Interpersonal Communication and Perception

Objectives

1. Define perception and interpersonal perception.
2. Identify and explain the three stages of interpersonal perception.
3. Describe the relationship between interpersonal communication and interpersonal perception.
4. Explain how we form impressions of others, describe others, and interpret others’ behavior.
5. Identify the eight factors that distort the accuracy of our interpersonal perceptions.
6. Offer five suggestions for improving interpersonal perceptions.

Outline

- Understanding Interpersonal Perception
- How We Form Impressions of Others
- How We Interpret the Behavior of Others
- Barriers to Accurate Interpersonal Perception
- How to Improve Interpersonal Perception Skills
Part One Interpersonal Communication Foundations

What you see and what you hear depends a good deal on where you are standing. It also depends on what sort of person you are.”

C. S. Lewis

Look at the Norman Rockwell painting. What is happening, and what has happened? What is the relationship among the individuals in the painting? You probably have deduced that the boy was running away from home, the policeman found him, and then he took the boy into the local coffee shop for ice cream or some other treat. Perhaps you think that the man behind the counter is wistfully recalling his own days of running away as a child. What are your feelings about the policeman? Do you see him as a friendly and caring person who has a good understanding of kids?

In Chapter 1, we defined human communication as the process of making sense of the world and sharing that sense with others by creating meaning through the use of verbal and nonverbal messages. In this chapter, we discuss the first half of that definition—the process of making sense of our world. How we make sense out of what we experience is the starting point for what we share with others. As human beings, we interpret and attribute meaning to what we observe or experience, particularly if what we are observing is other people. We tend to make inferences about their motives, personalities, and other traits based on their physical qualities and behaviors. Those who are skilled at making observations and interpretations have a head start in developing effective interpersonal relationships. Those who are other-oriented, who are aware of and sensitive to the communication behaviors of others, will likely be better at accurately perceiving others.

Before we turn to the role that perception plays in interpersonal communication, let’s first take a closer look at the interpersonal perception process itself.

Understanding Interpersonal Perception

What is perception? Perception is the process of experiencing your world and then making sense out of what you experience. You experience your world through your five senses. Your perceptions of people, however, go beyond simple interpretations of sensory information. Interpersonal perception is the process by which you decide what people are like and give meaning to their actions. It includes making judgments about personality and drawing inferences from what you observe.¹

When you meet someone new, you select certain information to attend to: For example, you note whether the person is male or female, has an accent, smiles, and uses a friendly tone of voice, as well as particular personal information (she is from Boone, Iowa). You then organize the information into some category that is recognizable to you, such as “a friendly Midwesterner.” Then you interpret the organized perceptions: This person is trustworthy, honest, hardworking, and likable.
Stage 1: Selecting

Sit for a minute after you read this passage and tune in to all the sensory input you are receiving: Consider the feel of your socks against your feet, the pressure of the floor on your heels, the pressure of the piece of furniture against your body as you sit, the sounds from various sources around you—“white noise” from a refrigerator, personal computer, fluorescent lights, water in pipes, voices, passing traffic, or your own heartbeat or churning stomach. What do you smell? What do you see? Without moving your eyes, turn your awareness to the images you see in the corner of your vision. What colors do you see? What shapes? What taste is in your mouth? How do the pages of this book feel against your fingertips? Now stop reading and consider all these sensations. Try to focus on all of them at the same time. You can’t.

You are selective as you attempt to make sense out of the world around you. The number of sensations you can attend to at any given time is limited. Perhaps you close your eyes or sit in the dark as you listen to music. This allows you to select more auditory sensations because you have eliminated visual cues.

We Perceive and Remember Selectively. Why do we select certain sounds, images, and sensations and not others? Four principles frame the process of how we select what we see, hear, and experience: selective perception, selective attention, selective exposure, and selective recall.

Selective perception occurs when we see, hear, or make sense of the world around us based on a host of factors such as our personality, beliefs, attitudes, hopes, fears, and culture, as well as what we like and don’t like. We literally see and don’t see things because of our tendency to perceive selectively. Your eyes and your brain do not work like a camera, which records everything in the picture. When you develop film, you capture what was in the viewfinder. Your brain doesn’t necessarily process everything you see through your viewfinder. Similarly, your ear is not a microphone that consciously picks up every sound.

In a court of law, eyewitness testimony often determines whether someone is innocent or guilty of a crime. Recent research suggests, however, that a witness’s powers of observation are not flawless. In fact, researchers have discovered several perceptual errors in eyewitness testimony. Many innocent people have been convicted because of what a witness thought he or she saw or heard. As this evidence documents, our eyes are not cameras; our ears are not microphones. We perceive selectively.

Selective attention is the process of focusing on specific stimuli; we selectively lock on to some things in our environment and ignore others. As in the selective perception process, we have a tendency to attend to those things around us that relate to our needs and wants. When you’re hungry, for example, and you’re looking for a place to grab a quick bite of lunch, you’ll probably be more attentive to fast-food advertising and less focused on ads for cars. We also attend to information that is moving, blinking, flashing, interesting, novel, or noisy. Web page designers, for example, give a lot of thought to ways of catching our attention with advertisements.

Selective exposure is our tendency to put ourselves in situations that reinforce our attitudes, beliefs, values, or behaviors. The fact that we’re selective about what we expose ourselves to means that we are more likely to be in places that make us feel comfortable and support the way we see the world than in places that make us uncomfortable. Whom do you usually find at a Baptist church on Sunday mornings? Baptists. Who attends a Democratic Party convention? Democrats. If you perceive yourself to be a good student who does everything possible to get high grades, you will do your best to attend class. We expose ourselves to situations that reinforce how we make sense out of the world.
We are constantly selecting cues from our environment and then using those cues to help us perceive and form impressions of others. Are you aware of the behaviors that you typically notice about other people? What do you focus on when selecting information about other people and forming impressions of them?

**Selective recall** occurs when we remember things we want to remember and forget or repress things that are unpleasant, uncomfortable, or unimportant to us. Because our brains don’t operate like cameras or microphones, not all that we see or hear is recorded in our memories so that we can easily retrieve it. Some experiences may simply be too painful to remember. Or we just don’t remember some information because it’s not relevant or needed (like the address of the web page you clicked on yesterday).

**We Thin Slice.** Have you ever gone to a grocery store and enjoyed the free samples that are sometimes offered to get you to buy various products? The grocer hopes that if you like the small sample, you’ll want to purchase more. Perhaps after tasting a thin slice of cheese, you’ll buy a pound of it. The concept of **thin slicing** in the perception process works the same way. You sample a little bit of someone’s behavior and then generalize as to what the person may be like, based on the brief information you have observed. Journalist Malcolm Gladwell wrote a popular book called *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, in which he pointed to several examples of how people thin slice to make judgments of others. For example, Gladwell reviewed research that found that a patient was less likely to sue a physician for malpractice if the doctor had effective “people skills.” Doctors who took the time to listen, respond positively, empathize, and, in short, be other-oriented were less likely to be sued than doctors who were not other-oriented. As patients, we thin slice when we make a judgment about the overall credibility of a doctor based on just one aspect of the doctor’s behavior—his or her bedside manner. Later in this book, we’ll review the research of John Gottman, another researcher who has evidence of the accuracy of thin slicing; he has done extensive research about marriage and divorce. Gottman has been able to thin slice behaviors in marriage to be able to predict with 94 percent accuracy whether a couple will divorce. He has found that when he watches videotapes of couples having conversations and discussing real issues and problems in their marriage, he can make very accurate guesses as to whether the couple will stay together. Gottman has developed a way of thin slicing these marriage relationships. The four behaviors that predict divorce if all are present are defensiveness, stonewalling (not responding), criticism, and contempt—with contempt being the most corrosive.

Some people are better at thin slicing than others. There is evidence, for example, that women are better than men in interpreting nonverbal cues. Can you improve your ability to thin slice with accuracy? Yes, but it takes time and practice. It took marriage researcher John Gottman many years and a significant amount of research to be able to know what to look for in order to predict a successful or unsuccessful marriage. Learning how to be more perceptive and being more other-oriented, the focus of this book, can improve your ability to thin slice accurately.

**Stage 2: Organizing**

Look at the four items in Figure 3.1. What does each of them mean to you? If you are like most people, you will perceive item A as a rabbit, item B as a telephone number, item C as the word *interpersonal*, and item D as a circle. Strictly speaking, none of those perceptions is correct. We discuss why after we explore the second stage of perception, organizing.

We organize our world by creating categories, linking together the categories we’ve created, and then seeking closure by filling in any missing gaps in what we perceive.
We Create Categories. After we perceive certain stimuli, we organize them into convenient, understandable, and efficient categories that let us make sense of what we have observed. Organizing, or chunking, what we perceive makes it easier to process complex information because it lets us impose the familiar on the unfamiliar, and because we can more easily store and recall simple patterns.

One of the ways we create categories is by superimposing a familiar structure on information we select. To superimpose is to use a framework we’re already familiar with to interpret information that may, at first, look formless. We look for the familiar in the unfamiliar. For example, when you looked at item A in Figure 3.1, you saw the pattern of dots as a rabbit because rabbit is a concept you know and to which you attach various meanings. The set of dots would not have meaning for you in and of itself, nor would it be meaningful to you to attend to each particular dot or to the dots’ relationships to one another. It would be possible to create a mathematical model of the dots indicating their placement on the x-y grid, but such a model would be extremely complex and difficult to observe and remember. It’s much easier to organize the dots by superimposing something that is stored in your memory: a rabbit. For similar reasons, people have organized patterns of stars in the sky into the various constellations and have given them names that reflect their shapes, like the Bear, the Crab, and the Big and Little Dippers.

People also search for and apply patterns to their perceptions of other people. You might have a friend who jogs and works out at a gym. You put these together to create a pattern and label the friend as “athletic.” That label represents a pattern of qualities you use in relating to your friend, a pattern that we discuss later in the chapter.

We Link Categories. Once we have created categories, we link them together as a way of further making sense of how we have chunked what we experience. We link the categories though a process called punctuation. Punctuation is the process of making sense out of stimuli by grouping, dividing, organizing, separating, and further categorizing information.

Just as punctuation marks on this page tell you when a sentence ends, punctuation in the perception process makes it possible for you to see patterns in information. To many Americans, item B in Figure 3.1 looks like a telephone number because it has three numbers followed by four numbers. However, the digits could just as easily represent two totally independent numbers: five hundred fifty-five followed by the number four thousand, four hundred thirty-three. How we interpret the numbers depends on how we punctuate or separate them. When we record information, we use commas, periods, dashes, and colons to signal meanings and interpretations. In our minds, we sometimes impose punctuation marks where we believe they should be. For example, perhaps you mentally put a dash between 555 and 4433, even though no dash appears there.

When it comes to punctuating relational events and behaviors, people develop their own separate sets of standards. You will sometimes experience difficulties and disagreements because of differences in how you and your communication partner choose to punctuate a conversational exchange or a shared sequence of events. One classic example of relational problems resulting from differences in punctuation involves a husband who withdraws and a wife who nags. The husband punctuates their interactions in such a way that he sees his withdrawing as a reaction to her nagging. The wife, in contrast, sees herself as nagging her husband because he keeps
withdrawing. The husband and wife punctuate their perceptions differently because they each perceive different starting points for their interactions. Resolving such conflicts involves having the parties describe how they have punctuated the event and agree on a common punctuation.

We Seek Closure. Another way we organize information is by seeking closure. Closure is the process of filling in missing information or gaps in what we perceive. Looking again at Figure 3.1, you can understand people’s inclination to label the figure in item D a circle, even though circles are continuous lines without gaps. We apply the same principles in our interactions with people. When we have an incomplete picture of another human being, we impose a pattern or structure, classify the person on the basis of the information we do have, and fill in any missing information. For example, when meeting someone for the first time who looks and acts like someone you already know, you may make assumptions about your new acquaintance, based on the characteristics of the person you already know. You close the gaps in the missing information about your new acquaintance, based on the characteristics of the person well known to you. Many of us are uncomfortable with uncertainty; creating closure is a way of helping us make better sense out of what is new and unfamiliar.

Stage 3: Interpreting

Once you have selected and organized stimuli, you next typically interpret the stimuli. You see your best friend across a crowded room at a party. He waves to you, and you say to yourself, “He wants to talk with me.” Or you nervously wait as your British literature teacher hands back the results of the last exam. When the professor calls your name, she frowns ever so slightly; your heart sinks. You think, “I must have bombed on the test.” Or, while you are out, your administrative assistant leaves you a note that your sister called. You’re worried. You reflect, “My tightwad sister never uses her daytime cell phone minutes to call during the day. There must be something wrong.” In each of these situations, you’re trying to make sense out of the information you hear or see. You’re attempting to interpret the meaning of the verbal and nonverbal cues you experience.

**RECAP**

**The Interpersonal Perception Process**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tr>
<td>Selecting</td>
<td>The first stage in the perceptual process, in which we select certain sensations to focus awareness on</td>
<td>Sitting in your apartment where you hear lots of traffic sounds and car horns, but attending to a particular rhythmic car honking that seems to be right outside your door</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organizing</td>
<td>The second stage in the perceptual process, in which we assemble stimuli into convenient and efficient patterns</td>
<td>Putting together the car honking with your anticipation of a friend’s arrival to pick you up in her car to drive to a movie that starts in five minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpreting</td>
<td>The final stage in perception, in which we assign meaning to what we have observed</td>
<td>Deciding the car honking must be your friend signaling you to come out to the car quickly because she’s running late</td>
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We form impressions of others both passively and actively, and our own implicit assumptions and expectations color those impressions.

How We Form Impressions of Others

Impressions are collections of perceptions about others that we maintain and use to interpret their behaviors. Impressions tend to be very general: “She seems nice,” “He was very friendly,” or “What a nerd!” According to impression formation theory, we form these impressions based on our perceptions of physical qualities (what people look like), behavior (what people do), what people tell us, and what others tell us about them. When we first meet someone, we form a first impression without having much information, and we often hold on to this impression (even if it’s an inaccurate one) throughout the relationship. So it’s important to understand how we form impressions of others. Researchers have found that we often give special emphasis to the first things we see or the last things we observe about another person. We also generalize from specific positive or negative perceptions we hold.

Our perceptions of others affect how we communicate with them, and their perceptions of us affect the way they interact with us. It’s through our perceptions that we develop general as well as specific impressions of other people. (And they do the same—they rely on their perceptions to develop impressions of us.) How much we notice about another person relates to our level of interest and need. We perceive others either passively or actively.

Passive perception occurs simply because we are alive and our senses are operating. We see, hear, smell, taste, and feel things around us without any conscious attempt

impression Collection of perceptions about others that you maintain and use to interpret their behaviors.

impression formation theory Theory that explains how you develop perceptions about people and how you maintain and use those perceptions to interpret their behaviors.

passive perception Perception that occurs without conscious effort, simply in response to one’s surroundings.
to do so. No one teaches you to be passively perceptive; you simply respond to your surroundings. Similarly, you don’t have to think about perceiving others, you just do it because you’re alive.

Active perception doesn’t just happen. It is the process of actively finding out specific information by intentionally observing and sometimes questioning others. We’re engaged in active perception when we make a conscious effort to figure out what we are observing. Do you like to “people watch?” If you have some time on your hands while waiting for a friend, you may start just looking at people and making guesses about what these strangers do for a living, whether they are friendly, grumpy, peaceful, or petulant, where they are from, or whether they are married. When people watching, you are involved in active perception. You consciously make assumptions about the personalities and circumstances of those you observe.

As we make these assumptions and form impressions of others, most of us rely on an implicit personality theory, our personal set of assumptions and expectations or a pattern of associated qualities that we attribute to people, which allows us to understand them—whether we met them 10 minutes ago or 10 years ago. An implicit personality theory provides a way of organizing the vast array of information we have about people’s personalities.7

Although an implicit personality theory describes how we organize and interpret our perceptions of people’s personalities in general, we develop specific categories for people, called constructs. A construct, according to psychologist George Kelly, is a bipolar quality (that is, a quality with two opposite categories) or a continuum that we use to classify people.8 We may pronounce someone good or bad, athletic or nonathletic, warm or cold, funny or humorless, selfish or generous, beautiful or ugly, kind or cruel, and so on. So we don’t necessarily classify people in absolute terms—they are categorized in degrees.

As we meet and observe people, we draw on our own implicit personality theory to help us reduce our uncertainty about others. Uncertainty reduction theory suggests that one of the primary reasons we communicate at all is to reduce our uncertainty about what we see and experience. By making guesses and assumptions about people, we reduce our uncertainty. If we can reduce our uncertainty about other people, then we can predict their reactions and behaviors, adapt our behaviors and strategies, and therefore maximize the likelihood of fulfilling our own social needs.9 Being able to reduce uncertainty and increase predictability gives us greater control when communicating with others. Although this might sound calculating, it really isn’t. If you enjoy outdoor activities such as camping and hiking, one of your goals in establishing social relationships is probably to find others who share your interest. So actively observing, questioning, and consciously processing information to determine a potential friend’s interests can help you assess whether the relationship will meet your goals. And in the spirit of being other-oriented, you will also be able to assess whether you can meet the goals and interests of the other person. In Chapter 5, we discuss ways to improve your ability to gain information through more effective listening.

Now let’s take a closer look at several typical ways most of us form impressions of others: our tendency to emphasize what we see first or what we observe last when interacting with others, and our tendency to generalize from our perceptions of them as positive or negative.

We Emphasize What Comes First: The Primacy Effect

There is evidence that when we form impressions of others, we pay more attention to our first impressions. The tendency to attend to the first pieces of information that we observe about another person is called the primacy effect. The primacy effect was
documented in a famous study conducted by Solomon Asch. Individuals were asked to evaluate two people based on two lists of adjectives. The list for the first person had the following adjectives: *intelligent, industrious, impulsive, critical, stubborn,* and *envious.* The list for the other person had the same adjectives, but in reverse order. Although the content was identical, respondents gave the first person a more positive evaluation than the second. One explanation for this is that the first words in each list created a first impression that respondents used to interpret the remaining adjectives. In a similar manner, the first impressions we form about someone often affect our interpretation of subsequent perceptions of that person.

**We Emphasize What Comes Last: The Recency Effect**

Not only do we give more weight to our first impressions, we also give considerable attention to our most recent experiences and impressions. The tendency to put a lot of stock in the last thing we observe is called the recency effect. For example, if you have thought for years that your friend is honest, but today you discover that she lied to you about something important, that lie will have a greater impact on your impression of her than the honest behavior she has displayed for years. Similarly, if, during a job interview, you skillfully answered all of the interviewer’s questions yet your last answer to a question was not the answer the interviewer was looking for, you may not get the job. If you’re going to make mistakes in an interview, it’s best not to do it at the beginning of the interview (primacy effect) or at the end of the conversation (recency effect).

**We Generalize Positive Qualities to Others: The Halo Effect**

One feature common to most of our implicit personality theories is the tendency to put people into one of two categories: people we like and people we don’t like. Categorizing people as those we like often creates a halo effect, in which we attribute a variety of positive qualities to them without personally confirming the existence of these qualities. If you like me, you will add a “halo” to your impression of me and then apply to me those qualities from your implicit personality theory that apply to people you like, such as being considerate of other people, warm, caring, fun to be with and having a great sense of humor.

**We Generalize Negative Qualities to Others: The Horn Effect**

Just as we can use the halo effect to generalize about someone’s positive qualities, the opposite can also happen. We sometimes make many negative assumptions about a person because of one unflattering perception. This is called the horn effect, named for the horns associated with medieval images of a devil. If you don’t like the way someone looks, you might also decide that person is selfish or stingy and attribute a variety of negative qualities to that individual, using your implicit personality theory. As evidence of the horn effect, research suggests that during periods of conflict in our relationships, we are more likely to attribute negative behaviors to our feuding partner than we are to ourselves. A little bit of negative information can affect how we perceive other attributes of a person.

In support of the premise underlying the horn effect, researchers Dominic Infante and Andrew Rancer observed that some people have a tendency to see the worst in others, which causes them to lash out and be verbally aggressive. There is also evidence that some people interpret any negative feedback they receive as a personal attack, no matter how carefully the feedback is worded. For many people,
people, there is no such thing as “constructive criticism.” Like a sunburned sunbather, such people perceive even a mild suggestion presented with a light touch as a stinging rebuke.

How We Interpret the Behavior of Others

“I know why Alicia hasn’t arrived at our meeting yet. She just doesn’t like me. She is always late,” says Cathy. “I’ll bet she just wants people to think she’s too busy to be on time for our little group meetings. She is so stuck up.” Cathy seems not only to have formed a negative impression of Alicia, but also to harbor a hunch about why Alicia is typically late. Cathy is attributing meaning to Alicia’s behavior. Even though Alicia could have just forgotten about the meeting, may have another meeting that always runs overtime right before her meeting with Cathy, or is from a culture in which meetings almost always start after the announced meeting time, Cathy thinks Alicia’s absence is caused by feelings of superiority and contempt. Cathy’s assumptions about Alicia can be explained by several theories about the way we interpret the behavior of others. Based on a small sample of someone’s behavior, we develop our own explanations of why people do what they do. Attribution theory, standpoint theory, and intercultural communication theory can offer perspectives on how we make sense on what we perceive.

We Attribute Motives to Others’ Behavior: Attribution Theory

Attribution theory explains how we ascribe specific motives and causes to the behaviors of others. It helps us interpret what people do. For example, suppose the student sitting next to you in class gets up in the middle of the lecture and walks out. Why did the student leave? Did the student become angry at something the instructor said? It seems unlikely—the lecturer was simply describing types of cloud formations. Was the student sick? You remember noticing that the student looked a little flushed and occasionally winced. Maybe the student has an upset stomach. Or maybe the student is just a bit of a rebel and often does strange things like leaving in the middle of a class.

Social psychologist Fritz Heider says that we are “naive psychologists,”15 because we all seek to explain people’s motives for their actions. We are naive because we do not create these explanations in a systematic or scientific manner, but rather by applying
common sense to our observations. Developing the most credible explanation for the behavior of others is the goal of the attribution process.

**Causal attribution theory** identifies three potential causes for any person’s action: circumstance, a stimulus, or the person herself or himself. Attributing behavior to **circumstance** means that you believe a person acts in a certain way because the situation leaves no choice. This way of thinking places responsibility for the action outside of the person. There is interesting research that suggests that during times when you feel lonely and isolated from others, you are more likely to attribute your feelings of loneliness to your specific circumstance rather than to any flaws in your personality.

You would be attributing to circumstance if you believed the student quickly left the classroom because of an upset stomach. Concluding that the student left because the instructor said something inappropriate would be attributing the student’s action to the **stimulus** (the instructor). But if you knew the instructor hadn’t said anything out of line and that the student was perfectly healthy, you would place the responsibility for the action on the student. Attributing to the **person** means that you believe there is some quality about the person that caused the observed behavior.

To explore how attributions to a person affect us, interpersonal communication researchers Anita Vangelisti and Stacy Young wanted to know whether intentionally hurtful words inflict more pain than unintentionally hurtful comments. As you might suspect, if we think someone intends to hurt us, spiteful words have more sting and bite than if we believe someone does not intend to hurt our feelings. Our attributions are factors in our impressions.

**We Use Our Own Point of Reference About Power:**

**Standpoint Theory**

**Standpoint theory** is yet another framework that seeks to explain how we interpret the behavior of others. The theory is relatively simple: We each see the world differently because we’re each viewing it from a different position. Some people

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**UNDERSTANDING OTHERS**

**Adapting to Differences**

As noted in our discussion of standpoint theory, where you stand makes a difference in what you see and how you interpret human behavior. Following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, discussions about the perceptions of the power and influence of different cultural groups and countries became more common.

Men and women, Blacks and Whites, Jews and Christians, Muslims and Hindus, Hispanics and Asians, gay and straight individuals, all experience life from their own cultural standpoints, which means they all have perceptions about their influence on others. To become more other-oriented is to become aware of your own perceived place in society and to be more sensitive to how that position of power or lack of power affects how you perceive others with a different standpoint.

To explore applications of standpoint theory in your life, consider the following questions:

1. How would you describe your standpoint in terms of power and influence in your school or at work, or in your family? Have you ever experienced rejection, alienation, or discrimination based on how others perceive you?
2. How would other people in your life (parents, siblings, children, coworkers, employer, or friends) describe your power and influence on them?
3. How does your standpoint influence your relationship with others? Identify a specific relationship with a teacher, coworker, or family member in which different standpoints influence the quality of the relationship in either positive or negative ways.
4. What can you do to become more aware of how your standpoint influences your interactions with others? How can your increased awareness enhance the quality of your interpersonal communication with others?
have positions of power, and others do not; the resources that we have to help us make our way through life provide a lens through which we view the world and the people in it.

Standpoint theory explains why people with differing cultural backgrounds have different perceptions of others’ behavior. In the early nineteenth century, German philosopher Georg Hegel noted this simple but powerful explanation of why people see and experience the world differently.\(^{19}\) Hegel was especially interested in how one’s standpoint was determined in part by one’s power and influence. For example, people who have greater power and more influence in a particular culture may not be aware of their power and influence and how this power affects their perceptions of others. A person with less power (which in many cultures includes women and people of color) may be acutely aware of the power he or she doesn’t have.

As evidence of standpoint theory, one team of researchers found that people who perceived that they were the victims of someone’s lying to them or cheating them had an overall more negative view of the communication with their lying or cheating communication partner than with someone who they perceived did not lie or cheat.\(^{20}\) This makes sense, doesn’t it? If our point of view is that a certain person can’t be trusted in one situation, we are less likely to trust the person in other situations. C. S. Lewis was right: What we see and hear depends a good deal on where we are standing.

### RECAP

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impression Formation</td>
<td>We form general impressions of others based on general physical qualities, behaviors, and disclosed information.</td>
<td>Categorizing people as nice, friendly, shy, or handsome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicit Personality</td>
<td>We use a personal set of assumptions to draw specific conclusions about someone’s personality.</td>
<td>“If she is intelligent, then I believe she must be caring, too.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attribution Theory</td>
<td>We develop reasons to explain the behaviors of others.</td>
<td>“I guess she didn’t return my call because she doesn’t like me.” “He’s just letting off steam because he had a bad week of exams.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causal Attribution</td>
<td>We ascribe a person’s actions to circumstance, a stimulus, or the person himself or herself.</td>
<td>“He didn’t go to class because his alarm didn’t go off.” “He didn’t go to class because it was a makeup session.” “He didn’t go to class because he is bored by it.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standpoint Theory</td>
<td>We interpret the behavior of others through the lens of our own social position, power, or cultural background.</td>
<td>“He won’t join the fraternity because he doesn’t understand how important that network can be to his professional career.”</td>
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### We Draw on Our Own Cultural Background: Intercultural Communication Theory

When Cathy thought Alicia was rude and thoughtless because she always arrived at their meetings late, Cathy was attributing meaning to Alicia’s behavior based on Cathy’s cultural assumptions about when meetings usually begin. According to Cathy, if a meeting is supposed to start at 10:00 A.M., it’s important to be prompt and be ready to begin on time. But Alicia comes from a culture with a different approach to time; in Alicia’s culture, meetings never begin on time. In fact, it’s polite, according to Alicia, to be fashionably late so that the meeting leader can greet people and make any last-minute preparations for the meeting. To show up on time would be disrespectful. Both Alicia and Cathy are making sense out of their actions based on their own cultural backgrounds.
cultural framework. Alicia and Cathy aren’t the only ones who interpret behavior through their cultural lens—we all do.

Culture is a learned system of knowledge, behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, values, and norms that is shared by a group of people. Our culture is reflected not only in our behavior but in every aspect of the way we live our lives. The categories of things and ideas that identify the most profound aspects of cultural influence are known as cultural elements. According to one research team, cultural elements include the following:\n
- Material culture: housing, clothing, automobiles, and other tangible things
- Social institutions: schools, governments, religious organizations
- Belief systems: ideas about individuals and the universe
- Aesthetics: music, theatre, art, dance
- Language: verbal and nonverbal communication systems

As you can see from the list, cultural elements are not only things we can see and hear, but also ideas and values. And because these elements are so prevalent, they have an effect on how we interpret all that we experience.

Our culture is like the air we breathe, in that we’re often not aware that it’s there—we simply go about our daily routines, usually not conscious that we are breathing. Because our culture is ever-present and is constantly influencing our thoughts and behavior, it has a profound impact on how we experience the world. If you come from a culture in which horsemeat is a delicacy, you’ll likely savor each bite of your horse steak, because you’ve learned to enjoy it. Yet if eating horsemeat is not part of your cultural heritage, you will have a different perception if you’re invited to chow down on filet of horse. So it is with how we interpret the behavior of other people who have different cultural expectations than we do. In some countries, men kiss each other on the cheek when greeting one another, or they may walk arm in arm down the sidewalk when conversing. These are considered normal and natural aspects of human interaction. Yet in North America, these behaviors may be perceived differently because of different cultural expectations.

In a study investigating whether people from a variety of cultural backgrounds used their own culture to make sense out of the behavior of others, researchers found that stereotyping—making rigid judgments of others based on a small bit of information—is rampant in many cultures. In this study, participants from Australia, Botswana, Canada, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and the United States all consistently formed stereotypical impressions of others. Culture strongly influences how we interpret the actions of others.

Barriers to Accurate Interpersonal Perception

Think about the most recent interaction you had with a stranger. Do you remember the person’s age, sex, race, or physical description? Did the person have any distinguishing features, such as a beard, tattoos, or a loud voice? The qualities you recall...
will most likely serve as the basis for attributions you make about that person’s behavior. But these attributions, based on your first impressions, might be wrong. Each person sees the world from his or her own unique perspective. That perspective is clouded by a number of distortions and barriers that contribute to inaccurate interpersonal perception.

We Stereotype

*Preconceived notions about what they expect to find may keep people from seeing what’s before their eyes and ears. We see what we want to see, hear what we want to hear.* We stereotype others. To **stereotype** someone is to attribute a set of qualities to the person because of his or her membership in some category. The word **stereotype** was originally a printing term, referring to a metal plate that was cast from type set by a printer. The plate would print the same page of type over and over again. When we stereotype people, we place them into inflexible, all-encompassing categories. We “print” the same judgments on anyone placed in a given category.

Stereotyping other people and then treating them unfairly is a significant problem in modern society. There is clear evidence that this problem is especially acute for socially marginalized groups such as gays and lesbians and Blacks. Being aware of the problem is the first step to overcoming it.

We are more likely, according to communication researchers, to maintain our stereotypes of others if we believe that the people with whom we typically interact also share our stereotype. Why? People who hold a common stereotype reinforce one another’s thinking.

When we stereotype others, we overgeneralize. To **overgeneralize** is to treat small amounts of information as if they were highly representative. This tendency also leads people to draw inaccurate, prejudicial conclusions. For example, a professor may talk to two students and then generalize the impression he or she develops of those two students to the entire student population. In a similar way, most people tend to assume that the small sampling of another person’s behavior is a valid representation of who that person is. As you saw in Figure 3.1, you might perceive a rabbit even when you have only a few dots on which to base your perception.

To overgeneralize is similar to the concept of thin slicing that we discussed earlier in the chapter. Although we each thin slice—use a small sample of information to reach a conclusion—a problem occurs when the conclusion we reach from a brief observation is inaccurate. Overgeneralization occurs when the thin-sliced information we use to reach a conclusion is wrong. When making snap judgments from only bits of information, realize the potential for drawing an inaccurate conclusion.

We also stereotype others when we **oversimplify**—which is a human tendency to prefer a simple explanation to a more complex one. When Imelda picks you up late to go to a movie, she says, “Sorry, I lost track of the time.” The next day, Mary also picks you up late to go to a movie. She says, “Sorry. You wouldn’t believe how busy I’ve been. I ran out of hot water when I was showering, and my hair dryer must be busted. It kept shutting off. Then I stopped to get something to eat, and it took forever to get my order. And then it turned out they had it all messed up and had to redo it.” Whose explanation can you accept more easily, Imelda’s or Mary’s?

Usually, people prefer simple explanations; they tend to be more believable and easier to use in making sense of another’s actions. But in reality, our behaviors are affected by a multitude of factors, as Mary’s explanation indicates. Unfortunately, it takes a lot of effort to understand what makes another person do what he or she does—more effort than we are typically willing to give.
We’ve identified several theories that explain how we form impressions of other people when communicating via electronically mediated communication (EMC). These theories can help you explain and predict how others develop stereotypical impressions of you and how you may stereotype others based on your EMC. As we noted in Chapter 1, researchers first thought that because communicating via e-mail, text message, Facebook, Twitter, or phone offers fewer nonverbal cues, these media allow only limited expressions of relationship cues and feelings. This theory is called the cues-filtered-out theory. But more recently, researchers have found support for social information-processing theory. This theory suggests that EMC does include relationship cues and additional information that communicates feelings and emotions (such as emoticons), as well as more subtle cues embedded in the message, (such as how long someone takes to respond to a message, the formality of a message, use of all capital letters for emphasis, or even attention to spelling). It just takes longer for those cues to be evidenced as we interact online. So although there may be fewer cues available to help us form impressions of others when we communicate online, those that do exist may be even more potent in influencing the impressions we form and impressions others form of us.

Regardless of which theory explains how we form impressions of others online, there is evidence that we use what cues are present online to stereotype others, just as we do in face-to-face interactions. In fact, we may be more likely to stereotype others online than in person, because we have to make more inferences about the other person—because there are fewer cues and because it takes longer for relationship cues to emerge. This theory is called the social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE). We are more likely to reduce someone to a stereotype or, to use a technical term, to deindividuate online, because we have fewer cues to help us develop a clear impression of others.

One study found that Asian American women were stereotypically perceived as shyer and more introverted compared to African American women when communicating via e-mail but not when communicating by telephone. The fewer cues available, the more likely stereotypical perceptions of the other person were to emerge. Since e-mail offers fewer cues than the telephone (the telephone is a richer medium), stereotyping is more likely in the media-lean e-mail context. Another study found that people make stereotypical judgments about another person’s gender when communicating via e-mail when they aren’t certain whether the person they are interacting with is a male or female. We use whatever cues we have, such as language style, and even topics discussed, to help us form a stereotypical impression of the other person.

Another interesting study suggests that people may form stereotyped impressions about you based on the perceived physical attractiveness of the friends you have posted on your MySpace or Facebook pages. We apparently use all of the information we can get to help us form impressions of others when interacting online, including how attractive we perceive other people’s friends to be. If the friends whose photos appear on your page are attractive, research suggests you will be perceived as more attractive and have a more positive impression on others than if your friends are perceived as less attractive in appearance. In short, you look good if you have friends who look good. This suggests that people form stereotypes not only on the basis of the qualities of other people but also by using context cues about those with whom others associate.

What are the implications of these research studies? They suggest that in the twenty-first century, we are more likely rather than less likely to stereotype others when communicating online. We are more likely to overgeneralize and to oversimplify because we have limited information available. The problem is that with less relational information or fewer cues in general, we may be even more inaccurate in making stereotypical judgments of others online. So be mindful of the potential for developing inaccurate stereotypes online. Being aware of the problem is the first step in avoiding the problem.

We Ignore Information

People sometimes don’t focus on important information, because they give too much weight to information that is obvious and superficial. Why do we ignore important information that may be staring us in the face? It’s because, as you learned in the discussion about attribution theory, we tend to explain a person’s motives on the basis of the most obvious information rather than on in-depth information we might have. When meeting someone new, we perceive his or her physical qualities first: color of skin, body size and shape, age, sex, and other obvious characteristics. We overattribute to these qualities, because they are so vivid and available, and ignore other
details. We have all been victims of these kinds of attributions, some of us more than others. Often, we are unaware that others are making biased attributions, because they do not express them openly. But sometimes we can tell by the way others react to us and treat us. We may even choose to ignore contradictory information that we receive directly from the other person. Instead of adjusting our conception of that person, we adjust our perception. The halo and horn effects discussed earlier reflect this tendency. For example, if an instructor gets an excellent paper from a student who the instructor has concluded is not particularly bright or motivated, she may tend to find errors and shortcomings that are not really there, or she may even accuse the student of plagiarism.

There is evidence that we make stereotypical judgments of others even when we may not be fully aware that we are making such judgments. Researchers have found that we hold what are called implicit attitudes that affect how we perceive others. Since these implicit attitudes operate below our level of awareness, it’s important to monitor our behavior and reactions to others to ensure that we are not unfairly, inaccurately, or inappropriately making stereotypical judgments of them.

Categorizing individuals is not an inherently bad thing to do, but it is harmful to hang on to an inflexible image of another person in the face of contradictory information. For example, not all mothers are responsible or loving. But because American culture typically reveres motherhood, we may not easily process our perceptions of a mother who is abusive or negligent. Researchers have suggested that when we categorize and stereotype others, we do so to meet our own needs for power, authority, and structure. And it’s the minority group with less social and political power that tends to be marginalized and to get lost in the power shuffle.

To become more other-oriented is to become aware of your own perceived place in the power hierarchy in our society and to be more sensitive about how that position of power or lack of power affects your perceptions of others with a different level of power. Where are you in the power structure in your school, family, workplace, and in society in general? Whether you perceive yourself to have power or not, understanding your relative power level can help explain and predict how others will interact with you.

In the next chapter, we will explore how cultural differences have an impact on our interactions with others and identify strategies to more mindfully bridge cultural barriers that may contribute to negative perceptions of others.

We Impose Consistency

People overestimate the consistency and constancy of others’ behaviors. When we organize our perceptions, we also tend to ignore fluctuation in people’s behaviors and instead see them as consistent. We believe that if someone acted a certain way one day, he or she will continue to act that way in the future. Perhaps you have embarrassed yourself in front of a new acquaintance by acting foolish and silly. At another encounter with this new acquaintance, you realize that the person is continuing to see your behavior as foolish, even though you don’t intend it to be seen that way. The other person is imposing consistency on your inconsistent behavior.

In fact, everyone’s behavior varies from day to day. Some days, we are in a bad mood, and our behavior on those days does not represent what we are generally like. As intimacy develops in relationships, we interact with our partners in varying circumstances that provide a more complete picture of our true nature.
We Focus on the Negative

People give more weight to negative information than to positive information. Job interviewers often ask you to describe your strengths and weaknesses. If you describe five strengths and one weakness, it is likely that the interviewer will attend more to the one weakness you mention than to the strengths. We seem to recognize this bias and compensate for it when we first meet someone by sharing only positive information about ourselves.

In another of Solomon Asch’s experiments on impression formation, participants heard one of the following two lists of terms to describe a person: (1) intelligent, skillful, industrious, warm, determined, practical, cautious; or (2) intelligent, skillful, industrious, cold, determined, practical, cautious. The only difference in these two lists is the use of warm in the first list and cold in the second. Despite the presence of six other terms, those who heard the “cold” list had a much more negative impression of the person than those who heard the “warm” list. One piece of negative information can have a disproportionate effect on our impressions and negate the effect of several positive pieces of information. Perhaps you’ve noticed that following a near-flawless Olympic ice skating performance, the TV commentator, rather than focusing on the best executed leaps, twists, and turns, will first replay the one small error the skater made in the performance. In our own lives, we may have a tendency to do the same thing; we may focus on what we didn’t do well rather than emphasizing what we’ve done skillfully.

We Blame Others, Assuming They Have Control

People are more likely to believe that others are to blame when things go wrong than to believe that the problem was beyond their control. Your parents were looking forward to celebrating their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. They planned a quiet family celebration at a restaurant. You set your personal digital assistant to remind you one week before the anniversary dinner to buy them a present to give to them at the dinner. You hadn’t anticipated, however, that you’d lose your PDA. When the phone rang and your mom asked, “Where are you?” it all came jarringly back to you: Today was their anniversary, and you’d forgotten it! Not only did you forget to buy them a present, you forgot to attend the dinner. Your parents were hurt. Your mother’s quivering “How could you forget?” still sears your conscience. Your parents’ hurt feelings evolved into anger. They think you just didn’t care enough about them to remember such an important day. Rather than thinking that there might be an explanation for why you forgot their important day, they blame you for your thoughtlessness. Although they certainly have a right to be upset, their assuming that you don’t care about them is an example of what researchers call a fundamental attribution error.

A fundamental attribution error occurs when a person blames a problem on something that is personally controllable (such as forgetting an important date because you don’t care about your parents) rather than something uncontrollable (losing your personal digital assistant and having no back-up system to remind you of the event). Stated simply: We are likely to think that a person’s behavior is influenced by his or
her actions and choices rather than by external causes. We assume that people are responsible for their own actions. For example, the fundamental attribution error would predict that you’re more likely to assume that the person who cuts you off in traffic is a jerk rather than to assume he’s trying to get out of the way of the truck that’s tailgating him. If you assume another person made a conscious choice to hurt you instead of considering that there may be other reasons for the person’s behavior that are beyond the person’s control, you’ve made a fundamental attribution error. You can avoid making a fundamental attribution error by honestly examining your role in the communication process. There is also evidence that the more empathic or other-oriented we are, the less likely we are to blame the other person for any problem or mistake. If we can empathize with someone over the recent death of a loved one or a recent divorce, we may “cut that person some slack” and excuse behavior that otherwise might strike us as rude or self-centered. When you’ve made a mistake about a person’s behavior, admit it. You can enhance the quality of your relationships when you own up to making perceptual errors.

**We Avoid Responsibility**

People are more likely to save face by believing that they are not the cause of a problem; people assume that other people or events are more than likely the source of problems or events that may put them in an unfavorable light. In one classic episode of *The Simpsons*, Bart Simpson created a popular catch phrase by saying, “I didn’t do it” when he clearly was the cause of a calamity. Whether it was lighting Lisa’s hair on fire, calling Moe’s tavern asking for Al Coholic, or putting baby Maggie on the roof, Bart would simply say, “I didn’t do it.” We chuckle at Bart’s antics and would never stoop to such juvenile pranks. Yet there is evidence that when we do cause a problem or make a mistake, we are more likely to blame someone else rather than ourselves. Bart’s “I didn’t do it” approach to life represents self-serving bias.

When we avoid taking responsibility for our own errors and mistakes, we are guilty of what researchers call the self-serving bias. **Self-serving bias** is the tendency to

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**Building Your Skills**

Do you give people the benefit of the doubt when they do something that irritates you or make a mistake, or do you tend to assume the worst about their intentions? The fundamental attribution error is the human tendency to believe that the cause of a problem or a personal slight is something that is within the other person’s control, rather than external to the person. This tendency to blame others rather than considering that there may be an alternative explanation for a problem or a behavior can result in developing a judgmental, negative attitude toward others. For each of the following, think about what your first explanation was when the event happened to you:

- A person not calling back after a first date
- A server giving you lousy service
- A customer service person promising your car would be fixed by 5:00 p.m., but it isn’t
- A teacher being late for class
- A teacher not returning grades when he or she promised
- A student copying test answers from the student next to him
- A sales clerk ignoring you when you need assistance
- A friend not remembering your birthday

Now go back and generate several additional possible explanations for each behavior. How can you be sure which explanation is accurate? How often do you commit the fundamental attribution error? How often do you give someone the benefit of the doubt?
perceive our own behavior as more positive than others’ behavior. Sociologist Erving Goffman was one of the first to note this tendency when he wrote his classic book *The Preservation of Self in Everyday Life.* As the title of Goffman’s book reveals, we work hard to preserve our own selves. We strive to preserve not only our physical existence, but our psychological health as well. We sometimes may try to preserve a positive image of ourselves by not taking responsibility for our mistakes and by telling ourselves that we are skilled and effective. We are likely, for example, to attribute our own personal success to our hard work and effort rather than any to external, uncontrollable causes. You get an A on your anthropology paper because, you think, “I’m smart.” When you get an F on your history paper, it’s because your neighbor’s loud party kept you up all night and you couldn’t study. Self-serving bias is the tendency to take credit for the good things that happen to you and to say “I didn’t do it” or “It’s not my fault” when bad things happen to you. Simply being aware of the self-serving bias may help you become more objective and accurate in identifying the causes of calamities in your own life.

**RECAP** Barriers to Accurate Interpersonal Perception

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Ignoring Information</th>
<th>We don’t focus on important information because we give too much weight to obvious and superficial information.</th>
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<td>Stereotyping</td>
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<tr>
<td>Avoiding Responsibility</td>
<td>We save face by believing that other people, not ourselves, are the cause of problems; when things go right, it’s because of our own skills and abilities rather than help from others.</td>
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**How to Improve Interpersonal Perception Skills**

With so many barriers to perceiving and interpreting other people’s behavior accurately, what can you do to improve your perception skills? Increasing your awareness of the factors that lead to inaccuracy will help initially, and you will find additional suggestions in this section. Ultimately, your improvement will depend on your willingness to expand your experiences, to communicate about your perceptions with others, and to seek out and consider others’ perceptions of you. Realize that you have had a lifetime to develop these barriers and that it will take time, commitment, and effort to overcome their effects.

**Be Aware of Your Personal Perception Barriers**

Don’t get the idea that you (and everybody else) are automatically doomed to enact the various perception barriers that we’ve described. We presented them so that you can spot them and work to minimize them as you form impressions of and interact with others. But before you can minimize these perception barriers, you need to be
Being willing not only to accept criticism from others but also to seek it can enhance a relationship, if both people are sensitive when sharing and listening. Can you think of criticism that a close friend or family member has shared with you that strengthened the quality of your relationship with that person? Have you heard criticism that caused a relationship to deteriorate? What kind of shared information makes a relationship stronger? What kinds of criticism may be damaging to a relationship?

Be Mindful of the Behaviors That Create Meaning for You

To be mindful is to be conscious of what you are doing, thinking, and sensing at any given moment. In Chapter 2 we noted that you are sometimes unconsciously incompetent—you may not even realize when you are making a perceptual error. A way to increase your perceptual accuracy is to make an effort to be less on “automatic pilot” when making judgments of others and more aware of the conclusions that you draw. The opposite of being mindful is to be mindless—not attuned to what is happening to you. Have you ever walked into a room and then forgotten why you were going there? (Trust us: If this hasn’t happened to you, it will happen as you get older.) Or have you ever misplaced your keys, even though you just had them in your hand minutes earlier? How could you forget what you were directly experiencing just moments ago? The answer is, you were mindless rather than mindful. We sometimes aren’t paying attention to what we are doing. When you interact with others, try to identify one new thing to focus on and observe each time. Watch gestures, eyes, the wrinkles around eyes, foot movements; listen to tone of voice. Try to notice as much detail as possible, but keep the entire picture in view, being mindful of what you are observing.

Just by reading this chapter, you’ve gained greater understanding of how the perceptual process affects your relationships with others. Use your knowledge of the perceptual process to sharpen your own perceptions and conclusions. Here are additional strategies to help you become a more accurate perceiver.

Link Details with the Big Picture

Any skilled detective knows how to take a small piece of information or evidence and use it to reach a broader conclusion. Skilled perceivers keep the big picture in mind as they look for clues about a person. Just because someone may dress differently from you, or have a pronounced accent, don’t rush to judgment about the person based on such few snatches of information. Look and listen for other cues about your new acquaintance that can help you develop a more accurate understanding of who that person is. Try not to use early information to form a quick or rigid judgment that may be inaccurate. Look at all the details you’ve gathered.

Become Aware of Others’ Perceptions of You

The best athletes don’t avoid hearing criticism and observations from their coaches. Instead, they seek out as much feedback as they can about what they are doing right
and wrong. It is difficult to be objective about our own behavior, so feedback from others can help us with our self-perceptions. The strongest relationships are those in which the partners are willing both to share their perceptions and to be receptive to the perceptions of the other.

**Check Your Perceptions**

Throughout this chapter we’ve encouraged you to be more mindful of your communication with others. It may seem like we’re expecting you to be a mind reader—to just look at someone and know precisely what he or she is thinking. Mind reading may be a good circus act, but it’s not a well-documented way of enhancing your perception of others. What does seem to work is to check your perceptions of others.

You can check out the accuracy of your perceptions and attributions in two ways: indirectly and directly. **Indirect perception checking** involves seeking additional information through passive perception, either to confirm or to refute your interpretations. If you suspect someone is angry at you but is not admitting it, for example, you could look for more cues in his or her tone of voice, eye contact, and body movements to confirm your suspicion. You could also listen more intently to the person’s words and language.

**Direct perception checking** involves asking straight out whether your interpretation of what you perceive is correct. Asking someone to confirm a perception shows that you are committed to understanding his or her behavior. If your friend’s voice sounds weary and her posture is sagging, you may assume that she is depressed or upset. If you ask, “I get the feeling from your tone of voice and the way you’re acting that you are kind of down and depressed; what’s wrong?” your friend can then either provide another interpretation: “I’m just tired; I had a busy week”; or expand on your interpretation: “Yeah, things haven’t been going very well. . . .” Your observation might also trigger a revelation: “Really? I didn’t realize I was acting that way. I guess I am a little down.”

**Become Other-Oriented**

Effective interpersonal perception depends on the ability to understand where others are coming from, to get inside their heads, to see things from their perspectives.

Becoming other-oriented involves a two-step process: social decentering (consciously thinking about another’s thoughts and feelings) and empathizing (responding emotionally to another’s feelings). What does your boss think and feel when you arrive late for work? What would your spouse think and feel if you brought a dog home as a surprise gift? Throughout this book we offer suggestions for becoming other-oriented, for reminding yourself that the world does not revolve around you. Being other-oriented enables you to increase your understanding of others and improve your ability to predict and adapt to what others do and say.

To improve your ability to socially decenter and to empathize, strive for two key goals: (1) Gather as much information as possible about the circumstances that are affecting the other person; and (2) gather as much information as possible about the other person.
One barrier to effective interpersonal communication is inaccurately perceiving the emotional expressions of others. Misreading someone’s emotional response can impede effective and appropriate communication with that person. If, for example, you think your friend is angry with you because of something that you did, when in reality, he is upset because of his poor performance on a test, your misattribution of your friend’s emotion could create relational turbulence between the two of you. Inaccurately jumping to conclusions, either about what emotion someone may be experiencing or about the cause of that emotion, reduces communication effectiveness.

In this chapter we’ve discussed the role of attribution theory as a framework for understanding how we interpret the behavior of others, including emotional expression. Attribution theory explains why we may think someone is angry, upset, frustrated, or delighted because of something we said or did.

How can we improve our ability to accurately perceive what others may feel or express? One way is to use the perception checking skills we’ve presented. You can try the indirect perception checking approach by simply withholding your interpretation until you spend more time observing your partner. Or you can use direct perception checking. Rather than trying to read someone’s mind and make an assumption about what the person may be feeling, you can check your perceptions directly by asking that person what she or he is feeling.

• Step one is to observe what someone is expressing nonverbally (the person’s facial expression, tone of voice, movement, posture, and gestures).
• Step two is to make a mindful guess as to what the person may be feeling. But don’t stop there.
• Step three is to ask a question to check whether your impression is accurate.

Besides using perception checking, it’s useful to keep the following principles in mind when trying to accurately perceive others’ emotions.

• Seek to interpret someone’s emotion by considering the overall context of the communication.
• Don’t consider just one bit of behavior, such as only facial expression or only tone of voice; look for a variety of cues, both spoken and unspoken, to increase the accuracy of your perception of your partner’s emotions.
• Consider how your partner has responded to information and events in the past to help you interpret emotional responses.

Being conscious of attribution theory, effectively using perception checking skills, and being mindful of general strategies for accurately interpreting emotions can help enhance the quality of your interpretations of the emotional expressions of others.

We continue to stress the importance of considering the thoughts and feelings of others as a way to enhance the quality of our interpersonal relationships. When forming impressions of others and striving to perceive them accurately, it’s especially important to consider what the other person may be thinking and feeling. To help you become more other-oriented, we offer several questions you could ask yourself. You don’t need to ponder each question every time you meet someone new—that would be unrealistic. But in situations in which it’s especially important to form an accurate impression of someone (whether you’re interviewing the person for a job or thinking about asking the person out on a date), consider these questions:

• What factors or circumstances are affecting the other person right now?
• How can I determine whether there are factors I don’t know about or don’t fully understand about the other person? Should I ask specific questions?
• What do I know about this person that explains his or her behaviors?
• What might be going on in the other person’s mind right now?

• What might the other person be feeling right now?
• What other possible explanations could there be for the person’s actions?
• What would I be thinking if I were in the same situation as this person?
• How would I be feeling if I were in the same situation as this person?
• What would most other people think if they were in that situation?
• How would most other people feel if they were in that situation?
Understanding Interpersonal Perception (pages 62–66)

Interpersonal perception is a fundamental element of interpersonal communication. It is the process by which you decide what people are like and give meaning to their actions, including selecting information about them and forming impressions about their personalities and behavior. We select information, make judgments, organize, and create categories to help us make sense of what we observe and interpret what we see, hear, and experience.

Key Terms
- Perception 62
- Selective recall 64
- Interpersonal perception 62
- Thin slicing 64
- Selective perception 63
- Superimpose 65
- Selective attention 63
- Punctuation 65
- Selective exposure 63
- Closure 66

Critical Thinking Questions
1. Describe a recent situation in which your first impression of someone turned out to be inaccurate. What led you to form this initial impression? What were your initial perceptions? What then led you to change those perceptions?

Activities
Find a magazine ad or illustration, a photograph, or a painting that shows a group of people, and bring it to class. In groups of four or five, pass around the pictures. For each picture, write down a few words to describe your perceptions of what you see. What are the people doing? What is their relationship to one another? What is each person like? How is each person feeling? Why are they doing what they are doing? After you have finished, share what you wrote with the others in your group. Try to determine why people’s descriptions of what they saw differed. What factors influenced your perceptions?

Web Resources
- http://novaonline.nv.cc.va.us/eli/spd110td/interper/siteindex.html Learn more about the perception process at this site; explore how the way you make sense out of the world affects the way you communicate with others.
- http://lynn_meade.tripod.com/id38.htm Visit this site and explore the meaning of self-concept and perception while gaining knowledge about yourself through an assortment of tests.

How We Form Impressions of Others and Interpret Their Behaviors (pages 67–73)

Our perceptions and the impressions we form of others affect how we communicate with them, and their perceptions of us affect the way they interact and communicate with us. Attribution theory, standpoint theory, and intercultural communication theory offer perspectives on how to make sense of what we perceive.

Key Terms
- Impressions 67
- Recency effect 69
- Impression formation theory 67
- Halo effect 69
- Passive perception 67
- Horn effect 69
- Active perception 68
- Attribution theory 70
- Implicit personality theory 68
- Causal attribution theory 71
- Construct 68
- Standpoint theory 71
- Uncertainty reduction theory 68
- Culture 73

Critical Thinking Questions
1. Describe a recent situation in which your first impression of someone turned out to be inaccurate. What led you to form this initial impression? What were your initial perceptions? What then led you to change those perceptions?

2. Think of a recent interaction with a friend, family member, or work colleague in which you interpreted the person’s behavior incorrectly. Did you attribute specific motives to the person’s behavior? What led you to ascribe these motives? What was the outcome of the exchange?

Activities
Pair up with someone in class whom you do not know and with whom you have not interacted before. Without saying anything to each other, write down ten words that you think apply to the other person. Now chat together for five minutes. On a separate section of your paper, write down any additional words that you believe apply to the person; you can also go back and cross out any of the words in the first list that you now think don’t apply. Share both lists of words with each other. Discuss the reasons each of you chose each word.

Barriers to Accurate Interpersonal Perception (pages 73–79)

Each person sees the world from his or her own unique perspective. That perspective is clouded by a number of distortions or barriers that contribute to inaccurate interpersonal perceptions.

One of the primary and most common barriers is stereotyping.
the tendency to attribute certain qualities to someone because of the person’s membership in a particular category. We tend to ignore information that doesn’t mesh with our preconceived notions. We may also overgeneralize, focus on negative information, or avoid responsibility for a problem in our interaction or communication with another person.

**Key Terms**
- Stereotype
- Fundamental attribution error
- Social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE)
- Self-serving bias

**Critical Thinking Questions**
1. What do you think contributes to the tendency to perceive others inaccurately? How might the effects of those factors be minimized or eliminated?
2. Think about some of your recent interpersonal conflicts. How would you describe your perception of the problem in each conflict? How do you think the others would describe their perceptions of the problem? What role did perception play in contributing to or resolving the conflict?
3. Choose several “friends” from Facebook or another social networking site—people you don’t know well but who have nonetheless “friended” you. What impressions do you have of these people? Do you tend to place them into a category based on their profile information, wall posts, or photos? What factors lead you to categorize them in this way? Are your perceptions positive or negative? What attribution errors might you be making?
4. Ethics: Do you have a right in an intimate relationship to expect your partner to share his or her perceptions of you, whether those perceptions are positive or negative? Explain your reasoning.

**Activities**
Make a list to share with classmates of between five and ten stereotypes of different groups or categories of people. Compare and contrast your list and your classmates’ lists. What factors contribute to the forming of these stereotypes?

Ask a classmate to make a list of adjectives that he or she would use to describe you. Then discuss with the classmate how many of these characteristics are based on stereotypes. How many are based on other perceptual barriers such as lack of information?

**Web Resources**
- https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo/ At this site you can test your implicit attitudes to explore prejudices and stereotypes that you might have.

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**How to Improve Interpersonal Perception Skills**
*(pages 79–82)*

Despite the barriers to perceiving and interpreting others’ behavior accurately, there are a number of things you can do to improve your perception skills. The first step is to be aware of these barriers and mindful of what you are doing, thinking, sensing, and observing. Other strategies to improve the accuracy of your perceptions include

- Linking details and clues about a person with the big picture.
- Becoming aware of others’ perceptions of you.
- Checking your perceptions directly and indirectly.
- Becoming other-oriented.

**Key Terms**
- Mindful
- Indirect perception checking
- Direct perception checking

**Critical Thinking Questions**
1. Describe a recent communication exchange in which you needed to be other-oriented. How did you “step back” to understand what the other person was thinking and feeling? Did you express empathy? Explain how you did so.
2. Ethics: If you are aware of how you are distorting your own perceptions and attributions, should you try to change? Are people morally obligated to perceive others accurately? Explain your reasoning.

**Activities**
Think of a person in your life whose recent behavior and/or communication has puzzled or angered you. Put yourself in the person’s place and analyze why he or she is behaving in this way. List the questions you need to ask yourself to help understand your perceptions and determine whether these perceptions are accurate. What perception-checking steps do you need to take? What, specifically, do you need to do to adjust your perceptions and have more effective communication with this person?

**Web Resources**
- http://www.selfgrowth.com/index.html This is a site devoted to personal growth, self-improvement, and self-help. You can also sign up to receive a free newsletter.
- http://sds.hss.cmu.edu/risk Make better decisions by understanding the domain in which they take place. The Center for Risk Perception and Communication will help you measure perceptions and evaluate communication.