deal of travel with his family; and the third realized she wanted to go back to school.

The speech of self-introduction will allow you to draw on the information in this chapter, and it will give you a relatively stress-free way to begin finding your voice in this class.

sizing things up

What Messages Shaped You?

Most of the memorable messages college students receive about education come from their parents, and those messages help students make decisions during difficult or transitional times. Take a minute to write down the most memorable message that you received from a parent or parental figure telling you about college. This can be a message about going to college, succeeding in college, or any other circumstance surrounding college. Now take a look at this message. What is its main point? What does this message mean to you, personally?

The exercise you just engaged in was the same approach used in a research study by one of your textbook authors and her colleagues. We asked 419 college students the same question and found that parental messages about college are both meaningful and significant to college students. Overall, parents’ messages about college are about working (and playing) hard, the necessity of attending college, and encouragement and support.

Does your message fit into one of these themes? If so, which one? How have you used this message, if at all, so far in your college experience? The lesson you can learn from this exercise is that others throughout our lives communicate with us about how we are supposed to think and behave. We are shaped by and

communicating creatively

Messages to Your Younger Self

As a way to celebrate International Women's Day, YouTube encouraged people to empower young women with the #DearMe campaign. The #DearMe campaign asks digital creators around the world to upload "video letters" to their younger selves that provide the advice and encouragement they wish they had heard when they were younger. The campaign encouraged people to use the hashtag #DearMe on social media to share their messages. Although the initial focus was on young girls, these video letters apply to all who wish to tell their younger selves or others a supportive, clarifying, and/or realistic message. A quick search of the videos yields an array of messages, perspectives, and identities. In this section, you have been learning about how your self-perceptions and others' perceptions of you have, in part, formed who you are. Perhaps you can take the time to create a video message or write a letter to your younger self. What would your letter say? What part does perception play in your message to your younger self?

Source: Brouwer, B. (2015). YouTube launches #DearMe campaign for International Women's Day. *Tubefilter*. www.tubefilter.com/2015/03/03/youtube-dearme-campaign-international-womens-day/

LEARNING MORE ABOUT YOURSELF

Perhaps you now understand why the ancients said, "Know thyself." They, like people today, believed that self-awareness is a discovery worth making. Accurate self-awareness helps you be ready to make sound choices now and in the future. If you dislike chemistry, you might not enjoy a career as a physician or pharmacist. If you like to write and are good at it, you might have a future as a writer or social media content creator. If you are skillful at athletics, perhaps you can take advantage of that talent with scholarships, varsity sports, and even professional sports. What you have learned about yourself in the past, and what you learn about yourself now, will affect your future.

Right now, as you go about your everyday activities, you should be aware of what kind of person you are and who you want to be in the future. In her memoir *Untamed* author and activist Glennon Doyle talks about this as "trusting your knowing." What she means is that we should trust that we know ourselves and listen to our inner voices.²⁴ Are you shy, timid, and unassertive? Are you active, vigorous, and energetic? Do you welcome change, adventure, and risk? Do you see yourself as capable, unstoppable, and hard-driving? In his book *Let Your Life Speak*, education activist Parker Palmer encourages readers to think deeply about the answers to the questions "What am I?" and "What is my nature?" as a way to find their inner voice and determine the gifts they have been given to share with the world.²⁵ Answering these and many other questions is the key to finding your authentic selfhood. As Michelle Obama notes in her memoir *Becoming*, "Your story is what you have, what you will always have. It is something to

to the questions “What am I?” and “What is my nature?” as a way to find their inner voice and determine the gifts they have been given to share with the world.²⁵ Answering these and many other questions is the key to finding your authentic selfhood. As Michelle Obama notes in her memoir *Becoming*, “Your story is what you have, what you will always have. It is something to own.”²⁶

Joseph O'Connor was a high school junior when he spent two weeks in the Sierra Nevada mountain range of eastern California—a challenge that changed his level of self-awareness. Rain poured, hail pelted, and the beauty of dawn at 13,000 feet entranced him. In an article about his new self-awareness, O'Connor wrote:

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The wonder of all I'd experienced made me think seriously about what comes next. “Life after high school,” I said to myself. “Uh-oh.” What had I been doing the last three years? I was so caught up in defying the advice of my parents and teachers to study and play by the rules that I hadn't considered the effects my actions would have on me.²⁷

O'Connor's experience changed his self-awareness, and he went from being a D student to one who made the honor roll.

You don't have to go to the mountains to come to a new awareness of yourself. If you want to learn more about yourself, you can take several steps to achieve that goal. If you want to learn more about your physical self, you can start a new workout program that pushes your physical strength in new ways. You can also talk to your relatives about people in your family. What health ailments do your parents and grandparents face? Are these problems inherited? Knowing your family health history can help doctors diagnose your illnesses, assess your risk level for various diseases, and identify risk-reducing strategies. How can knowing this information make you think differently about how you communicate or behave and the kinds of experiences you seek out or avoid? For example, if a close family member died of lung cancer due to years of smoking, would you avoid smoking cigarettes and people who smoke cigarettes? Would you advocate for antismoking initiatives on your campus?

If you want to learn more about your personality and how others perceive you, you can talk with your significant other, partner, friends, coworkers, bosses, and even your children if you are a parent. In what ways is your personality similar to and different from the personalities of your family members? For example, you may learn best by doing things hands-on just like your grandfather or lack patience like your mother. Consider other features of your life that will suggest how you are perceived. Do people seek you out to build a friendship? Do others ask you to participate in social events? Do friends ask you for advice?

If you want to know what type of employee you are, you can ask your supervisor, coworkers, and customers. Consider the type of environment that you thrive in and ones that you don't enjoy. Do you like to work alone or with others? What kinds of jobs have you held? Have you been given increasing amounts of responsibility in those jobs, or have you frequently lost jobs? Do you need motivation from others, or do you work to complete a task without reminders from others? Do others seek you out to partner with them on work or school projects?

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