

FUNDAMENTALS OF COMMUNICATION



LOUIS: The Louisiana Library Network

Fundamentals of Communication

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Licensing

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Introduction

The Creation of This Book

This textbook was created as part of the Interactive OER for Dual Enrollment project, facilitated by [LOUIS: The Louisiana Library Network](#) and funded by a \$2 million [Open Textbooks Pilot Program grant from the Department of Education](#).

This project supports the extension of access to high-quality post-secondary opportunities to high school students across Louisiana and beyond by creating materials that can be adopted for dual enrollment environments. Dual enrollment is the opportunity for a student to be enrolled in high school and college at the same time.

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If you are adopting this textbook, we would be glad to know of your use via this [brief survey](#).

Review Statement

This textbook and its accompanying course materials went through at least two review processes:

- Peer reviewers, coordinated by Jared Eusea, River Parish Community College, used an online course development standard rubric for assessing the quality and content of each course to ensure that the courses developed through Interactive OER for Dual Enrollment support online learners in that environment. The evaluation framework reflects a commitment to accessibility and usability for all learners.
 - Reviewers
 - Lisa Abney
 - Jesse Walczak
 - Missy LaCour
- The Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education (ISKME) collaborated with LOUIS to review course materials and ensure their appropriateness for dual enrollment audiences. Review criteria were drawn from factors that apply across dual enrollment courses and subject areas, such as determining appropriate reading levels, assessing the fit of topics and examples for high school DE students; applying high-level principles for quality curriculum design, including designing for accessibility, appropriate student knowledge checks, and effective scaffolding of student tasks and prior knowledge requirements, addressing adaptability and open educational practices, and principles related to inclusion and representational social justice.
 - Reviewers
 - Melody Boeck
 - Victoria VanNest

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About the Book

Beginning with the essential question—what is communication?—the first chapter lays the groundwork by introducing key definitions and outlining the many benefits of studying communication, from personal growth to professional development. In Chapter 2, we dive into perception, exploring how we make sense of ourselves and others, and how improving our perceptual abilities enhances communication effectiveness. Chapter 3 turns our attention to communication theory, introducing students to a range of paradigms—from empirical laws to critical theories—that help explain and predict communicative behavior. The following chapters focus on the core channels of communication: verbal and nonverbal, with discussions on their definitions, functions, and roles in meaning-making. Listening, often an overlooked skill, is thoroughly examined in Chapter 6, where students learn about the listening process, its challenges, and strategies for becoming better listeners. Chapter 7 explores communication climates, emphasizing how messages can affirm or deny others’ presence and the role of conflict in shaping relationships. Interpersonal communication, covered in Chapter 8, examines the development and maintenance of various relationships including friendships, romantic partnerships, and family ties. Identity and culture come to the forefront in Chapters 9 and 10, where the focus shifts to how culture influences communication and how to navigate intercultural interactions with competence and sensitivity. Finally, Chapter 11 introduces students to mass communication and media literacy, highlighting the growing influence of media in shaping public discourse and individual perceptions.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

1: Foundations of Communication

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- Explain communication studies
- Define communication
- Explain the Linear and Transactional Models of Communication
- Discuss the benefits of studying communication

You are probably reading this book because you are taking an introductory communication course at the college level. Many colleges and universities around the country require students to take some type of communication course in order to graduate. Introductory communication classes include courses on public speaking, interpersonal communication, or a class that combines both. While these are some of the most common introductory communication courses, many communication departments are now offering an introductory course that explains what communication is, how it is studied as an academic field, and what areas of specialization make up the field of communication. In other words, these are survey courses similar to courses such as Introduction to Sociology or Introduction to Psychology. Our goal in this text is to introduce you to the field of communication as an academic discipline of study.

[1.1: Defining Communication](#)

[1.2: Benefits of Communication Studies](#)

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1.1: Defining Communication

As professors, we hear a lot of people talk about communication both on and off our campuses. We're often surprised at how few people can actually explain what communication is or what communication departments are about. Even our majors sometimes have a hard time explaining to others what it is they study in college. Throughout this book, we will provide you with the basics for understanding what communication is, what communication scholars and students study, and how you can effectively use the study of communication in your life—whether or not you are a communication major. We accomplish this by taking you on a journey through time. The material in this text is framed chronologically and is largely presented in the context of the events that occurred before the Industrial Revolution (2500 BCE–19th century CE) and after the Industrial Revolution through the present day. In each chapter, we include boxes that provide examples of that chapter's topic in the context of “then,” “now,” and “you” to help you grasp how the study of communication at colleges and universities impacts life in the real world.

Before we introduce you to verbal and nonverbal communication, history, theories, and research methods and the chronological development of communication specializations, we want to set a foundation in this chapter by explaining communication studies, models of communication, and communication at work.



Image by Jessica Da Rosa on Unsplash.

What Is Communication Studies?

When we tell others that we teach communication, people often ask questions like, Do you teach radio and television? Do you teach public speaking? Do you do news broadcasts? Do you work with computers? Do you study public relations? Is that journalism or mass communication? But the most common question we get is, What is that? It's interesting that most people will tell us they know what communication is, but they do not have a clear understanding of what it is communication scholars study and teach in our academic discipline. In fact, many professors in other departments on our campus also ask us what it is we study and teach. If you're a communication major, you've probably been asked the same question and, like us, may have had a hard time answering it succinctly. If you memorize the definition below, you will have a quick and simple answer to those who ask you what you study as a communication major.



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Bruce Smith, Harold Lasswell, and Ralph D. Casey provided a good and simple answer to the question, “What is communication studies?” They state that communication studies is an academic field whose primary focus is “who says what, through what channels (media) of communication, to whom, [and] what will be the results (121).”



Egyptian antiquities in the Brooklyn Museum Image by Sailko is licensed under CC BY 3.0

Although they gave this explanation almost 70 years ago, to this day it succinctly describes the focus of communication scholars and professionals. As professors and students of communication, we extensively examine the various forms and outcomes of human communication. On its website, the [National Communication Association \(NCA\)](#) states that communication studies “focuses on how people use messages to generate meanings within and across various contexts, cultures, channels, and media. The discipline promotes the effective and ethical practice of human communication...Communication is a diverse discipline which includes inquiry by social scientists, humanists, and critical and cultural studies scholars.” Now, if people ask you what you’re studying in a communication class, you have an answer!

In this course, we will use the Smith, Lasswell, and Casey definition to guide how we discuss the content in this book. Part I sets the foundation by exploring the what and channels (verbal and nonverbal communication) and presenting the whom and results (theories and research methods). Before we get into those chapters, it is important for you to know how we define the actual term communication to give you context for our discussion of it throughout the book.

Defining Communication

As we have already discussed, it’s more difficult than you think. Don’t be discouraged. For decades, communication professionals have had difficulty coming to any consensus about how to define the term communication (Hovland et al.). Even today, there is no single agreed-upon definition of communication. In 1970 and 1984, Frank Dance looked at 126 published definitions of communication within the field and said that the task of trying to develop a single definition of communication that everyone likes is like trying to nail Jell-O to a wall. Thirty years later, defining communication still feels like nailing Jell-O to a wall.

We recognize that there are countless definitions of communication, but we feel it’s important to provide you with our definition so that you understand how we approach each chapter in this book. We are not arguing that this definition of communication is the only one you should consider viable, but you will understand the content of this text better if you understand how we have come to define communication. For the purpose of this text, we define communication as the process of using symbols to exchange meaning.

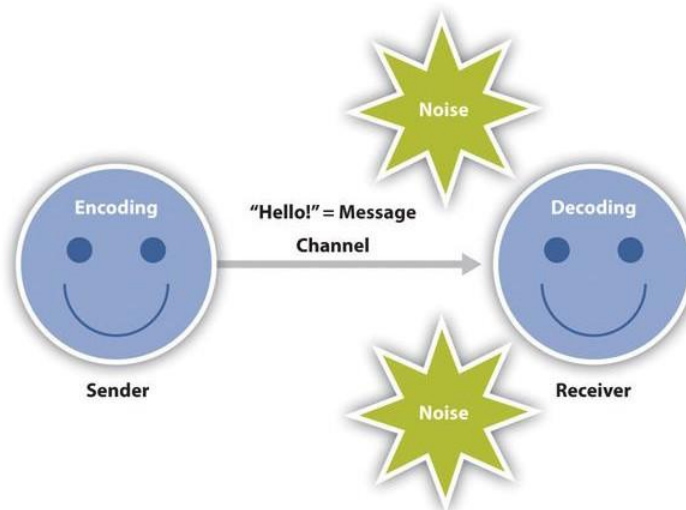
Let’s examine two models of communication to help you further grasp this definition. Shannon and Weaver proposed a Mathematical or Linear Model of Communication that suggests that communication is simply the transmission of a message from one source to another. Watching YouTube videos serves as an example of this. You act as the receiver when you watch videos, receiving messages from the source (the YouTube video). To better understand this, let’s break down each part of this model.

The Linear Model of Communication states that communication moves only in one direction. The sender encodes a message, then uses a certain channel (verbal/nonverbal communication) to send it to a receiver who decodes (interprets) the message. Noise is anything that interferes with or changes the original encoded message.

A sender is someone who encodes and sends a message to a receiver through a particular channel. The sender is the initiator of communication. For example, when you text a friend, ask a teacher a question, or wave to someone, you are the sender of a message.

A receiver is the recipient of a message. Receivers must decode (interpret) messages in ways that are meaningful to them. For example, if you see your friend make eye contact, smile, wave, and say “hello” as you pass, you are receiving a message intended for you. When this happens, you must decode the verbal and nonverbal communication in ways that are meaningful to you.

A message is the particular meaning or content the sender wishes the receiver to understand. The message can be intentional or unintentional, written or spoken, verbal or nonverbal, or any combination of these. For example, as you walk across campus, you may see a friend walking toward you. When you make eye contact, wave, smile, and say “hello,” you are offering a message that is intentional, spoken, verbal, and nonverbal.



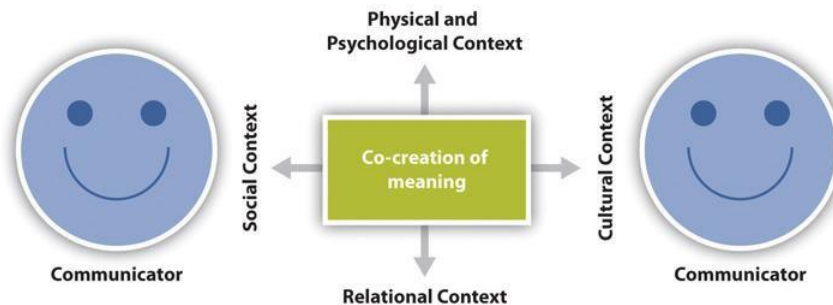
Linear Model of Communication Image by Andy Schmitz is licensed under CC-BY-SA 3.0

A channel is the method a sender uses to send a message to a receiver. The most common channels humans use are verbal and nonverbal forms of communication. Verbal communication relies on language and includes speaking, writing, and sign language. Nonverbal communication includes gestures, facial expressions, paralanguage, and touch. We also use communication channels that are mediated (such as television or the computer), which may utilize both verbal and nonverbal communication. Using the greeting example above, the channels of communication include both verbal and nonverbal communication.

Noise is anything that interferes with the sending or receiving of a message. Noise is external (a jackhammer outside your apartment window or loud music in a nightclub) and internal (physical pain, psychological stress, or nervousness about an upcoming test). External and internal noise make encoding and decoding messages more difficult. Using our ongoing example, if you are on your way to lunch and listening to music on your phone when your friend greets you, you may not hear your friend say “hello,” and you may not wish to chat because you are hungry. In this case, both internal and external noise influenced the communication exchange. Noise is in every communication context, and therefore, no message is received exactly as it is transmitted by a sender because noise distorts it in one way or another.

A major criticism of the Linear Model of Communication is that it suggests communication only occurs in one direction. It also does not show how context or our personal experiences impact communication. Television serves as a good example of the linear model. Have you ever talked back to your television while you were watching it? Maybe you were watching a sporting event or a dramatic show and you talked to the people in the television. Did they respond to you? We’re sure they did not. Television works in one direction. No matter how much you talk to the television, it will not respond to you. Now apply this idea to the communication in your relationships. It seems ridiculous to think that this is how we would communicate with each other on a regular basis. This example shows the limits of the linear model for understanding communication, particularly human-to-human communication.

Given the limitations of the Linear Model, Barnlund adapted the model to more fully represent what occurs in most human communication exchanges. The Transactional Model of Communication demonstrates that communication participants act as senders *and* receivers simultaneously, creating reality through their interactions. Communication is not a simple one-way transmission of a message: the personal filters and experiences of the participants impact each communication exchange. The Transactional Model demonstrates that we are simultaneously senders and receivers and that noise and personal filters always influence the outcomes of every communication exchange.



Transactional Model of Communication Image by Andy Schmitz is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 3.0

The Transactional Model of Communication adds to the Linear Model by suggesting that both parties in a communication exchange act as both sender and receiver simultaneously, encoding and decoding messages to and from each other at the same time. While these models are overly simplistic representations of communication, they illustrate some of the complexities of defining and studying communication. Going back to Smith, Lasswell, and Casey, we may choose to focus on one, all, or a combination of the following: senders of communication, receivers of communication, channels of communication, messages, noise, context, and the outcome of communication. We hope you recognize that studying communication is simultaneously detail-oriented (looking at small parts of human communication) and far-reaching (examining a broad range of communication exchanges).

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1.2: Benefits of Communication Studies

If you think about the Smith, Lasswell, and Casey statement that those of us who study communication investigate “who says what, through what channels (media) of communication, to whom, [and] what will be the results,” you should realize how truly complex a task we perform (121). While we’ll explore many examples later in the book, we want to briefly highlight a few examples of what you might study if you are interested in communication as a field of study.

Studying communication is exciting because there are so many possibilities on which to focus. For example, you might study elements of the history and use of YouTube (Soukup), the use of deception in texting (Wise and Rodriguez), college students’ “guilty pleasure” media use (Panek), how sons and daughters communicate disappointment (Miller et al.), an examination of motherhood in lesbian-headed households (Koenig et al.), or daughters’ perceptions of communication with their fathers (Dunleavy et al.).



Communication helps with diplomacy Image by Kremlin.ru is licensed under CC BY 4.0

The above examples demonstrate just a small taste of what we can examine through the lens of communication. In reality, studying communication has almost limitless possibilities. That’s what makes this field so dynamic and exciting! When you think about the infinite number of variables we can study, as well as the infinite number of communication contexts, the task of studying “who says what, through what channels (media) of communication, to whom, [and] what will be the results” is open to countless possibilities. The study of communication has proven helpful to us as social beings as we work to better understand the complexities of our interactions and relationships.

As a student taking an introductory communication course, you might be thinking, “Why does this matter to me?” One reason it is important for you to study and know communication is that these skills will help you succeed in personal, social, and professional situations. A survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers found that “college students who wish to separate themselves from the competition during their job search would be wise to develop proficiencies most sought by employers, such as communication, interpersonal, and teamwork skills.” Whether you major in communication or not, the more you understand communication, the greater potential you have to succeed in all aspects of your life. Another important reason for studying communication is that it can lead to a variety of career opportunities.

Career-Focused Communication Skills

The kind of skills developed by students who study communication are highly valued by all kinds of employers. Courses and activities in the academic field of communication both teach and make use of the skills ranked consistently high by employers. Students who study communication are ready to excel in a wide variety of careers. Forbes listed “The 10 Skills Employers Want in 20-Something Employees.” Look to see how many relate directly to what you would learn from a course such as ours:

- Ability to work in a team
- Ability to make decisions and solve problems
- Ability to plan, organize, and prioritize work
- Ability to communicate verbally with people inside and outside an organization
- Ability to obtain and process information
- Ability to analyze quantitative data
- Technical knowledge related to the job
- Proficiency with computer software programs
- Ability to create and/or edit written reports
- Ability to sell and influence others

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

2: Perceiving and Understanding

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- Describe communication and perception processes
- Discuss factors that influence the perception of self and others
- Describe strategies for improving perception

Think back to the first day of classes. Did you plan ahead for what you were going to wear? Did you get the typical school supplies together? Did you try to find your classrooms ahead of time or look for the syllabus online? Did you look up your professors on an online professor evaluation site? Based on your answers to these questions, I could form an impression of who you are as a student. But would that perception be accurate? Would it match up with how you see yourself as a student? And perception, of course, is a two-way street. You also formed impressions about your professors based on their appearance, dress, organization, intelligence, and approachability. As a professor who teaches others how to teach, I instruct my student-teachers to really take the first day of class seriously. The impressions that both teacher and student make on the first day help set the tone for the rest of the semester.

As we go through our daily lives, we perceive all sorts of people and objects, and we often make sense of these perceptions by using previous experiences to help filter and organize the information we take in. Sometimes we encounter new or contradictory information that changes the way we think about a person, group, or object. The perceptions that we make of others and that others make of us affect how we communicate and act. In this chapter, we will learn about the perception process, how we perceive others, how we perceive and present ourselves, and how we can improve our perceptions.

[2.1: Perception Process](#)

[2.2: Perceiving Others](#)

[2.3: Perceiving and Presenting Self](#)

[2.4: Improving Perception](#)

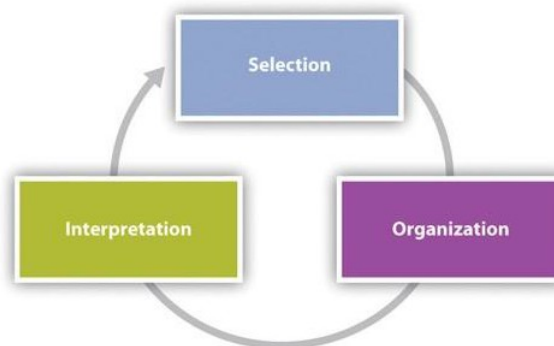
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2.1: Perception Process

Perception is the process of selecting, organizing, and interpreting information. This process includes the perception of select stimuli that pass through our perceptual filters, are organized into our existing structures and patterns, and are then interpreted based on previous experiences. Although perception is a largely cognitive and psychological process, how we perceive the people and objects around us affects our communication. We respond differently to an object or person that we perceive favorably than we do to something we find unfavorable. But how do we filter through the mass amounts of incoming information, organize it, and make meaning from what makes it through our perceptual filters and into our social realities?

Selecting Information

We take in information through all five of our senses, but our perceptual field (the world around us) includes so many stimuli that it is impossible for our brains to process and make sense of it all. So as information comes in through our senses, various factors influence what actually continues on through the perception process (Fiske and Taylor). Selecting is the first part of the perception process, in which we focus our attention on certain incoming sensory information. Think about how, out of many other possible stimuli to pay attention to, you may hear a familiar voice in the hallway, see a pair of shoes you want to buy from across the mall, or smell something cooking for dinner when you get home from work. We quickly cut through and push to the background all kinds of sights, smells, sounds, and other stimuli, but how do we decide what to select and what to leave out?



The Perception Process. Image by Lumen Learning is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA

We tend to pay attention to information that is salient. Salience is the degree to which something attracts our attention in a particular context. The thing attracting our attention can be abstract, like a concept, or concrete, like an object. For example, a person's identity as a Native American may become salient when they are protesting at the Columbus Day parade in Denver, Colorado. Or a bright flashlight shining in your face while camping at night is sure to be salient. The degree of salience depends on three features (Fiske and Taylor, 186). We tend to find salient things that are visually or aurally stimulating and things that meet our needs or interests. Lastly, expectations affect what we find salient.

Organizing Information

Organizing is the second part of the perception process, in which we sort and categorize information that we perceive based on innate and learned cognitive patterns called schemata. There are four types of these schemata: prototypes, personal construct, stereotypes, and scripts. One or all of these tools can be used to organize our perceptions in a meaningful way.

The first of the schemata is known as a prototype. A prototype defines the clearest or most representative examples of some category. It is an ideal or best example of a particular category. Stating that a particular person would make the ideal friend, or that someone is the perfect worker, are both means of prototyping. We classify people by the category that most represents them. Then we consider how well they measure up. The second schemata, personal construct, allows us to measure people and situations. We do so usually after we generalize people into their category or stereotype. Then we make judgments in a limited manner, and our perception may not include nonhighlighted qualities. Thus, we are reminded that the processes of selecting and organizing interact to affect our perception.

The third schemata, known as stereotyping, is the process of predicting generalizations of people and situations. It is very widely used and can be negative as well as positive. However, it is rarely a completely accurate form of measure. Finally, the last schemata is known as a script. A script is a sequence of activities that spells out how we and others are expected to act in a specific situation.

We follow these scripts when someone says hello, when we date, when we are at church, and in many other situations. We have been trained by our environment to follow certain paths that can be constructive, destructive, or both.

The organization of what we select to interpret has a very large influence on our perception. The different environments that we have lived in throughout our lives will always influence our insight. All four cognitive schemata are ever-changing based on new environments and how open we are to new ideas. The ability to understand that we cannot possibly have a complete understanding of people in this world is crucial to the interpretation process. Only if we realize that we change with every input of information, with every bite of food, with every breath of air can we understand that cognitive schemata are ever-changing. Therefore, we must revisit regularly how we organize our perceptions constantly and replace what we have thought to be true with what we have learned to be true.

Interpreting Information

Although selecting and organizing incoming stimuli happens very quickly, and sometimes without much conscious thought, interpretation can be a much more deliberate and conscious step in the perception process. Interpretation is the third part of the perception process, in which we assign meaning to our experiences using schemata. Schemata are like databases of stored, related information that we use to interpret new experiences. We all have fairly complicated schema that have developed over time as small units of information combine to make more meaningful complexes of information.

We have an overall schema about education and how to interpret experiences with teachers and classmates. This schema started developing before we even went to preschool based on things that parents, peers, and the media told us about school. For example, you learned that certain symbols and objects like an apple, a ruler, a calculator, and a notebook are associated with being a student or teacher. You learned new concepts like grades and recess, and you engaged in new practices like doing homework, studying, and taking tests. You also formed new relationships with teachers, administrators, and classmates. As you progressed through your education, your schemata adapted to the changing environment. How smooth or troubling schema reevaluation and revision are varies from situation to situation and person to person. For example, some students adapt their schema relatively easily as they move from elementary, to middle, to high school, and on to college and are faced with new expectations for behavior and academic engagement. Other students don't adapt as easily, and holding on to their old schema creates problems as they try to interpret new information through old, incompatible schema.

We've all been in a similar situation at some point in our lives, so we know that revising our schema can be stressful and that such revision takes effort and usually involves some mistakes, disappointments, and frustrations. But being able to adapt our schema is a sign of cognitive complexity, which is an important part of communication competence. So even though the process may be challenging, it can also be a time for learning and growth.

It's important to be aware of schema because our interpretations affect our behavior. For example, if you are doing a group project for class and you perceive a group member to be shy based on your schema of how shy people communicate, you may avoid giving him presentation responsibilities in your group project because you do not think shy people make good public speakers. Schemata also guide our interactions, providing a script for our behaviors. We know, in general, how to act and communicate in a waiting room, in a classroom, on a first date, and on a game show. Even a person who has never been on a game show can develop a schema for how to act in that environment by watching *The Price Is Right*, for example. People go to great lengths to make shirts with clever sayings or act enthusiastically in hopes of being picked to be a part of the studio audience and hopefully become a contestant on the show.

As we have seen, schemata are used to interpret others' behavior and form impressions about who they are as a person. To help this process along, we often solicit information from people to help us place them into a preexisting schema. In the United States and many other Western cultures, people's identities are often closely tied to what they do for a living. When we introduce others, or ourselves, occupation is usually one of the first things we mention. Think about how your communication with someone might differ if he or she were introduced to you as an artist versus a doctor. We make similar interpretations based on where people are from, their age, their race, and other social and cultural factors. We will learn more about how culture, gender, and other factors influence our perceptions as we continue through the chapter. In summary, we have schemata about individuals, groups, places, and things, and these schemata filter our perceptions before, during, and after interactions. As schemata are retrieved from memory, they are executed, like computer programs or apps on your smartphone, to help us interpret the world around us. Just like computer programs and apps must be regularly updated to improve their functioning, competent communicators update and adapt their schemata as they have new experiences.

Summary of Perception Process

Perception is the process of selecting, organizing, and interpreting information. This process affects our communication because we respond to stimuli differently, whether they are objects or persons, based on how we perceive them. Given the massive amounts of stimuli taken in by our senses, we only select a portion of the incoming information to organize and interpret. We select information based on salience. We tend to find salient things that are visually or aurally stimulating and things that meet our needs and interests. Expectations also influence what information we select. We organize information that we select into patterns based on proximity, similarity, and difference. We interpret information using schemata, which allow us to assign meaning to information based on accumulated knowledge and previous experience.

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2.2: Perceiving Others

Are you a good judge of character? How quickly can you “size someone up”? Interestingly, research shows that many people are surprisingly accurate at predicting how an interaction with someone will unfold based on initial impressions. Fascinating research has also been done on the ability of people to make a judgment about a person’s competence after as little as 100 milliseconds of exposure to politicians’ faces. Even more surprising is that people’s judgments of competence, after exposure to two candidates for senate elections, accurately predicted election outcomes (Ballew and Todorov). In short, after only minimal exposure to a candidate’s facial expressions, people made judgments about the person’s competence, and those candidates judged more competent were people who actually won elections! As you read this section, keep in mind that these principles apply to how you perceive others and to how others perceive you. Just as others make impressions on us, we make impressions on others. We have already learned how the perception process works in terms of selecting, organizing, and interpreting. In this section, we will focus on how we perceive others with specific attention to how we interpret our perceptions of others.

Attribution and Interpretation

I’m sure you have a family member, friend, or coworker with whom you have ideological or political differences. When conversations and inevitable disagreements occur, you may view this person as “pushing your buttons” if you are invested in the issue being debated, or you may view the person as “on their soapbox” if you aren’t invested. In either case, your existing perceptions of the other person are probably reinforced after your conversation, and you may leave the conversation thinking, “She is never going to wake up and see how ignorant she is! I don’t know why I even bother trying to talk to her!” Similar situations occur regularly, and there are some key psychological processes that play into how we perceive others’ behaviors. By examining these processes, attribution in particular, we can see how our communication with others is affected by the explanations we create for others’ behavior. In addition, we will learn some common errors that we make in the attribution process that regularly lead to conflict and misunderstanding.

In most interactions, we are constantly making attributions through which we invent explanations for what is happening. Why did my neighbor slam the door when she saw me walking down the hall? Why is my partner being extra nice to me today? Why did my officemate miss our project team meeting this morning? In general, we seek to attribute the cause of others’ behaviors to internal or external factors. Internal attributions connect the cause of behaviors to personal aspects such as personality traits. External attributions connect the cause of behaviors to situational factors. Attributions are important to consider because our reactions to others’ behaviors are strongly influenced by the explanations we reach.

Imagine that Gloria and Jerry are dating. One day, Jerry gets frustrated and raises his voice to Gloria. She may find that behavior more offensive and even consider breaking up with him if she attributes the cause of the blowup to his personality, since personality traits are usually fairly stable and difficult to control or change. Conversely, Gloria may be more forgiving if she attributes the cause of his behavior to situational factors beyond Jerry’s control, since external factors are usually temporary. If she makes an internal attribution, Gloria may think, “Wow, this person is really a loose cannon. Who knows when he will lose it again?” If she makes an external attribution, she may think, “Jerry has been under a lot of pressure to meet deadlines at work and hasn’t been getting much sleep. Once this project is over, I’m sure he’ll be more relaxed.” This process of attribution is ongoing, and, as with many aspects of perception, we are sometimes aware of the attributions we make, and sometimes they are automatic and/or unconscious.



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Attribution has received much scholarly attention because it is in this part of the perception process that some of the most common perceptual errors or biases occur. One of the most common perceptual errors is the fundamental attribution error, which refers to our tendency to explain others' behaviors using internal rather than external attributions (Sillars, 183). For example, when I worked at an urban college in Denver, Colorado, I often had students come into class irritated, saying, "I got a parking ticket! I can't believe those people. Why don't they get a real job and stop ruining my life!" If you Google some clips from the reality television show *Parking Wars*, you will see the ire that people often direct at parking enforcement officers. In this case, illegally parked students attribute the cause of their situation to the malevolence of the parking officer, essentially saying they got a ticket because the officer was a mean/bad person, which is an internal attribution. Students were much less likely to acknowledge that the officer was just doing his or her job (an external attribution) and that the ticket was a result of the student's decision to park illegally.

Perceptual errors can also be biased, and in the case of the self-serving bias, the error works out in our favor. Just as we tend to attribute others' behaviors to internal rather than external causes, we do the same for ourselves, especially when our behaviors have led to something successful or positive. When our behaviors lead to failure or something negative, we tend to attribute the cause to external factors. Thus, the self-serving bias is a perceptual error through which we attribute the cause of our successes to internal personal factors while attributing our failures to external factors beyond our control. When we look at the fundamental error and the self-serving bias together, we can see that we are likely to judge ourselves more favorably than another person, or at least less personally.

The professor-student relationship offers a good case example of how these concepts can play out. I have often heard students who earned an unsatisfactory grade on an assignment attribute that grade to the strictness, unfairness, or incompetence of their professor. I have also heard professors attribute a poor grade to the student's laziness, attitude, or intelligence. In both cases, the behavior is explained using an internal attribution and is an example of the fundamental attribution error. Students may further attribute their poor grades to their busy schedules or other external, situational factors rather than their lack of motivation, interest, or preparation (internal attributions). On the other hand, when students get a good grade on a paper, they will likely attribute that cause to their intelligence or hard work rather than an easy assignment or an "easy grading" professor. Both of these examples illustrate the self-serving bias. These psychological processes have implications for our communication because when we attribute causality to another person's personality, we tend to have a stronger emotional reaction and tend to assume that this personality characteristic is stable, which may lead us to avoid communication with the person or to react negatively. Now that you're aware of these common errors, you can monitor them more and engage in perception checking, which we will learn more about later, to verify your attributions.

Physical and Environmental Influences on Perception

We make first impressions based on a variety of factors, including physical and environmental characteristics. In terms of physical characteristics, style of dress and grooming are important, especially in professional contexts. We have a general schema regarding how to dress and groom for various situations ranging from formal to business casual to casual to lounging around the house.

You would likely be able to offer some descriptors of how a person would look and act from the following categories: a goth person, a prep, a jock, a fashionista, and a hipster. The schemata associated with these various cliques or styles are formed through personal experience and through exposure to media representations of these groups. Different professions also have schemata for appearance and dress. Imagine a doctor, mechanic, congressperson, exotic dancer, or mail carrier. Each group has clothing and personal styles that create and fit into general patterns. Of course, the mental picture we have of any of the examples above is not going to be representative of the whole group, meaning that stereotypical thinking often exists within our schema. We will learn more about the negative effects of stereotypical thinking later in the chapter, but it's important to understand how persuasive various physical perceptual influences can be.

Think about the harm that has been done when people pose as police or doctors to commit crimes or other acts of malice. Seeing someone in a white lab coat automatically leads us to see that person as an authority figure, and we fall into a scripted pattern of deferring to the "doctor" and not asking too many questions. The Milgram experiments offer a startling example of how powerful these influences are. In the experiments, participants followed instructions from a man in a white lab coat (who was actually an actor), who prompted them to deliver electric shocks to a person in another room every time the other person answered a memory question incorrectly. The experiment was actually about how people defer to authority figures instead of acting independently. Although no one was actually being shocked in the other room, many participants continued to "shock," at very high levels of voltage, the other person even after that person was supposedly being shocked complained of chest pains and became unresponsive (Encina).

Just as clothing and personal style help us form impressions of others, so do physical body features. The degree to which we perceive people to be attractive influences our attitudes about and communication with them. Facial attractiveness and body weight tend to be common features used in the perception of physical attractiveness. In general, people find symmetrical faces and nonoverweight bodies attractive. People perceived as attractive are generally evaluated more positively and seen as kinder and more competent than people evaluated as less attractive. Additionally, people rated as attractive receive more eye contact, more smiles, and closer proximity to others (people stand closer to them).

Although some physical and environmental features are easier to change than others, it is useful to become aware of how these factors, which aren't necessarily related to personality or verbal and nonverbal communication, shape our perceptions. These early impressions also affect how we interpret and perceive later encounters, which can be further explained through the halo and horn effects.

The Halo and Horn Effects

We have a tendency to adapt information that conflicts with our earlier impressions in order to make it fit within the frame we have established. This is known as selective distortion, and it manifests in the halo and horn effects. The angelic halo and devilish horn are useful metaphors for the lasting effects of positive and negative impressions. The halo effect occurs when initial positive perceptions lead us to view later interactions as positive. The horn effect occurs when initial negative perceptions lead us to view later interactions as negative (Hargie, 281).

Since impressions are especially important when a person is navigating the job market, let's imagine how the horn and halo effects could play out for a recent college graduate looking to land her first real job. Nell has recently graduated with her degree in communication studies and is looking to start her career as a corporate trainer. If one of Nell's professors has a relationship with an executive at an area business, his positive verbal recommendation will likely result in a halo effect for Nell. Since the executive thinks highly of his friend the professor and the professor thinks highly of Nell, then the executive will start his interaction with Nell with a positive impression and interpret her behaviors more positively than he would otherwise. The halo effect initiated by the professor's recommendation may even lead the executive to dismiss or overlook some negative behaviors. Let's say Nell doesn't have a third party to help make a connection and arrives late for her interview. That negative impression may create a horn effect that carries through the interview. Even if Nell presents as competent and friendly, the negative first impression could lead the executive to minimize or ignore those positive characteristics, and the company may not hire her.

Summary of Perceiving Others

We use attributions to interpret perceptual information, specifically, people's behavior. Internal attributions connect behavior to internal characteristics such as personality traits. External attributions connect behavior to external characteristics such as situational factors. Two common perceptual errors that occur in the process of attribution are the fundamental attribution error and the self-serving bias. The fundamental attribution error refers to our tendency to overattribute other people's behaviors to internal rather than external causes. The self-serving bias refers to our tendency to overattribute our successes to internal factors and overattribute our failures to external factors. The halo effect describes a perceptual effect that occurs when initial positive impressions lead us to view later interactions as positive. The horn effect describes a perceptual effect that occurs when initial negative impressions lead us to view later interactions as negative.

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2.3: Perceiving and Presenting Self

Just as our perception of others affects how we communicate, so does our perception of ourselves. But what influences our self-perception? How much of ourselves are products of our own making and how much is constructed based on how others react to us? How do we present ourselves to others in ways that maintain our sense of self or challenge how others see us? We will begin to answer these questions in this section as we explore self-concept, self-esteem, and self-presentation.

Self-Concept

Self-concept refers to the overall idea of who a person thinks they, she, or he is. If I said, “Tell me who you are,” your answers would be clues as to how you see your self-concept. Each person has an overall self-concept that might be encapsulated in a short list of overarching characteristics that he or she finds important. But each person’s self-concept is also influenced by context, meaning we think differently about ourselves depending on the situation we are in. In some situations, personal characteristics, such as our abilities, personality, and other distinguishing features, will best describe who we are. You might consider yourself laid back, traditional, funny, open-minded, or driven, or you might label yourself a leader or a thrill seeker. In other situations, our self-concept may be tied to a group or cultural membership. For example, you might consider yourself a member of the Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity, a Southerner, or a member of the track team.

Our self-concept is also formed through our interactions with others and their reactions to us. The concept of the looking glass self explains that we see ourselves reflected in other people’s reactions to us and then form our self-concept based on how we believe other people see us (Cooley). This reflective process of building our self-concept is based on what other people have actually said, such as “You’re a good listener,” and other people’s actions, such as coming to you for advice. These thoughts evoke emotional responses that feed into our self-concept. For example, you may think, “I’m glad that people can count on me to listen to their problems.”



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We also develop our self-concept through comparisons. Men are more likely than women to include group memberships in their self-concept descriptions to other people. Social comparison theory states that we describe and evaluate ourselves in terms of how we compare to other people. Social comparisons are based on two dimensions: superiority/inferiority and similarity/difference (Hargie, 261). In terms of superiority and inferiority, we evaluate characteristics like attractiveness, intelligence, athletic ability, and so on. For example, you may judge yourself to be more intelligent than your brother or less athletic than your best friend, and these judgments are incorporated into your self-concept.

This process of comparison and evaluation isn’t necessarily a bad thing, but it can have negative consequences if our reference group isn’t appropriate. Reference groups are the groups we use for social comparison, and they typically change based on what we are evaluating. In terms of athletic ability, many people choose unreasonable reference groups with which to engage in social comparison. If a man wants to get into better shape and starts an exercise routine, he may be discouraged by his difficulty in keeping up with the aerobics instructor or running partner and judge himself as inferior, which could negatively affect his self-

concept. Using as a reference group people who have only recently started a fitness program but have shown progress could help maintain a more accurate and hopefully positive self-concept.

We also engage in social comparison based on similarity and difference. Since our self-concept is context specific, similarity may be desirable in some situations and difference more desirable in others. Factors like age and personality may influence whether or not we want to fit in or stand out. Although we compare ourselves to others throughout our lives, adolescent and teen years usually bring new pressure to be similar to or different from particular reference groups. Think of all the cliques in high school and how people voluntarily and involuntarily broke off into groups based on popularity, interest, culture, or grade level. Some kids in your high school probably wanted to fit in with and be similar to other people in the marching band but be different from the football players. Conversely, athletes were probably more apt to compare themselves, in terms of similar athletic ability, to other athletes rather than kids in show choir. But social comparison can be complicated by perceptual influences. As we learned earlier, we organize information based on similarity and difference, but these patterns don't always hold true. Even though students involved in athletics and students involved in arts may seem very different, a dancer or singer may also be very athletic, perhaps even more so than a member of the football team. As with other aspects of perception, there are positive and negative consequences of social comparison.

We generally want to know where we fall in terms of ability and performance as compared to others, but what people do with this information and how it affects self-concept varies. Not all people feel they need to be at the top of the list, but some won't stop until they get the highest score on a video game or set a new school record in a track-and-field event. Some people strive to be first chair in the clarinet section of the orchestra, while another person may be content to be second chair. The education system promotes social comparison through grades and rewards such as honor rolls and dean's lists. Although education and privacy laws prevent me from displaying each student's grade on a test or paper for the whole class to see, I do typically report the aggregate grades, meaning the total number of As, Bs, Cs, and so on. This doesn't violate anyone's privacy rights, but it allows students to see where they fell in the distribution. This type of social comparison can be used as motivation. The student who was one of only three out of twenty-three to get a D on the exam knows that most of her classmates are performing better than she is, which may lead her to think, "If they can do it, I can do it."

But social comparison that isn't reasoned can have negative effects and result in negative thoughts like "Look at how bad I did. Man, I'm stupid!" These negative thoughts can lead to negative behaviors, because we try to maintain internal consistency, meaning we act in ways that match up with our self-concept. So if the student begins to question her academic abilities and then incorporates an assessment of herself as a "bad student" into her self-concept, she may then behave in ways consistent with that, which is only going to worsen her academic performance. Additionally, a student might be comforted to learn that he isn't the only person who got a D and then not feel the need to try to improve, since he has company. You can see in this example that evaluations we place on our self-concept can lead to cycles of thinking and acting. These cycles relate to self-esteem and self-efficacy, which are components of our self-concept.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem refers to the judgments and evaluations we make about our self-concept. While self-concept is a broad description of the self, self-esteem is more specifically an evaluation of the self (Byrne). If I again prompted you to "Tell me who you are" and then asked you to evaluate (label as good/bad, positive/negative, desirable/undesirable) each of the things you listed about yourself, I would get clues about your self-esteem. Like self-concept, self-esteem has general and specific elements. Generally, some people are more likely to evaluate themselves positively, while others are more likely to evaluate themselves negatively (Brockner). More specifically, our self-esteem varies across our life span and across contexts.

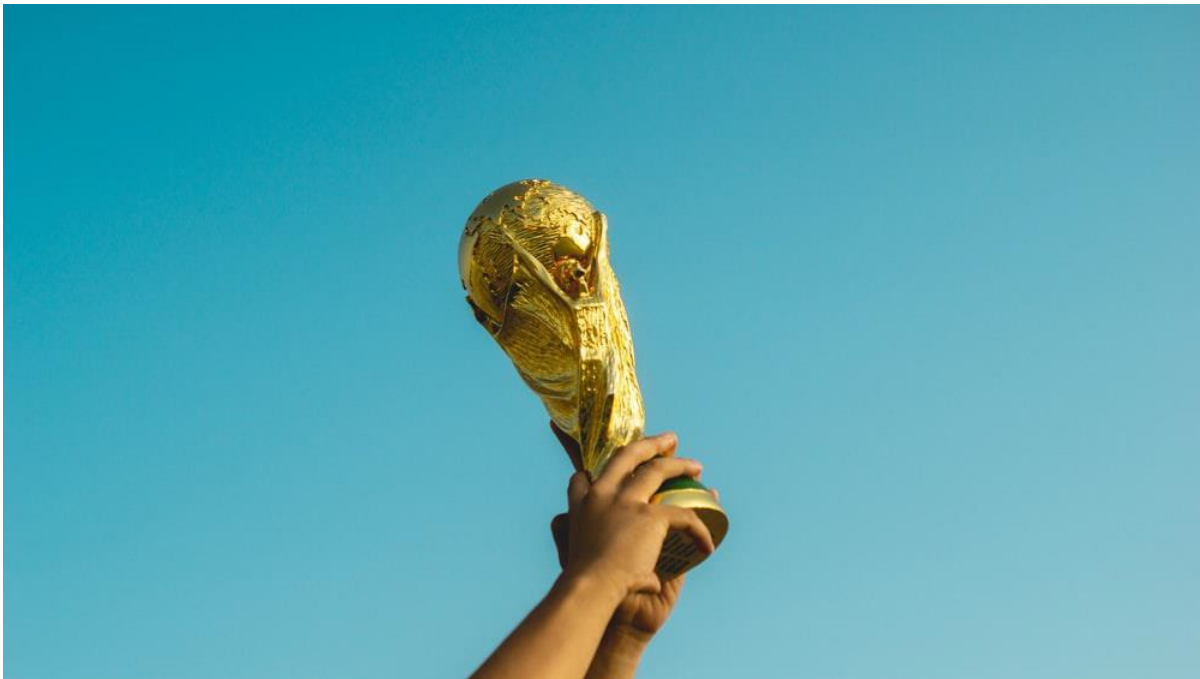


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How we judge ourselves affects our communication and our behaviors, but not every negative or positive judgment carries the same weight. The negative evaluation of a trait that isn't very important for our self-concept will likely not result in a loss of self-esteem. For example, I am not very good at drawing. While I appreciate drawing as an art form, I don't consider drawing ability to be a very big part of my self-concept. If someone critiqued my drawing ability, my self-esteem wouldn't take a big hit. I do consider myself a good teacher, however, and I have spent and continue to spend considerable time and effort on improving my knowledge of teaching and my teaching skills. If someone critiqued my teaching knowledge and/or abilities, my self-esteem would definitely be hurt. This doesn't mean that we can't be evaluated on something we find important. Even though teaching is very important to my self-concept, I am regularly evaluated on it. Every semester, I am evaluated by my students, and every year, I am evaluated by my dean, department chair, and colleagues. Most of that feedback is in the form of constructive criticism, which can still be difficult to receive, but when taken in the spirit of self-improvement, it is valuable and may even enhance our self-concept and self-esteem. In fact, in professional contexts, people with higher self-esteem are more likely to work harder based on negative feedback, are less negatively affected by work stress, are able to handle workplace conflict better, and are better able to work independently and solve problems (Brockner). Self-esteem isn't the only factor that contributes to our self-concept; perceptions about our competence also play a role in developing our sense of self.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to the judgments people make about their ability to perform a task within a specific context (Bandura). Judgments about our self-efficacy influence our self-esteem, which influences our self-concept. The following example also illustrates these interconnections.



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Pedro did a good job on his first college speech. During a meeting with his professor, Pedro indicates that he is confident going into the next speech and thinks he will do well. This skill-based assessment is an indication that Pedro has a high level of self-efficacy related to public speaking. If he does well on the speech, the praise from his classmates and professor will reinforce his self-efficacy and lead him to positively evaluate his speaking skills, which will contribute to his self-esteem. By the end of the class, Pedro likely thinks of himself as a good public speaker, which may then become an important part of his self-concept. Throughout these points of connection, it's important to remember that self-perception affects how we communicate, behave, and perceive other things. Pedro's increased feeling of self-efficacy may give him more confidence in his delivery, which will likely result in positive feedback that reinforces his self-perception. He may start to perceive his professor more positively, since they share an interest in public speaking, and he may begin to notice other people's speaking skills more during class presentations and public lectures. Over time, he may even start to think about changing his major to communication or pursuing career options that incorporate public speaking, which would further integrate being "a good public speaker" into his self-concept. You can hopefully see that these interconnections can create powerful positive or negative cycles. While some of this process is under our control, much of it is also shaped by the people in our lives.

The verbal and nonverbal feedback we get from people affect our feelings of self-efficacy and self-esteem. As we saw in Pedro's example, being given positive feedback can increase our self-efficacy, which may make us more likely to engage in a similar task in the future (Hargie). Obviously, negative feedback can lead to decreased self-efficacy and a declining interest in engaging with the activity again. In general, people adjust their expectations about their abilities based on feedback they get from others. Positive feedback tends to make people raise their expectations for themselves, and negative feedback does the opposite, which ultimately affects behaviors and creates the cycle. When feedback from others is different from how we view ourselves, additional cycles may develop that impact self-esteem and self-concept.

Self-discrepancy theory states that people have beliefs about and expectations for their actual and potential selves that do not always match up with what they actually experience (Higgins). To understand this theory, we have to understand the different "selves" that make up our self-concept, which are the actual, ideal, and ought selves. The actual self consists of the attributes that you or someone else believes you actually possess. The ideal self consists of the attributes that you or someone else would like you to possess. The ought self consists of the attributes you or someone else believes you should possess.

These different selves can conflict with each other in various combinations. Discrepancies between the actual and ideal/ought selves can be motivating in some ways and prompt people to act for self-improvement. If your ought self should volunteer more for the local animal shelter, then your actual self may be more inclined to do so. Discrepancies between the ideal and ought selves can be especially stressful. Many professional women who are also mothers have an ideal view of self that includes professional success and advancement. They may also have an ought self that includes a sense of duty and obligation to be a full-time mother. The actual self may be someone who does OK at both but doesn't quite live up to the expectations of either. These discrepancies do not just create cognitive unease—they also lead to emotional, behavioral, and communicative changes.

When we compare the actual self to the expectations of ourselves and others, we can see particular patterns of emotional and behavioral effects. When our actual self doesn't match up with our own ideal self, we are not obtaining our own desires and hopes, which can lead to feelings of dejection including disappointment, dissatisfaction, and frustration. For example, if your ideal self has no credit card debt and your actual self does, you may be frustrated with your lack of financial discipline and be motivated to stick to your budget and pay off your credit card bills.

When our actual self doesn't match up with other people's ideals for us, we may not be obtaining significant others' desires and hopes, which can lead to feelings of dejection including shame, embarrassment, and concern for losing the affection or approval of others. For example, if a significant other sees you as an "A" student and you get a 2.8 GPA your first year of college, then you may be embarrassed to share your grades with that person.



Image by Kyle Glenn on Unsplash

When our actual self doesn't match up with what we think other people think we should obtain, we are not living up to the ought self that we think others have constructed for us, which can lead to feelings of agitation, feeling threatened, and fearing potential punishment. For example, if your parents think you should follow in their footsteps and take over the family business, but your actual self wants to go into the military, then you may be unsure of what to do and fear being isolated from the family.

Finally, when our actual self doesn't match up with what we think we should obtain, we are not meeting what we see as our duties or obligations, which can lead to feelings of agitation including guilt and weakness and a feeling that we have fallen short of our moral standard (Higgins, 322–23). For example, if your ought self should volunteer more for the local animal shelter, then your actual self may be more inclined to do so due to the guilt of reading about the increasing number of animals being housed at the facility. The following is a review of the four potential discrepancies between selves:

- Actual vs. own ideals. We have an overall feeling that we are not obtaining our desires and hopes, which leads to feelings of disappointment, dissatisfaction, and frustration.
- Actual vs. others' ideals. We have an overall feeling that we are not obtaining significant others' desires and hopes for us, which leads to feelings of shame and embarrassment.
- Actual vs. others' ought. We have an overall feeling that we are not meeting what others see as our duties and obligations, which leads to feelings of agitation including fear of potential punishment.
- Actual vs. own ought. We have an overall feeling that we are not meeting our duties and obligations, which can lead to a feeling that we have fallen short of our own moral standards.

Influences on Self-Perception

We have already learned that other people influence our self-concept and self-esteem. While interactions we have with individuals and groups are definitely important to consider, we must also note the influence that larger, more systemic forces have on our self-

perception. Social and family influences, culture, and the media all play a role in shaping who we think we are and how we feel about ourselves. Although these are powerful socializing forces, there are ways to maintain some control over our self-perception.

Various forces help socialize us into our respective social and cultural groups and play a powerful role in presenting us with options about who we can be. While we may like to think that our self-perception starts with a blank canvas, our perceptions are limited by our experiences and various social and cultural contexts.

Parents and peers shape our self-perceptions in positive and negative ways. Feedback that we get from significant others, which includes close family, can lead to positive views of self (Hargie, 99). In the past few years, however, there has been a public discussion and debate about how much positive reinforcement people should give to others, especially children. The following questions have been raised: Do we have current and upcoming generations that have been overpraised? Is the praise given warranted? What are the positive and negative effects of praise? What is the end goal of the praise? Let's briefly look at this discussion and its connection to self-perception.

Whether praise is warranted or not is very subjective and specific to each person and context, but in general, there have been questions raised about the potential negative effects of too much praise. Motivation is the underlying force that drives us to do things. Sometimes we are intrinsically motivated, meaning we want to do something for the love of doing it or for the resulting internal satisfaction. Other times we are extrinsically motivated, meaning we do something to receive a reward or avoid punishment. If you put effort into completing a short documentary for a class because you love filmmaking and editing, you have been largely motivated by intrinsic forces. If you complete the documentary because you want an "A" and know that if you fail, your parents will not give you money for your spring break trip, then you are motivated by extrinsic factors.

Both can, of course, effectively motivate us. Praise is a form of extrinsic reward, and if there is an actual reward associated with the praise, like money or special recognition, some people speculate that intrinsic motivation will suffer. But what's so good about intrinsic motivation? Intrinsic motivation is more substantial and long-lasting than extrinsic motivation and can lead to the development of a work ethic and a sense of pride in one's abilities. Intrinsic motivation can move people to accomplish great things over long periods of time and be happy despite the effort and sacrifices made. Extrinsic motivation dies when the reward stops. Additionally, too much praise can lead people to have a misguided sense of their abilities. College professors who are reluctant to fail students who produce failing work may be setting those students up to be shocked when their supervisor critiques their abilities or output once they get into a professional context (Hargie, 105–7).



Image by Benjamin Davies on Unsplash

There are cultural differences in the amount of praise and positive feedback that teachers and parents give their children. For example, teachers give less positive reinforcement in Japanese and Taiwanese classrooms than do teachers in US classrooms. Chinese and Kenyan parents do not regularly praise their children because they fear it may make them too individualistic, rude, or arrogant (Wierzbicka). So the phenomenon of overpraising isn't universal, and the debate over its potential effects is not resolved.

Research has also found that communication patterns develop between parents and children that are common in many verbally and physically abusive relationships. Such patterns have negative effects on a child's self-efficacy and self-esteem (Morgan and Wilson, 341). As you'll recall from our earlier discussion, attributions are links we make to identify the cause of a behavior. In the case of aggressive or abusive parents, they are not as able to distinguish between mistakes and intentional behaviors, often seeing honest mistakes as intended and reacting negatively to the child. Such parents also communicate generally negative evaluations to their children by saying, for example, "You can't do anything right!" or "You're a bad girl." When children do exhibit positive behaviors, abusive parents are more likely to use external attributions that diminish the achievement of the child by saying, for example, "You only won because the other team was off their game." In general, abusive parents have unpredictable reactions to their children's positive and negative behavior, which creates an uncertain and often scary climate for a child that can lead to lower self-esteem and erratic or aggressive behavior. The cycles of praise and blame are just two examples of how the family as a socializing force can influence our self-perceptions.

Summary of Perception and Self

Our self-concept is the overall idea of who we think we are. It is developed through our interactions with others and through social comparison that allows us to compare our beliefs and behaviors to others. Our self-esteem is based on the evaluations and judgments we make about various characteristics of our self-concept. It is developed through an assessment and evaluation of our various skills and abilities, known as self-efficacy, and through comparison and evaluation of who we are, who we would like to be, and who we should be (self-discrepancy theory). Social comparison theory and self-discrepancy theory affect our self-concept and self-esteem because through comparison with others and comparison of our actual, ideal, and ought selves, we make judgments about who we are and our self-worth. These judgments then affect how we communicate and behave.

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2.4: Improving Perception

So far, we have learned about the perception process and how we perceive others and ourselves. Now we will turn to a discussion of how to improve our perception. Our self-perception can be improved by becoming aware of how schemata, socializing forces, self-fulfilling prophecies, and negative patterns of thinking can distort our ability to describe and evaluate ourselves. How we perceive others can be improved by developing better listening and empathetic skills, becoming aware of stereotypes and prejudice, developing self-awareness through self-reflection, and engaging in perception checking.

Overcoming Barriers to Perceiving Others

There are many barriers that prevent us from competently perceiving others. While some are more difficult to overcome than others, they can all be addressed by raising our awareness of the influences around us and committing to monitoring, reflecting on, and changing some of our communication habits. Whether it is our lazy listening skills, lack of empathy, or stereotypes and prejudice, various filters and blinders influence how we perceive and respond to others.

Develop Empathetic Listening Skills

Effective listening is not easy, and most of us do not make a concerted effort to overcome common barriers to listening. Our fast-paced lives and cultural values that emphasize speaking over listening sometimes make listening feel like a chore. But we shouldn't underestimate the power of listening to make someone else feel better and to open our perceptual field to new sources of information. Empathetic listening can also help us expand our self- and social awareness by learning from other people's experiences and taking on different perspectives. Empathetic listening is challenging because it requires a cognitive and emotional investment that goes beyond the learning of a skill set.

Beware of Stereotypes and Prejudice

Stereotypes are sets of beliefs that we develop about groups, which we then apply to individuals from that group. Stereotypes are schemata that are taken too far, as they reduce and ignore a person's individuality and the diversity present within a larger group of people. Prejudice is negative feelings or attitudes toward people based on their identity or identities.

Checking Perception

Perception checking is a strategy to help us monitor our reactions to and perceptions about people and communication. There are some internal and external strategies we can use to engage in perception checking. In terms of internal strategies, review the various influences on perception that we have learned about in this chapter and always be willing to ask yourself, "What is influencing the perceptions I am making right now?" Even being aware of what influences are acting on our perceptions makes us more aware of what is happening in the perception process. In terms of external strategies, we can use other people to help verify our perceptions.

Improving Self-Perception

Our self-perceptions can and do change. Recall that we have an overall self-concept and self-esteem that are relatively stable, and we also have context-specific self-perceptions. Context-specific self-perceptions vary depending on the person with whom we are interacting, our emotional state, and the subject matter being discussed. Becoming aware of the process of self-perception and the various components of our self-concept (which you have already started to do by studying this chapter) will help you understand and improve your self-perceptions.

Avoid Reliance on Rigid Schemata

As we learned earlier, schemata are sets of information based on cognitive and experiential knowledge that guide our interaction. We rely on schemata almost constantly to help us make sense of the world around us. Sometimes schemata become so familiar that we use them as scripts, which prompts mindless communication and can lead us to overlook new information that may need to be incorporated into the schema. So it's important to remain mindful of new or contradictory information that may warrant revision of a schema. Being mindful is difficult, however, especially since we often unconsciously rely on schemata.

Be Critical of Socializing Forces

We learned earlier that family, friends, sociocultural norms, and the media are just some of the socializing forces that influence our thinking and therefore influence our self-perception. These powerful forces serve positive functions but can also set into motion

negative patterns of self-perception. Two examples can illustrate the possibility for people to critique and resist socializing forces in order to improve their self-perception. The first deals with physical appearance and notions of health, and the second deals with cultural identities and discrimination.

Beware of Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

Self-fulfilling prophecies are thought and action patterns in which a person's false belief triggers a behavior that makes the initial false belief actually or seemingly come true (Guyl et al., 116). For example, let's say a student's biology lab instructor is a Chinese person who speaks English as a second language. The student falsely believes that the instructor will not be a good teacher because he speaks English with an accent. Because of this belief, the student doesn't attend class regularly and doesn't listen actively when she does attend. Because of these behaviors, the student fails the biology lab, which then reinforces her original belief that the instructor wasn't a good teacher.

Create and Maintain Supporting Interpersonal Relationships

Aside from giving yourself affirming messages to help with self-perception, it is important to find interpersonal support. Although most people have at least some supportive relationships, many people also have people in their lives who range from negative to toxic. When people find themselves in negative relational cycles, whether it is with friends, family, or romantic partners, it is difficult to break out of those cycles. But we can all make choices to be around people that will help us be who we want to be and not be around people who hinder our self-progress. This notion can also be taken to the extreme, however. It would not be wise to surround yourself with people who only validate you and do not constructively challenge you, because this too could lead to distorted self-perceptions.

Beware of Distorted Patterns of Thinking and Acting

You already know from our discussion of attribution errors that we all have perceptual biases that distort our thinking. Many of these are common, and we often engage in distorted thinking without being conscious of it. Learning about some of the typical negative patterns of thinking and acting may help us acknowledge and intervene in them. One such pattern involves self-esteem and overcompensation.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

3: Communication Theory

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- Define theory and explain its functions
- Explain what makes a good theory
- Understand Theoretical Paradigms
- Explain the Empirical Laws Paradigm
- Explain the Human Rules Paradigm
- Explain the Systems Theory Paradigm
- Explain the Rhetorical Theory Paradigm
- Explain the Critical Theory Paradigm

How did the universe begin? Where did it all come from? Scientists, theologians, and educators have been debating this topic for centuries. A commonplace for this debate occurs in school textbooks—should they teach creationism or the big bang theory? How you answer this question depends on the theoretical perspective you hold. In either case, your theoretical perspective includes some common features—reasons to justify your theory and evidence you use to prove that it is correct. Creationists cite the Bible or other religious texts as proof of their theoretical perspective. Advocates of the big bang theory argue that the earth emerged 13.7 billion years ago and cite the continued expansion of space (Hubble’s law) as verifiable proof that this theory is correct. But how do we know which theory is right? Let’s apply this same reasoning to communication. Think about the many ways you develop and try to answer questions about the “right” ways to communicate.

We want to leave the intricacies of the theoretical debate between creationism and the big bang theory to our colleagues in the physical sciences, religious studies, and philosophies. However, we’ll use this chapter to explore theoretical issues relevant to the study of communication. By the end of this chapter, you should understand what communication theories are, their functions, how we evaluate them, and the five major theoretical paradigms shaping communication study today. You’ll also discover just how important communication theory is to your everyday life.

[3.1: Defining Theory](#)

[3.2: Empirical Laws Paradigm](#)

[3.3: Human Rules Paradigm](#)

[3.4: Systems Theory Paradigm](#)

[3.5: Rhetorical Theories Paradigm](#)

[3.6: Critical Theories Paradigm](#)

[3.7: Evaluating Theories](#)

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