

Chapter 2

Perceiving the Self and Others

CHAPTER OUTCOMES

- Describe how our personal perspective on the world influences our communication
- Explain how we use and misuse schemas when communicating with others
- Define the attributions we use to explain behavior
- Describe cultural differences that influence perception
- Identify how our self-concept—who we think we are—influences communication
- Describe how our cognitions about ourselves and our behavior affect our communication with others

LECTURE NOTES

- **Perception** is the cognitive process through which we interpret our experiences and come to our own unique understandings.
 - Perceptions affect how we communicate with others and how we interpret others' communications.
 - Understanding perception's role in the communication process is crucial to our success as communicators.
- **Perception: Making Sense of Your World** explores how our interpretations of what we see, hear, and touch are unique because of the ways in which we select, organize, and interpret information. **Communication processing** is how information is gathered, organized, and evaluated by individuals.
 - **Selecting information** involves sifting through what we consider important in every situation.
 - **Schemas: Organizing Perceptions**
 - **Schemas** are mental structures that help us put together bits of information to form patterns and create meaning.
 - **The function of schemas** is to help us to understand and anticipate how things should work.
 - **Challenges with schemas and perceptions** include the following:
 - Schemas can cause us to rely on stereotypes or misinformation.
 - Schemas may lead to uncritical, passive information processing, or **mindlessness**, as opposed to **mindfulness**, or focus. Its signs include:
 - ♦ Reduced cognitive activity
 - ♦ Inaccurate recall
 - ♦ Uncritical evaluation
 - Schemas may cause **selective perception**, or the selection of information based on existing schemas, usually in a biased manner.
 - Schemas may cause **undue influence**, that is, giving a piece of information greater credibility than it warrants.

- **Attributions: Interpreting Your Perceptions**
 - **Attributions** are personal characteristics we use to explain behavior; these may include:
 - Internal attributions: behavior attributed to someone's personality
 - External attributions: behavior attributed to something outside a person's control
 - **Fundamental attribution error** says that we overemphasize the internal and underestimate the external causes of behavior we see in others and that we do the opposite when it comes to ourselves (called **self-serving bias**).
 - **Interaction appearance theory** explains how our attributions of someone change the more we interact with them. This is especially true of physical appearance.
- **Improving Your Perceptions** involves the following three suggestions:
 - Verify your perceptions to confirm or debunk conclusions.
 - Be thoughtful when you seek explanations—don't just go with the most obvious explanation you observe.
 - Look beyond first impressions by delaying reactions or judgments until you make further perceptions.
- **Perception in a Diverse World** explores how our perceptions are linked to the wide diversity we encounter in the world.
 - **The Cultural Context**
 - Culture has a profound effect on the way we perceive ourselves and those around us.
 - Diversity is the differences among people, such as race, education, ability, and geography. Effective communication requires that we understand and appreciate those who are different from us.
 - **Perceptual Barriers** are barriers to competent communication that are caused by perceptual challenges; these may include:
 - **A Narrow Perspective**
 - People often see things through their own circumstances.
 - **Cultural myopia** occurs when people fail to consider other cultural perspectives, assuming their own culture is appropriate and relevant in all situations and to all people.
 - **Stereotyping and Prejudice**
 - **Stereotyping** is an impression of a group of people that is fixed so that you apply a set of perceptions to an entire group. Stereotypes may be positive, negative, or neutral.
 - **Prejudice** is a deep-seated feeling of unkindness toward particular groups or an individual.
- **Cognition: Perceiving Ourselves** explores the three important influences on our *cognitions*, or thoughts about ourselves: self-concept, self-esteem, and self-efficacy.
 - **Self-Concept: Who You Think You Are**
 - **Self-concept** is your understanding of who you are, shaped through thinking about your strengths and weaknesses, observing your behavior in a variety of situations, witnessing your own reactions to situations, and watching others' reactions to you. Self-concept shapes our communication with others.

- When you interact with others, you get impressions from them about how they evaluate you, and that information gets woven into your self-concept.
- When you communicate with others, you get information that can affect your self-concept; this information comes in the following forms:
 - Direct evidence—compliments, insults, support, or negative remarks
 - Indirect evidence—revealed through innuendo, gossip, subtle nonverbal cues, or lack of communication
 - **Social comparison theory**—how we compare ourselves to others as we develop ideas about ourselves
- **Self-Esteem: How You Feel About Yourself**
 - **Self-esteem** is the way a person feels (or attitude) about himself or herself.
 - Self-concept is tied to self-esteem in that you must first know yourself before you have an attitude about yourself.
 - People with high self-esteem are confident in what they do and think and in how they perform.
 - Those with low self-esteem often lack information about themselves, mistrust the knowledge they do possess, or have an *inconsistent* view of themselves.
- **Self-Efficacy: Assessing Your Own Abilities**
 - **Self-efficacy** is the ability to predict actual success from self-concept and self-esteem.
 - People often avoid situations where they believe their self-efficacy to be low.
 - Feelings of low self-efficacy can cause a person to dwell on shortcomings, resulting in a lack of effort and lowering of self-esteem.
 - Feelings of high self-efficacy help protect against emotional scarring from failures but can result in overconfidence.
 - **Self-fulfilling prophecy** is a prediction that causes an individual to alter behavior in a way that makes the prediction more likely to occur.
- **Assessing Our Perceptions of Self**
 - Whenever we communicate, we are assessing our strengths and weaknesses.
 - **Self-actualization** is when you feel you have negotiated a communication situation as well as you possibly could.
 - **Self-adequacy** is when your assessment of your communication is acceptable or sufficient.
 - Self-adequacy leads to either contentment or self-improvement.
 - Self-adequacy may be very positive if a more difficult communication situation was predicted than what actually occurred.
 - **Self-denigration** occurs when you criticize yourself for your communicative performance.
 - Most self-denigration is unnecessary and prevents real improvement
- **Behavior: Managing Our Identities** explores the role cognition and behavior play in how we perceive others and how they perceive us.
 - We all have aspects of ourselves we want to share and aspects we want to keep private. How we communicate with others shapes how they view us.

- The self has cognitions, including self-concept, self-esteem, and self-efficacy, all of which influence verbal and nonverbal behavior. Our behaviors generate feedback from others, which leads to assessments of self-actualization, self-adequacy, and self-denigration. These assessments affect our cognition.
- **Self-Presentation**
 - **Self-presentation** is intentional communication designed to show elements of our self for strategic purposes; it occurs in the following ways:
 - Face-to-face conversation
 - Mediated forms, such as e-mail, text messaging, and Facebook
 - **Self-monitoring** is your ability to watch your environment and others in it for cues on how to present yourself in particular situations.
 - People who are high self-monitoring try to portray themselves as the “right person at the right time” and implement situation-appropriate communication behaviors.
 - People who are low self-monitoring are not as sensitive to situational cues related to communication behavior and communicate according to their deep-seated values or beliefs.
 - Competent communicators monitor themselves enough to present themselves effectively and still be aware of others’ needs in the communication situation.
- **Self-Disclosure**
 - **Self-disclosure** is when you share important information about yourself with others.
 - We often use self-disclosure to confirm or improve our self-esteem or to obtain reassurance. This feedback is then incorporated into ourselves, based on several factors, including our sensitivity level to feedback.
- **Technology: Managing the Self and Perceptions**
 - Technology can allow for more controlled presentation of self.
 - How you present yourself online can affect people’s perceptions of you, as can the things your friends say to you in online forums, such as Facebook.

CLASS DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some schemas that you use in your everyday life?
 - Examples include schemas of professions (such as student, professor, waiter). When we use these schemas, we know how to interact with a person because of some preconceived ideas about their profession, but that may lead to stereotyping (e.g., assuming that all college students drink).
2. What are some things that we tend to not select when it comes to perception? What do we tend not to see? What do we tend not to hear? Why is that?
 - We tend not to see things that are not central to what we are paying attention to. Therefore, we tend not to remember commercials as well as we remember the main program. We tend to notice landmarks only at places where we change direction much more often than just landmarks along the way. We tend to notice things that are different (a neon-green house in the midst of light-brown houses).

3. Think of someone who has influence on how you perceive things. Do you feel that influence is undue influence?
 - It is important that you talk about yourself as teacher. How does what you say (or what the textbook says) influence how students perceive things? For example, when I teach a research methods course, I ask students at the beginning of the course (after explaining what they are) whether they prefer qualitative or quantitative methods. They generally gravitate toward quantitative methods, which is typical in U.S. culture. By the end of the course, I ask the question again, and most choose qualitative methods. We spend a good deal of time deconstructing this, and I point out that many times it is because their teacher, who is a qualitative researcher, has (unconsciously or consciously) helped to shape their perceptions of these two research methods.
4. How does your culture influence your perceptions? Do you think your gender influences your perceptions? What about your age? Give some examples.
 - What do students see as edible? Culture influences their choices significantly. What about toys that were fun to play with as a child? Gender often influences that. What music do they enjoy? Age usually influences this choice.
5. What are some situations in which you are more likely to self-monitor how you present yourself? Why do you think that is?
 - Students may generally self-monitor more in situations such as job interviews, first dates, and events they deem important. This is because they are consciously attempting to present a good impression, both verbally and nonverbally.
6. When applying for a job or internship, would you rather do an in-person interview, a phone interview, or a Skype interview? Why? How do you think each of those mediums would affect an interviewer's perception of you?
 - With these answers, be sure to pull from students the "why" part of their preferences. Would they prefer to monitor more channels (physical, verbal, nonverbal) or fewer? Why? Here's an interesting question, if you had a phone interview, would you still dress up? Why or why not?

PERSONAL WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. This I Believe

Who influences you? Think of one or two of your specific beliefs and ask yourself how you developed them. Who has helped shape these beliefs over the years?

Remember, people can shape your beliefs for *and* against things, so consider both sides. Do you think this person's influence on you has been positive or negative? Why? Answer in two pages.

2. We Are Family...

As of this writing, there are nineteen children in the Duggar family of Tontitown, Arkansas. They are the stars of a reality television show about their life. In contrast, China has a one-child policy, but it only applies to those who are of the ethnic majority living in urban areas. Many different cultural understandings about family exist around the world. What is yours? How did you come to understand what a "normal" family size is? Where do you draw your comparisons from? What are some different things that influence this perception? Are there times when making assumptions about another person's culture are helpful and/or necessary? Explain your ideas in a two- to three-page paper.

3. Do I Perceive a Bias Here?

Go to the Harvard Implicit Bias Web site at <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>. Take at least one of the tests. Write a two-page paper about your experience taking this test. Was it eye-opening or surprising for you? Why do you think you scored the way you did? What do you think these tests say about perceptions and stereotypes or bias?

4. Do You Hear What I Hear?

For 5 minutes, pay very close attention to every sound you can hear in the space where you are sitting. Write down or describe every sound you hear. Then reflect on your list. What did you hear? Were any of the sounds ones that you didn't "hear" before? Why do you think you did not notice or perceive certain sounds before? Be specific and detailed in your answer.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

1. Perception Line

Goal: To understand how the perception process works

Time Required: 20 minutes

Materials:

1. Categories by which you can organize or group your students. Examples include height, hair color, skin color, jeans/no jeans, earrings/no earrings (and other various pieces of jewelry), tennis shoes/no tennis shoes, painted nails/no painted nails, and length of shirt sleeves
2. Space in the classroom for students to line up, facing the class

Directions:

1. Ask for seven to eight volunteers (or about half the class if your class is smaller than fourteen).
2. Have the student volunteers stand in a line facing the class.
3. Explain to the class that perception involves selection, organization, and interpretation and that you are going to show that process in action. Tell the students who are still sitting that they will be the ones showing how the perception process works.
4. Ask students who are seated to come up to the line of students one at a time, select some visible "thing" about those students, and then rearrange the line of students to organize them in relation to the "thing" they have selected. Once this is done, have them interpret for the class why they reorganized the students in that particular way. As an example, begin by organizing the volunteers by gender (males on one end of the line, females on the other). Then turn and explain to the students that you selected and have organized them by gender—male and female. Students may not duplicate categories once another person has used them.
5. Repeat this process a few times, depending on time allotted. If you have time, you can have students go through the process a second time. (*Note:* To be fair, you may want to be the last person to go through the group because you began with the "easy" example of gender.)

Debriefing: Have students discuss whether or not they noticed things they chose before the exercise (such as what color eyes their fellow students have or who has or does not have earrings). Why didn't they notice these things before? Students will likely answer

that these items were not important before. Point out that this is part of selection. It is important to make a selection based on the context of the situation. Also, ask students about other ways to organize people that don't usually show up in this exercise, for example, attractiveness or race. Talk about how we attach meanings to these particular organizations.

2. I Know That Guy!!

Goal: To enable students to understand how perception influences their characterizations of others

Time Required: 15 minutes

Materials:

1. A set of photos of people you know but who are unknown to the class
2. Blank paper and writing implements for students
3. Document camera

Directions:

1. Arrange the class in groups of three to five depending on how many pictures you brought in.
2. Ask the class to create a detailed story about the person(s) in each photo, including the following:
 - The names of the people in the photo
 - What they were doing when this picture was taken
 - What they do for a living
 - How they (if there is more than one in the photo) get along; their relationship with one another
 - Whether they are nice people

(Note: Students will often resist answering this because they view it as stereotyping. Agree with them, but tell them we make judgments about people every day based simply on what we can see and that to deny this is to allow stereotyping rather than exploring it.)

3. Tell students to be ready to answer the question "Why did you think that?" in relation to each question asked. *(Note: Encourage students to make their stories somewhat outlandish. This makes students less resistant to stereotyping because their stories are so unbelievable that they feel the stereotyping is less real.)*
4. Once students have finished their stories, have a volunteer from each group read them to the class. Put each photo, in turn, on the document camera so the rest of the class can see them. Ask the students, "Why did you think that?" for each question (this is less threatening when done with the whole class rather than group by group).

Debriefing: Through discussion, help students explore ways that we perceive other people based on appearances and how having an understanding of this can help people be aware of why they perceive people in particular ways. Tell students this awareness is more likely to help students change perceptions more easily should the situation warrant. If you feel comfortable, tell students about the people in each of the pictures and what they are doing.

3. Self-Concept and Self-Esteem

Goal: To understand the difference between self-concept and self-esteem

Time Required: 5 minutes

Materials: Blank paper and writing implement for each student

Directions:

1. Tell students they have 3 minutes (extend it to 5 minutes if you need to) to write down as many answers as they can to the question “Who Are You?”
2. After they have done this, have students circle any nouns they have included, such as “brother,” “student,” “mother.”

Debriefing: Explain to students that the terms they circled relate to their self-concept—who they understand themselves to be. The other terms are related to their self-esteem—how they *feel* about who they are.

4. People Eat That???

Goal: To understand how cultural perceptions about food are formed

Time Required: 15 minutes

Materials:

1. Samples of foods that are not common to many students. Examples include artichoke, avocado, kumquat, sardines, tofu, and ugli fruit
2. More common foods such as apples, smoked sausage, and grapes
3. Optional: Access to the Internet to visit the following Web site: www.moolf.com/interesting/top-ten-strangest-foods-from-around-the-world.html

Directions:

1. Allow the students to view the food samples.
2. Ask students to identify the ones they have eaten.
3. Next, ask students a series of questions about the foods they have eaten. For example, ask if anyone in the class has eaten something that came from a cow? Something that came from a horse? (*Note:* Expect mainly “Yes” responses to the first question and mainly “No” to the second.) Additional questions include the following: Something that came from a pig? Something that came from a dog? Something that came from a chicken? Something that came from a parrot?
4. Lead students in a discussion about our perceptions of food. What do we (culturally) see as edible, and what do we consider inedible? Why do we think and feel these this way? If there is time, pull up a list of “strange” foods from other cultures at www.moolf.com/interesting/top-ten-strangest-foods-from-around-the-world.html.

Debriefing: What foods do people in the United States eat that people in other cultures would find strange or disgusting?

5. Are You a “Good” Student?

Goal: To enable students to understand that they have common perceptions about the terms “good student” and “bad student,” even if they are not conscious of them

Time Required: 10 minutes

Materials: None

Directions:

1. Ask students to present themselves as a “good student.” What does a “good student” look like? It is likely that students will straighten up, make eye contact perhaps, pick up a pencil, etc.

2. Now, ask students to present themselves as a “bad student.” Most will slump down; some may pretend to sleep. (*Note:* I had a student who walked out of the room then came right back in. His argument was that bad students weren’t even there!)

Debriefing: Lead students in a discussion on how they self-monitor in the classroom. What things in the classroom influence students to become high self-monitors about their behaviors? What influence students to be less conscious of their own self-monitoring?

6. Do You Remember?

Goal: To understand how we use selective perception

Time Required: 10 minutes

Materials: Blank paper and writing implement for each student

Directions:

1. Ask students to take out a piece of paper and a pencil and then look straight down at their paper.
2. Instruct students that they are not allowed to look in any direction other than directly at their paper. Ask students to answer the following questions:
 - How many outlets are in the classroom?
 - How many desks are in the classroom?
 - How many light fixtures are in the classroom?
 - How many ceiling tiles are in the classroom?

(*Note:* Add questions that are pertinent to your classroom.)

Debriefing: Ask students to check their answers. Did they get any answers right? If so, why do they think they were able to remember those details? Why do they think they were unable to remember others? What led people to perceive (and remember) some aspects of the room, while ignoring others?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How can a person’s perception alter communication? In what ways do you perceive the world?
2. How does stereotyping affect your own communication?
3. What are some advantages to stereotyping?
4. How does self-efficacy relate to communication competence?
5. How does technology help to foster self-concept?
6. How is communication shaped by the self and others?
7. Explain two theories from the chapter and how they relate to your own life.
8. Explain some barriers to communication as presented in this chapter.
9. How can one reverse the self-fulfilling prophecy?
10. How do the media influence self-esteem and self-concept?
11. Give examples from your own life of when you used self-actualization and self-denigration.
12. Think of a time when you formed a first impression that turned out to be wrong. How did your impressions and perceptions change?

MEDIA

Easy A (Sony Pictures, 2010)

This comedy follows the saga of Olive, a “good girl” who assists in falsely spreading rumors about herself to help others. This film does a great job of showing how the rumor mill can work (and how quickly), the power of language in our lives, and the inability to “undo” what one has already said.

Mockingbird Don’t Sing (Dorian Films, 2001)

This film tells the story of “Katie,” a thirteen-year-old girl whose parents kept her locked inside her bedroom, tied to a chair. Inspired by real-life events, the film follows fictional linguist Sandra Tannen in her attempts to teach Katie language and basic communication skills.