INTERNATIONAL STATESMAN Nelson Mandela was fond of saying, "Where you stand depends on where you sit." He knew the stances he took on issues were framed by his unique vantage point in life. Likewise, who you are and how you were raised are unique to you, which means that *no one perceives the world exactly the way you do.* This essential principle significantly affects interpersonal relations, as communicators attempt to share meaning from perspectives that are often quite different.

Just like the cubes in Figure 4.1, every interpersonal situation can be seen from multiple points of view. Take a minute to study that figure. How many ways can you discover to view this image? If you only see one or two, keep looking; Figure 4.2 shows four ways. The point of this exercise is that making quick and accurate sense of even simple perspective drawings is a difficult task. With that in mind, you can begin to understand the challenge involved in imagining the perspectives of other human beings, who are far more complex and multidimensional.

In this chapter, we provide tools for communicating in the face of perceptual differences. We begin by explaining that reality is constructed through communication. Then we introduce some of the many reasons why the world appears so different to each of us. After examining the perceptual factors that make understanding so difficult, we look at tools for bridging the perceptual gap.

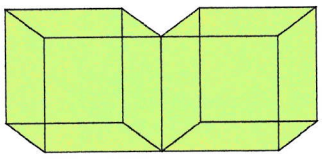


FIGURE 4.1 How many different ways can you view two cubes?

THE PERCEPTION PROCESS

How do our perceptions affect our communication with others? We begin to answer these questions by taking a look at the way we make sense of the world.

REALITY IS CONSTRUCTED

Most social scientists agree that the world we know isn't "out there." Rather, we create our reality with others through communication (Kotchemidova,

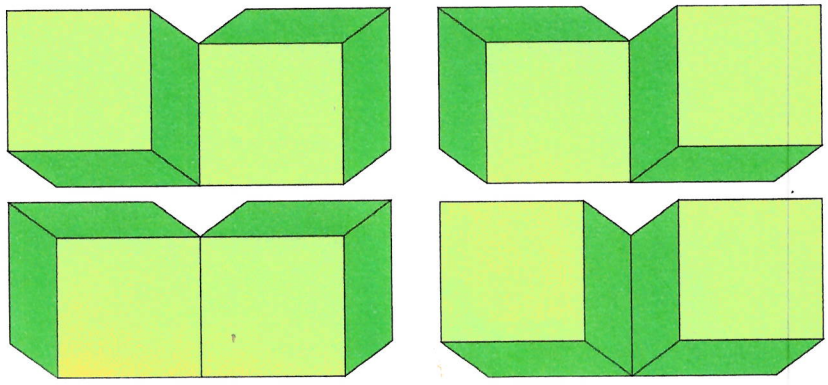


FIGURE 4.2 Four ways of viewing Figure 4.1.

2010). This may seem hard to accept until we recognize that there are two levels of reality, which have been labeled "first order" and "second order" (Nardone & Watzlawick, 2005; Watzlawick, 1984, 1990). **First-order realities** are physically observable qualities of a thing or situation (e.g., your neighbor speaks with an accent). By contrast, **second-order realities** involve our *attaching meaning* to first-order things or situations (e.g., the accent makes her sound exotic). Second-order realities don't reside in objects or events, but rather in our minds.

Life runs most smoothly when we share second-order realities. For example:

First-order reality:	A job interviewer asks if you are married.
Shared second-order reality:	This is a reasonable question for the situation.

Communication becomes more problematic when we have different second-order realities. For example:

First-order reality:	A job interviewer asks if you are married.
Your second-order reality:	The question has nothing to do with the job and is inappropriate.
Interviewer's second-order reality:	I am trying to make conversation.

In addition, many communication problems can arise when we mistake second-order (constructed) realities for first-order ones.

In this chapter, we explore factors that cause us to experience and make sense of the world in different ways. Perhaps more important, we introduce you to some communication tools that can help bridge the gap between differing perceptions, and in so doing improve relationships.

Zits: © 2001 Zits Partnership, Dist. by King Features

We perceive one another through many personal filters. ***Think of another's communication behavior that affected you strongly. How else might you organize and interpret information related to it?***

STEPS IN THE PERCEPTION PROCESS

We attach meanings to our experiences in four steps: selection, organization, interpretation, and negotiation.

Selection

Because we're exposed to more input than we can possibly manage, the first step in perception is **selection**, or determining which data we will attend to. Several factors cause us to notice some messages while ignoring others (Coon, 2009):

- *Intensity.* Something that is louder, larger, or brighter stands out. Someone who laughs or talks loudly at a party attracts more attention (not always favorable) than do quieter guests.
- *Repetition.* Repetitious stimuli can also attract our attention. Just think of a quiet but steadily dripping faucet.
- *Contrast or change.* Unchanging people or things are less noticeable. For example, we may appreciate our significant others more when they leave.

Later in this chapter, we look at a variety of other factors—physiological, psychological, social, and cultural—that lead us to pay attention to certain people and events.

Organization

After selecting information from the environment, the next stage is **organization**, or arranging it in some meaningful way (out of many possibilities) to help make sense of the world. We organize using *perceptual schema*, or cognitive frameworks (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2001).

We use various types of schema to classify others, including the following (Freeman & Ambady, 2011):

- *Physical* (e.g., beautiful or plain, heavy or thin, young or old)
- *Role-based* (e.g., student, attorney, spouse)
- *Interaction-based* (e.g., friendly, helpful, aloof, sarcastic)
- *Psychological* (e.g., confident, insecure, happy, neurotic)

Once we have selected an organizing scheme to classify people, we use it to make generalizations about members of the groups who fit our categories. For example, if you are especially aware of a person's attractiveness, you might be alert to the differences in the way beautiful and plain people are treated (more on this in Chapter 6). If religion plays an important part in your life, you might think of members of your faith differently than you do others. We then organize our observations into generalizations ("Women tend to . . ."; "Teachers usually . . ."; "Nervous people often . . ."). There's nothing wrong with generalizations about groups as long as they are accurate. But overgeneralizations (typically involving descriptors such as "always" and "never") can lead to problems of stereotyping, which you'll read about in a few pages.

We also can organize specific communication transactions in different ways, and these organizational schemes can have a powerful effect on our relationships. Communication theorists use the term **punctuation** to describe the determination of causes and effects in a series of interactions (Watzlawick et al., 1967). You can begin to understand how punctuation operates by visualizing a running quarrel between a husband and wife. Notice that the order in which each partner punctuates this cycle affects how the dispute looks. The husband begins by blaming the wife: "I withdraw because you're so demanding." The wife organizes the situation differently, starting with the husband: "I demand so much because you're withdrawing." These kinds of demand–withdraw arguments are common in intimate relationships (Reznik & Roloff, 2011; Schrodt et al., 2014). Once the cycle gets rolling, it is impossible to say which accusation is accurate, as Figure 4.3 indicates. The answer depends on how the sequence is punctuated.

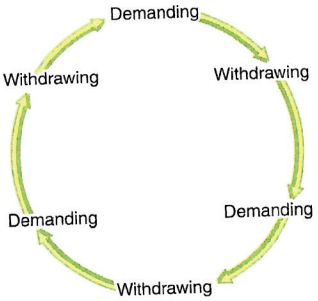


FIGURE 4.3 The way a communication sequence is punctuated affects its perceived meaning. Which comes first, the demanding or the withdrawing?

Anyone who has seen two children argue about "who started it" can understand that haggling over causes and effects isn't likely to solve a conflict. In fact, assigning blame will probably make matters worse (Caughlin & Huston, 2002). Rather than argue about whose punctuation of an event is correct, it's more productive to recognize that a dispute can look different to each person and then move on to the more important question of "What can we do to make things better?"

Interpretation

Once we have selected and organized our perceptions, we interpret them in a way that makes some sort of sense. **Interpretation**—attaching meaning to sense data—plays a role in virtually every interpersonal act. Is the person who smiles at you across a crowded room interested in romance or simply being polite? Is a friend's kidding a sign of affection or irritation? Should you take an invitation to "drop by any time" literally or not?

Several factors cause us to interpret a person's behavior in one way or another. For example:

- *Relational satisfaction.* A behavior that seems positive when you are happy with a partner might seem completely different when the relationship isn't satisfying (Luo et al., 2010). For example, couples in unsatisfying relationships are more likely than satisfied partners to blame one another when things go wrong (Diamond & Hicks, 2012). And the opposite also holds true: Partners in a satisfying relationship are likely to view each other more benevolently than accurately (Segrin et al., 2009).
- *Expectation.* If you go into a conversation expecting a hostile attitude, you're likely to hear a negative tone in the other person's voice—even if that tone isn't there (Hample et al., 2007). We talk more about how expectations affect perception later in this chapter.
- *Personal experience.* If you've been taken advantage of by landlords in the past, you might be skeptical about reclaiming your cleaning deposit.
- *Personality.* A study found that people with cold (relative to warm) dispositions have difficulty interpreting and labeling the emotions of others (Moeller et al., 2012). The researchers suggest that this deficiency can contribute to poorer social relationships for those with cold personalities.

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

Online Channels Affect Perception

You've been asked to come up with a list of tips for first-year college students. As you work on this task with an assigned stranger, that person says to you, "I bankrupted my checking account my freshman year." Later that person mentions, "My parents got divorced two years ago." How would you perceive those comments? Researchers at Cornell University believe your interpretation would be affected by whether the conversation took place in person or online.

Previous research has shown that people tend to engage in more self-disclosure via social media than they do face to face. This study focused on *perceptions* of such disclosures. Participants interpreted others' self-revelations as more personal and intimate when they read them online than when they heard them in person. They would then reciprocate, offering more of their own disclosures online than they would face to face.

The study lends support to the hyperpersonal nature of mediated communication discussed in Chapter 1. When cues are reduced and we see only typed words, we may read more into those comments than we would if they were delivered in person.

Jiang, L. C., Bazarova, N. N., & Hancock, J. T. (2013). From perception to behavior: Disclosure reciprocity and the intensification of intimacy in computer-mediated communication. *Communication Research, 40,* 125–143.

- *Assumptions about human behavior.* Do you assume people are lazy and dislike work, or do you believe people generally exercise self-direction and self-control? Imagine the differences in a boss who assumes workers fit the first description versus the second (Sager, 2008).

Note that the selection, organization, and interpretation phases of perception can occur in differing sequences. For example, a parent's or babysitter's past interpretations (such as "Jason is a troublemaker") can influence future selections (his behavior becomes especially noticeable) and the organization of events (when there's a fight, the assumption is that Jason started it). As with all communication, perception is an ongoing process in which it is hard to pin down beginnings and endings.

Negotiation

In Chapter 1 you read that meaning is created both *in* and *among* people. So far our discussion has focused on the inner components of perception—selection, organization, and interpretation—that take place in each person's mind. Now we need to examine the part of our sense-making that occurs *among* people. **Negotiation** is the process by which communicators influence each other's perceptions.

Negotiation can operate in subtle ways. For example, it's rare to draw a conclusion about something or someone without comparing notes with others. Imagine you think a person you just met is attractive, and you mention this impression to friends. If you hear negative appraisals from them ("I don't find that person attractive"), you might shift your initial perception—maybe not radically, but at least a bit. In one study that examined this process, college students rated the attractiveness of models in

a series of photos (Yang & Lee, 2014). Those who were able to see others' evaluations of the same photos slowly shifted their ratings to match the consensus. This finding suggests that beauty isn't just in the eye of the (individual) beholder—it's in the eyes of the (negotiating) beholders.

Another way to explain negotiation is to view interpersonal communication as the exchange of stories. **Narratives** are the stories we use to describe our personal worlds (Bromberg, 2012; Langellier & Peterson, 2006). Just as the boxes in Figure 4.1 on page 104 can be viewed in several ways, virtually every interpersonal situation can be described by more than one narrative. These narratives often differ in their casting of characters as "heroes" and "villains" (Aleman, 2005). For instance, consider a conflict between a boss and employee. If you ask the employee to describe the situation, she might depict the manager as a "heartless bean counter" while she sees herself as a worker who "always gets the job done." The manager's narrative might cast the roles quite differently: the "fair boss" versus the "clock watcher who wants to leave early." Similarly, stepmothers and mothers-in-law who see themselves as "helpful" might be portrayed as "meddlesome" in the narratives of stepdaughters and daughters-in-law (Christian, 2005; Sandel, 2004).

When our narratives clash with those of others, we can either hang on to our own point of view and refuse to consider anyone else's (usually not productive), or try to negotiate a narrative that creates at least some common ground. Shared narratives provide the best chance for smooth communication. For example, romantic partners who celebrate their successful struggles against relational obstacles are happier than those who don't have this shared appreciation (Flora & Segrin, 2000). Likewise, couples that agree about the important turning points in their relationships are more satisfied than those who have different views of which incidents were most important (Baxter & Pittman, 2001). Counselors even use "narrative therapy" to help partners revise and renew their identity as a couple (Kim et al., 2012b).

Shared narratives don't have to be accurate to be powerful (Martz et al., 1998). Couples who report being happily married after 50 or more years seem to collude in a relational narrative that doesn't always jibe with the facts (Miller et al., 2006). They agree that they rarely have conflict, although objective analysis reveals that they have had their share of disagreements and challenges. Without overtly deciding to do so, they choose to blame outside forces or unusual circumstances for problems, instead of attributing responsibility to one another. They offer the most charitable interpretations of one another's behavior, believing that their spouse acts with good intentions when things don't go well. And their narratives usually have happy endings (Frost, 2013). Examining this research, Judy Pearson (2000) asks the following:

> Should we conclude that happy couples have a poor grip on reality? Perhaps they do, but is the reality of one's marriage better known by outside onlookers than by the players themselves? The conclusion is evident. One key to a long happy marriage is to tell yourself and others that you have one and then to behave as though you do! (p. 186)

INFLUENCES ON PERCEPTION

A variety of factors influence how we select, organize, interpret, and negotiate data about others. The available information affects our perceptual judgments, as do physiological, cultural and social, and psychological factors.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

We can only make sense of what we know, and none of us knows everything about even the closest people in our lives. When new information becomes available, perceptions of others change. If you see your instructor only when she's teaching in the classroom, your conclusions about her will be based solely on her behaviors in that role. You might change your perception if you observe her in the roles of rush-hour driver, concertgoer, or grocery shopper.

We often gain access to new information about others when their roles overlap. Consider how that might occur at an office party. A person's "office" and "party" roles are usually quite different—so at an offsite work celebration, you may see behaviors you hadn't expected. Similarly, when your sweetheart takes you home to meet the family, you might get to watch your partner playing a "spoiled son" or "princess daughter" role. If you've ever said, "I saw a whole new side of you tonight," chances are it's because you gained access to information you didn't have before.

Social media can provide new information that affects perceptions. That's why job hunters are encouraged to clean up their online profiles and be careful to manage the impressions they might make (Kluemper et al., 2012). It's also why children and parents sometimes don't want to be Facebook friends with each other (Child & Westermann, 2013), which we discuss further in Chapter 10. Some roles are best kept private—or at least played to a select audience.

Look up and watch the video "All That We Share" (in Danish with English subtitles).

1) Consider how we *organize* and *interpret* information about others based on the "box" we see them in.
2) Discuss how *access to new information* and new "boxes" can help break down walls and build relationships.

PHYSIOLOGICAL INFLUENCES

Sometimes differing perspectives come from our physical environment and the ways that our bodies differ from others.

The Senses

The differences in how each of us sees, hears, tastes, touches, and smells stimuli can affect interpersonal relationships (Croy et al., 2013). Consider a few examples arising from physiological differences:

"Turn down that music! It's giving me a headache."
"It's not too loud. If I turn it down, it will be impossible to hear it."

"It's freezing in here."
"Are you kidding? We'll suffocate if you turn up the heat!"

"Why don't you pass that truck? The highway is clear for half a mile."
"I can't see that far, and I'm not going to get us killed."

Age

We experience the world differently throughout our lifetimes. Age alters not just our bodies but our perspectives. Consider, for instance, how you've viewed your parents through the years. When you were a child, you probably thought they were all-knowing and flawless. As a teen, you may have viewed them as old-fashioned and mean. In adulthood, many people begin to regard their parents as knowledgeable and perhaps even wise. Although your parents have probably changed over time, it's likely that your *perception* of them has changed far more than they have. A tongue-in-cheek observation attributed to Mark Twain puts it this way: "When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years."

Health and Fatigue

Recall the last time you came down with a cold, flu, or some other ailment. Health can have a strong impact on how you perceive and relate to others. A romantic overture doesn't sound appealing when you have a headache, and a night on the town with friends is more enjoyable when your muscles aren't aching. It's good to realize that someone else may be behaving differently because of illness. In the same way, it's important to let others know when you feel ill so they can give you the understanding you need.

Likewise, fatigue can affect relationships. People who are sleep deprived, for example, perceive time intervals as longer than they really are (Miró et al., 2003). One study found that when married couples don't sleep well, they have more negative perceptions of each other the following day, leading to more interpersonal discord (Seidman, 2011). Toward that end, a good night's sleep is an invaluable asset for managing interpersonal conflict (Gordon & Chen, 2014).

Biological Cycles

Are you a "morning person" or a "night person"? Each of us has a daily cycle in which all sorts of changes constantly occur, including variations in body temperature, sexual drive, alertness, and tolerance to stress (Koukkari & Sothern, 2006) and to pain (Jankowski, 2013). These cycles can affect the way we relate to each other. For example, you are probably better off avoiding prickly topics in the morning with someone who is not a "morning person."

Hunger

Your own experience probably confirms that being hungry (and getting grumpy) or having overeaten (and getting tired) affects how we interact with others. For example, teenagers who reported that their family did not get enough food to eat were almost three times as likely to have been suspended from school, almost twice as likely to have difficulty getting along with others, and four times as likely to have no friends (Alaimo et al., 2001). Although the exact nature of the causes and effects in this study is hard to pin down, one thing is clear: Hunger can affect our perception and communication.

The documentary *Life, Animated* tells the story of Owen Suskind, a young man who was unable to speak as a child. He and his family discovered that viewing Disney classics such as *The Little Mermaid* and *The Lion King* helped him understand social cues and reconnect with the world around him. ***How have neurobehavioral challenges shaped your own or others' perceptions and communication?***

Neurobehavioral Challenges

Some differences in perception are rooted in neurology. For instance, people with ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder) are easily distracted from tasks and have difficulty delaying gratification (Goldstein, 2008; Tripp et al., 2007). It's easy to imagine how those with ADHD might find a long lecture boring and tedious, whereas others are fascinated by the same lecture (Von Briesen, 2007). People with bipolar disorder experience significant mood swings in which their perceptions of events, friends, family members, and even attempts at social support shift dramatically (Doherty & MacGeorge, 2013). The National Institute of Mental Health (2013) estimates that between 5 million and 7 million Americans are affected by these two disorders alone—and there are many other neurobehavioral conditions that influence our perceptions.

PSYCHOLOGICAL INFLUENCES

Along with physiology, our psychological state also influences the way we perceive others.

Mood

Our emotional state strongly influences how we view people and events and therefore how we communicate (Lount, 2013). An early experiment using hypnotism dramatically demonstrated the influence of mood on perception (Lebula & Lucas, 1945). Each subject viewed the same series of six pictures several times, each time having been put in a different mood. The descriptions of the pictures differed radically depending on the emotional state of the subject. For example, these are descriptions by one subject in various emotional states while describing a picture of children digging in a swampy area:

Happy mood: "It looks like fun, reminds me of summer. That's what life is for, working out in the open, really living—digging in the dirt, planting, watching things grow."
Anxious mood: "They're going to get hurt or cut. There should be someone older there who knows what to do in case of an accident. I wonder how deep the water is."
Critical mood: "Pretty horrible land. There ought to be something more useful for kids of that age to do instead of digging in that stuff. It's filthy and dirty and good for nothing."

Although there's a strong relationship between mood and happiness, it's not clear which comes first: the perceptual outlook or the amount of relational satisfaction. There is some evidence that perception leads to satisfaction (Fletcher et al., 1987), and some that satisfaction drives positive perceptions (Luo et al., 2010). In other words, the attitude/expectation we bring to a situation shapes our level of happiness or unhappiness. Once

started, this process can create a spiral. If you're happy about your relationship, you will be more likely to interpret your partner's behavior in a charitable way. This, in turn, can lead to greater happiness. Of course, the same process can work in the opposite direction. One study revealed that spouses who felt uncertain about the status of their marriage saw relational threats in conversations that seemed quite ordinary to outsiders (Knobloch et al., 2007).

One remedy to serious distortions—and unnecessary conflicts—is to monitor your own moods. If you're aware of being especially critical or sensitive, you can avoid overreacting to others (and you can warn others: "This isn't a good time for me to discuss this with you—I'm a bit cranky right now").

Self-Concept

Another psychological factor that influences perception is self-concept (Hinde et al., 2001). One study demonstrated that the self-concept was the most important factor in perceiving teasing as friendly or hostile (Alberts et al., 1996). Another study showed that perceiving oneself as funny is related to perceiving others as funny (Bosacki, 2013). As a third example of self-concept's importance in perception, children who have a low opinion of themselves are more likely to see themselves as victims of bullying, both in their classrooms and online (Katzer et al., 2009; Kowalski & Limber, 2013). As discussed in Chapter 3, the way we think and feel about ourselves strongly influences how we interpret others' behavior.

SOCIAL INFLUENCES

Within a society, our personal point of view plays a strong role in shaping perceptions. Social scientists have developed **standpoint theory** to describe how a person's position in a society shapes her or his view of society in general and of specific individuals (Litwin & Hallstein, 2007; Wood, 2005). Standpoint theory is most often applied to the difference between the perspectives of privileged social groups and people who have less power (Kinefuchi & Orbe, 2008), and to the perspectives of women and men (Dougherty, 2001). Unless one has been disadvantaged, it can be difficult to imagine how the world might look to someone who has been treated badly because of race, ethnicity, gender, biological sex, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic class. After some reflection, though, you probably can understand how being marginalized can make the world seem like a very different place.

We look now at how some specific types of societal roles affect an individual's perception.

Sex and Gender Roles

Although people often use the terms *sex* and *gender* as if they're identical, there is an important difference (Katz-Wise & Hyde, 2014). *Sex* refers to biological characteristics of a male or female, whereas **gender** refers to the social and psychological dimensions of masculine and feminine behavior.

The TV drama *Transparent* captures the struggles faced by Maura Pfefferman (Jeffrey Tambor), a transgender woman going through the transition later in life. Maura's ex and her spoiled children make the process especially difficult. ***What sex and gender roles govern communication in your relationships?***

Males and females can be more or less masculine, more or less feminine, or have both masculine *and* feminine characteristics. A person with relatively equal masculine and feminine characteristics is referred to as **androgynous**. In general, 80 percent of people see themselves as either sex typed (masculine male/feminine female) or androgynous (Choi et al., 2009).

A large body of research shows that men and women perceive the world differently, for reasons ranging from genes to neurology to hormones (Becker et al., 2007; Schroeder, 2010). For instance, one study found that women are better than men at reading emotion in facial expressions, which is consistent with research showing that women are generally more perceptive about interpreting others' nonverbal cues (Rennels & Cummings, 2013; see also Hall & Andrzejewski, 2017). However, the authors noted that these differences weren't in place at infancy, and it's hard to know whether nature or nurture was responsible for the development of this skill over time. Even cognitive researchers who focus on biological differences between men and women acknowledge that societal gender roles affect perception dramatically (Halpern, 2000).

Sex role stereotypes can influence perception. In one experiment (Matthews, 2016), college debate judges were asked to assess the aggressiveness of participants in a fictional debate round. Even though all the debaters used similar language, the judges perceived the female debaters as significantly more aggressive than the males. In a different study (Kingsbury & Coplan, 2016), participants perceived ambiguous text messages as more negative when the hypothetical sender was identified as female—particularly if the recipient was male. These findings suggest that whether they mean to or not, communicators often see the world through the lens of societal role constructs.

"How is it gendered?"

Gender can sometimes influence perception more than biological sex does (Baglan, 1993). For instance, a study on perceptions of effective teacher behavior (Aylor, 2003) found that gender was superior to biological sex as a predictor. Masculine individuals, regardless of their biological sex, perceived good teaching as a teacher's use of communication to manage students' behavior (e.g., the teacher's being persuasive and managing conversations). Feminine individuals perceived good teaching as a teacher's use of communication to manage students' feelings (e.g., supporting students' egos and helping students realize their mistakes).

One way to appreciate the impact of gender roles on perception is to consider the experiences

@work Sexual Harassment and Perception

What does a hand on the shoulder mean when making a workplace request? What if it lasts for more than a few seconds? Or how about the statement, "You need to do more around here—*much* more." Every student of communication knows that messages have no meaning until people give them meaning—and that's largely a matter of perception. Understanding interpersonal perception is thus critical to addressing the challenging issue of sexual harassment.

Although there are clear-cut examples of outright harassment, differing perceptions explain many other incidents. For example, women are more likely than men to perceive behaviors as sexual harassment, and people with sexist attitudes tend to see less evidence of sexual harassment around them (Bitton & Shaul, 2013). Cultural background also shapes perceptions of harassment (Merkin, 2012; Toker, 2016). People from cultures with high power distance (see Chapter 2) are less likely to perceive harassment from higher-ups than are those from places with low power distance.

The meanings attributed to essentially the same behaviors change for workers as they age and gain new experiences. Younger employees—both men and women—are less likely than older people to regard sexualized interaction such as flirting and sexual joking as harassment (Blackstone et al., 2014).

Findings like these help explain why some people find sexual harassment where others see nothing offensive. That's where clear communication comes in: When members of an organization share their own perceptions and better understand those of others, we can expect fewer misunderstandings and greater job satisfaction. The perception-checking skills described in this chapter can be used to help the cause.

of transgender individuals. Many report seeing the world differently after shifting gender identities (Alter, 2016). One trans man said he's learning new communication rules: "I'm still trying to figure out all of the different secret codes that guys use to talk to each other and to make friendships," he says. "I don't know what that punch on the arm meant."

Occupational Roles

The kind of work we do also governs our view of the world. Imagine five people taking a walk through a park. One, a botanist, is fascinated by the variety of trees and plants. Another, a zoologist, is on the lookout for interesting animals. The third, a meteorologist, keeps an eye on the sky, noticing changes in the weather. The fourth, a psychologist, is totally unaware of the goings-on of nature, concentrating instead on the interaction among the people in the park. The fifth, a pickpocket, quickly takes advantage of the others' absorption to collect their wallets. There are two lessons in this little story: The first, of course, is to watch your wallet carefully. The second is that our occupational roles frequently govern our perceptions.

An experiment in the early 1970s dramatically illustrated how occupational roles shape perception. Stanford psychologist Philip Zimbardo (1971, 2007) recruited a group of well-educated, middle-class young men.

Billy Crudup stars as Dr. Philip Zimbardo in *The Stanford Prison Experiment*, a dramatization of the 1970s study described in this section. Among other findings, the experiment showed how occupational roles can influence perception and behavior. ***How do your social roles shape your perceptions of others?***

He randomly chose 11 to serve as "guards" in a mock prison set up in the basement of Stanford's psychology building. He issued the guards uniforms, handcuffs, whistles, and billy clubs. The remaining 10 participants became "prisoners" and were placed in rooms with metal bars, bucket toilets, and cots.

Zimbardo let the guards establish their own rules for the experiment: no talking during meals and rest periods and after lights out. They took head counts at 2:30 a.m. Troublemakers received short rations. Faced with these conditions, the prisoners began to resist. Some barricaded their doors with beds. Others went on hunger strikes. Several ripped off their identifying number tags. The guards reacted to the rebellion by clamping down hard on protesters. Some turned sadistic, physically and verbally abusing the prisoners. The experiment was scheduled to go on for 2 weeks, but after 6 days Zimbardo realized that what had started as a simulation had become too intense. Clearly the roles they had taken on led the guards and prisoners to perceive, and then treat, each other very differently.

You can probably think of ways in which jobs you've held have affected how you view others. If you've been in customer service, you're probably more patient and understanding with those in similar positions (although you could also be a bit more critical). And if you've ever been promoted to manager at your place of work, you know that it typically changes your perceptions of, and behavior toward, coworkers who are now under your supervision.

Relational Roles

Think back to the "Who am I?" list you made in Chapter 3. It's likely your list included roles you play in relation to others: You may be a daughter, roommate, spouse, friend, and so on. Roles like these don't just define who you are—they also affect your perception.

Take for example the role of parent. As most new mothers and fathers will attest, having a child alters the way they see the world. They might perceive their crying baby as a helpless soul in need of comfort, whereas nearby strangers have a less charitable appraisal. As the child grows, parents often pay more attention to the messages in the child's environment. One father we know said he never noticed how much football fans curse and swear until he took his 6-year-old to a game with him. In other words, his role as father affected what he paid attention to and how he interpreted it.

The roles involved in romantic love can also dramatically affect perception. These roles have many labels: partner, spouse, boyfriend/girlfriend, and so on. There are times when your affinity biases the way you perceive the object of your affection. You may see your sweetheart as more attractive than other people do and as more attractive than your previous partners, regardless of whether that's objectively accurate (Swami & Allum, 2012). As a result, perhaps you overlook some faults that others notice (Segrin et al., 2009). Your romantic role can also

change the way you view others. Two separate studies (Cole et al., 2016; Gonzaga et al., 2008) found that when people are in love, they view other romantic candidates as less attractive than they otherwise would (one of the research teams referred to this as "perceptual downgrading").

Perhaps the most telltale sign of the effect of "love goggles" is when they come off. Many people have experienced breaking up with a romantic partner and wondering later, "What did I ever see in that person?" The answer—at least in part—is that you saw what your relational role led you to see.

CULTURAL INFLUENCES

Culture influences selection, organization, interpretation, and negotiation, and it exerts a powerful influence on the way we view others' communication. Even beliefs about the very value of talk differ from one culture to another (Dailey et al., 2005). Western cultures tend to view talk as desirable and use it for social purposes as well as to perform tasks. Silence has a negative value in these cultures. It is likely to be interpreted as lack of interest, unwillingness to communicate, hostility, anxiety, shyness, or a sign of interpersonal incompatibility. Westerners are generally uncomfortable with silence, which they often find embarrassing and awkward.

On the other hand, Asian cultures tend to perceive talk quite differently (Kim, 2002). Silence is valued, as Taoist sayings indicate: "In much talk there is great weariness," or "One who speaks does not know; one who knows does not speak." Unlike Westerners, Japanese and Chinese communicators believe that remaining quiet is the proper state when there is nothing to be said. To Asians, a talkative person is often considered a show-off or a fake.

These different views of speech and silence can lead to communication problems when people from different cultures meet. Communicators may view each other with disapproval and mistrust. Only when they recognize the cultural differences in behavior can they adapt, or at least understand and respect their differences.

The valuing of talk isn't the only way culture shapes perceptions. Cultural factors also affect our view of health professionals. Author Anne Fadiman (1997) explains why Hmong immigrants from the Southeast Asian country of Laos preferred their traditional shamanistic healers, called *txiv neeb*, to American doctors. The Hmong family whose experience she chronicled perceived striking differences in health care between the two cultures:

> A *txiv neeb* might spend as much as eight hours in a sick person's home; doctors forced their patients, no matter how weak they were, to come to the hospital, and then might spend only twenty minutes at their bedsides. *Txiv neebs* were polite and never needed to ask questions; doctors asked about their sexual and excretory habits. *Txiv neebs* could render an immediate diagnosis; doctors often demanded samples of blood (or even urine or feces, which they liked to keep in little bottles), took X rays, and waited for days for the results to come back from the laboratory—and then, after all that, sometimes they were unable to identify the cause of the problem. *Txiv neebs* never undressed their patients; doctors asked patients to take off all their clothes, and sometimes dared to put their fingers inside women's vaginas. *Txiv neebs* knew that to treat the body without treating the soul was an act of patent folly; doctors never even mentioned the soul. (p. 33)

Media Clip

Master of Perception: *Sherlock*

The famous Victorian sleuth Sherlock Holmes comes to life in the TV series *Sherlock*. Set in present-day London, the fictional detective (played by Benedict Cumberbatch) is successful in large measure because he's so perceptive. After watching people for only a few moments, he's able to draw stunningly accurate conclusions about their motives and behaviors. One of Sherlock's university classmates puts it this way: "He could look at you and tell your whole life story." In response, Sherlock states, "I simply observed."

In terms of perception principles, Sherlock is more careful at selecting stimuli than are those around him, noticing details that others missed. He also tries not to be influenced by expectations or by the obvious. In fact, Sherlock chides those who miss important information because they fall prey to the common perception tendencies described in these pages.

Although Holmes' powers of deduction make him a stellar investigator, he lacks interpersonal competence. He's often condescending and blunt, to the point of being rude. It appears that the man who is so perceptive about the world around him doesn't recognize—or perhaps care about—his own interpersonal blind spots.

Culture plays an important role in our ability to understand the perspectives of others (Amarasinghe, 2012; Croucher, 2013). People raised in individualist cultures, which value independence, are often less adept at perspective-taking than those from collectivist cultures, which value interdependence. In one study, Chinese and American players were paired together in a communication game that required the participants to take on the perspective of their partners (Wu & Keysar, 2007). In all measures, the collectivist Chinese had greater success in perspective-taking than did their American counterparts. This isn't to suggest that one cultural orientation is better than the other; it only shows that culture shapes the way we perceive, understand, and empathize with others.

Co-cultural factors affect perception as well. In studies using photos of children of various races, participants perceived black children as being significantly older than their actual ages (Goff et al., 2014). The same was not true of perceptions of white or Latino children. Participants also regarded black children as being more responsible for their actions than children of other races. The researchers maintain that this perception affects the treatment of black children in American culture. We'll have more to say about the negative effects of stereotyping later in this chapter.

COMMON TENDENCIES IN PERCEPTION

By now it's obvious that many factors affect the way we interpret the world. Social scientists use the term **attribution** to describe the process of attaching meaning to behavior (LaBelle & Martin, 2014; Rittenour & Kellas, 2015). We attribute meaning to both our own actions and the actions of others, but we often use different yardsticks. Research has uncovered several perceptual tendencies that may lead to inaccurate attributions.

WE MAKE SNAP JUDGMENTS

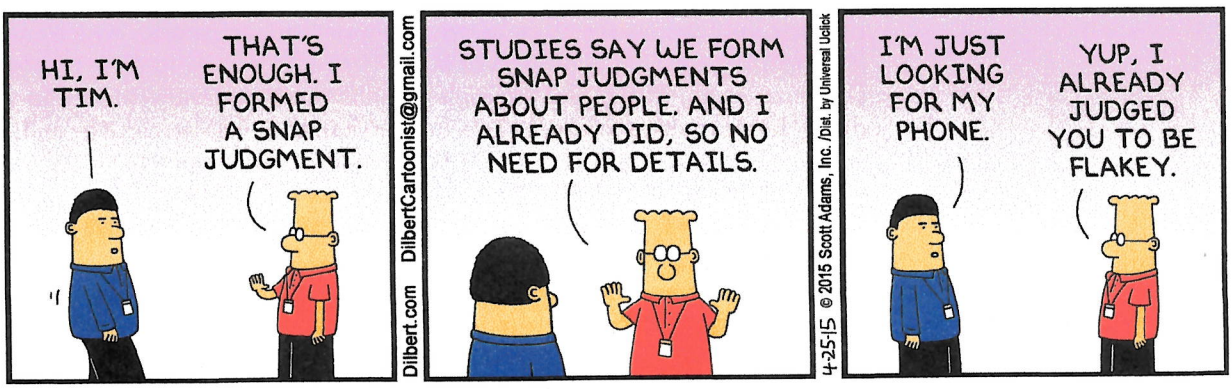
Our ancestors often had to make quick judgments about whether strangers were likely to be dangerous, and there are still times when this ability can be a survival skill (Enosh & Ben-Ari, 2013). But there are many cases when judging others without enough knowledge or information can get us into trouble. In the most serious cases, gun holders fire at innocent people after making inaccurate snap decisions. On a more personal level, most of us have felt badly misjudged by others who made unfavorable snap judgments. If you've ever been written off in the first few minutes of an interview, or unfairly rebuffed by someone you just met, then you know the feeling.

Despite the risks of rash decision making, in some circumstances people can make surprisingly good choices in the blink of an eye (Gladwell, 2004). The best snap judgments come from people whose decisions are based on expertise and experience. However, even nonexperts can be good at making some split-second decisions. For example, many speed daters are able to use physically observable traits to determine whether a person they have just met will become a romantic partner (Kurzban & Weeden, 2005). And researchers have found that inferences about politicians based on snap judgments of their looks alone can be surprisingly accurate (Wänke et al., 2013).

Snap judgments become particularly problematic when they are based on **stereotyping**—exaggerated beliefs associated with a categorizing system. Stereotypes, which people automatically make on "primitive categories" such as race, sex, and age (Devos, 2013), may be founded on a kernel of truth, but they go beyond the facts at hand and make claims that usually have no valid basis.

Three characteristics distinguish stereotypes from reasonable generalizations:

- The first involves *categorizing others on the basis of easily recognized but not necessarily significant characteristics*. For example, perhaps the first thing you notice about a person is his or her skin color—but that is not nearly as significant as the person's intelligence or achievements.
- The second feature that characterizes stereotypes is *ascribing a set of characteristics to most or all members of a group*. For example, you



might unfairly assume that all older people are doddering or that all men are insensitive to women's concerns (Hummert, 2011).

- Finally, stereotyping involves *applying the generalization to a particular person*. Once you believe all old people are geezers or all men are jerks, it's a short step to considering a particular senior citizen as senile or a particular man as a sexist pig.

By adulthood, we tend to engage in stereotyping frequently, effortlessly, and often unconsciously, using what researchers call *implicit bias* to make our judgments (Morin, 2015). Once we create and hold these biases, we seek out isolated behaviors that support our inaccurate beliefs in an attempt to be cognitively consistent. For example, men and women in conflict with each other often notice or remember only behaviors of the opposite sex that fit their stereotypes (Allen, 1998). They then point to these behaviors—which might not be representative of how the other person typically behaves—to support their stereotypical and inaccurate claims: "Look! There you go criticizing me again. Typical for a woman!"

One way to avoid the kinds of communication problems that come from excessive stereotyping is to *decategorize*, or treat people as individuals. Changing labels can aid the process of decategorizing. Instead of talking about white coworkers, gay friends, or foreign students, dropping the descriptors "white," "gay," and "foreign" might help you and others perceive people more neutrally.

WE CLING TO FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Snap judgments are significant because our initial impressions of others often carry more weight than the ones that follow. This is due in part to what social scientists call the **primacy effect**: our tendency to pay more attention to, and to better recall, things that happen first in a sequence (Miller et al., 2004). You can probably recall first impressions you held of people who are now your close friends. With some it was "like at first sight." With others, your initial appraisal was negative and it took some time and effort for it to change. Either way, your first impressions played a significant role in the interactions that followed.

The term **halo effect** describes the tendency to form an overall positive impression of a person on the basis of one positive characteristic. Positive first impressions are often based on physical attractiveness, which can lead people to attribute all sorts of other virtues to a good-looking person (Lorenzo et al., 2010). For example, employment interviewers rate mediocre but attractive job applicants higher than their less attractive candidates (Watkins & Johnston, 2000). Unfortunately, the opposite also holds true. The **horns effect** (also called the "devil" or "pitchfork" effect) occurs when a negative appraisal adversely influences the perceptions that follow (Koenig & Jaswal, 2011).

Once we form a first impression—whether it's positive or negative—we are susceptible to **confirmation bias**: We tend to seek out and organize our impressions to support that opinion. For example, experimental

subjects asked more suspicious questions when they believed that a suspect had been cheating on a task (Hill et al., 2008). The same bias occurs in job interviews: Once a potential employer forms a positive impression, the tendency is to ask questions that confirm the employer's image of the applicant (Powell et al., 2012). The interviewer might ask leading questions aimed at supporting her positive views ("What valuable lessons did you learn from that setback?"), interpret answers in a positive light ("Ah, taking time away from school to travel was a good idea!"), encourage the applicant ("Good point!"), and sell the company's virtues ("I think you would like working here"). Likewise, applicants who create a negative first impression are operating under a cloud that may be impossible to dispel.

A study of college roommates shows all these effects at work. Roommates who had positive initial impressions of each other were likely to have positive subsequent interactions, manage their conflicts constructively, and continue living together (Marek et al., 2004). The opposite was also true: Roommates who got off to a bad start tended to spiral negatively. This finding reinforces the wisdom and importance of the old adage, "You never get a second chance to make a first impression."

WE JUDGE OURSELVES MORE CHARITABLY THAN WE DO OTHERS

Whereas we may evaluate others critically, we tend to judge ourselves more generously (McClure et al., 2011). Social scientists use two theories to explain this phenomenon. The first is called the **fundamental attribution error**: the tendency to give more weight to personal qualities than to the situation when making attributions (McPherson & Young, 2004). For instance, if someone you know makes a hurtful comment, you're likely to chalk it up to flaws in her or his character (mean spirited) than to external factors (fatigue, peer pressure). We're more charitable when judging ourselves. This **self-serving bias** means that when we perform poorly, we usually blame external forces—and when we perform well, we credit ourselves rather than the situation (Shepperd et al., 2008).

Consider a few examples of using different standards when making attributions of ourselves and others:

- When *they* botch a job, we think they weren't listening well; when *we* make the mistake, the problem was unclear directions.
- When *he* makes an overly critical comment, it's because he's insensitive; when *we* do, it's constructive criticism.
- When *she* uses profanity, it's because of a flaw in her character; when *we* swear, it's because the situation called for it (see Young, 2004).

One study of "honest but hurtful" messages shows how self-serving bias can operate in romantic relationships (Zhang, 2009). Partners who deliver these messages tend to see them as helpful and constructive. When on the receiving end, however, communicators see the same messages as

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

Hurtful Communication: A Matter of Perception

"You always hurt the one you love"—or so the song lyric says. A team of communication scholars led by Stacy Young explored the truth behind this claim.

The researchers asked couples to discuss a relational conflict for seven minutes. Afterward, each partner viewed a recording of the conversation and counted the number of times something hurtful was said.

The couples often disagreed on which comments were hurtful. In fact, they agreed only 20 percent of the time. But one thing was consistent: Participants regularly attributed more hurtful comments to their partners than to themselves.

It's noteworthy that the couples in the study actually scored high in measures of relational satisfaction. This finding shows that even in a happy romantic relationship, self-serving bias affects perceptions of hurtful communication.

Young, S. L., Bippus, A. M., & Dunbar, N. E. (2015). Comparing romantic partners' perceptions of hurtful communication during conflict conversations. *Southern Communication Journal, 80,* 39–54.

hurtful and mean. It's even easier to engage in self-serving bias in impersonal online relationships. A study showed that members of online teams, as opposed to in-person teams, were quicker to blame their partners when mistakes occurred (Walther & Bazarova, 2007). The researchers suggest that "unseen, unknown, and remote" teammates are easy scapegoats when something goes wrong.

When you're feeling wronged, it's easy to blame others, believing they're out to get you. But it's possible you've misperceived their intentions, and talking things out might help. In one study, experimental subjects were surprised to discover that partners who had assigned them tedious tasks meant no harm. In fact, those partners were ready to apologize once they were informed of the perceived slight (Adams & Insei, 2016). The same principle can operate in the real world. You might feel bullied by a boss who overloads you with work, but it could be she isn't aware of how you feel. She might even change your workload once you speak up—respectfully, of course. The goal is to make sure the two of you hold similar perceptions of the matter, or at least understand one another's point of view. For ideas about how to talk about delicate issues such as this, see the discussions of perception checking in this chapter and of "I" language in Chapter 5.

WE ARE INFLUENCED BY OUR EXPECTATIONS

Suppose you took a class and were told in advance that the instructor was terrific. Would this expectation affect the way you perceived the teacher? Research shows that it almost certainly would. In one study, students who read positive comments about instructors on a website viewed those teachers as

more credible and attractive than did students who were not exposed to the same comments (Edwards et al., 2007; see also Edwards & Edwards, 2013).

Expectations don't always lead to more positive appraisals. There are times when we raise our expectations so high that we are set up for disappointment. If you are told that someone you are about to meet is extremely attractive, you may be let down when the person doesn't live up to your unrealistic mental image. Our expectations influence the way we see others, both positively and negatively—and may lead to self-fulfilling prophecies (DiPaola et al., 2010).

This is an important point to remember when making decisions about others. Many professions require that manuscripts submitted to journals be evaluated through "blind review"—that is, without identifying information that might influence the evaluator's appraisal. Orchestras often use "blind auditions," where musicians perform behind a screen (Rice, 2013). In the same way, you can probably think of situations when it would be wise to avoid seeking advance information about another person you meet.

Judges on the TV show *The Voice* keep their backs to contestants at first to evaluate singing on its own merit. ***How have you been swayed by appearances? How can you avoid this common perceptual tendency?***

WE ARE INFLUENCED BY THE OBVIOUS

Being influenced by what is most obvious is understandable. As you read earlier, we select stimuli from our environment that are noticeable—that is, intense, repetitious, unusual, or otherwise attention grabbing. The problem is that the most obvious factor is not necessarily the only cause—or the most significant one—of an event. For example:

- When two children (or adults, for that matter) fight, it may be a mistake to blame the one who lashes out loudest. Perhaps the other one was at least equally responsible, teasing or refusing to cooperate.
- You might complain about an acquaintance whose malicious gossiping or arguing has become a bother, forgetting that by putting up with that kind of behavior you have been at least partially responsible.
- You might blame an unhappy work situation on the boss, overlooking other factors beyond her control, such as a change in the economy, the policy of higher management, or demands of customers or other workers.

These examples show that it is important to take time to gather all the facts before arriving at a conclusion.

WE ASSUME OTHERS ARE LIKE US

We commonly imagine that others possess the same attitudes and motives that we do (Human & Biesanz, 2011). The frequently mistaken assumption

that others' views are similar to our own applies in a wide range of situations. For example:

- You've heard a slightly raunchy joke that you found funny. You assume that it won't offend a friend. It does.
- You've been bothered by an instructor's tendency to get off the subject during lectures. If you were a professor, you'd want to hear constructive criticism, so you decide to share it, expecting the professor to be grateful. Unfortunately, you're wrong.
- You lost your temper with a friend a week ago and said some things you regret. In fact, if someone said those things to you, you would consider the relationship finished. Imagining that your friend feels the same way, you avoid making contact. In fact, your friend feels that he was partly responsible and has avoided you because he thinks you're the one who wants to end things.

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

We don't always fall into the kind of perceptual tendencies described in this section. Sometimes, for instance, people *are* responsible for their misfortunes, or our problems *are not* our fault. Likewise, the most obvious interpretation of a situation may be the correct one. Nonetheless, a large amount of research has shown again and again that our perceptions of others are often distorted in the ways we have described. The moral, then, is clear: Don't assume your perceptions are accurate or unbiased.

SYNCHRONIZING OUR PERCEPTIONS

After reading this far, you can appreciate how out of sync our perceptions of one another can be. These mismatched perceptions can interfere with our communication—and they can increase exponentially. As one communication scholar wryly puts it, confusion emerges "whenever we try to imagine what others think we think they think" (Anton, 2015). What we need, then, are tools to help others understand our perceptions and for us, in turn, to understand theirs. In this section, we introduce two such tools.

PERCEPTION CHECKING

Given the likelihood for perceptual errors, it's easy to see how a communicator can leap to the wrong conclusion and make inaccurate assumptions. Consider the defense-arousing potential of incorrect accusations such as these:

"Why are you mad at me?" (Who said I was?)
"What's the matter with you?" (Who said anything was the matter?)
"Come on now. Tell the truth." (Who said I was lying?)

Even if your interpretations are correct, these kinds of mind-reading statements are likely to generate defensiveness. The skill of **perception checking** provides a better way to review your assumptions and to share your interpretations (Hansen et al., 2002). A complete perception check has three parts:

1. A description of the behavior you noticed.
2. Two possible interpretations of the behavior.
3. A request for clarification about how to interpret the behavior.

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

"When you stomped out of the room and slammed the door [behavior], I wasn't sure whether you were mad at me [first interpretation] or just in a hurry [second interpretation]. How did you feel? [request for clarification]"
"You haven't laughed much in the last couple of days [behavior]. It makes me wonder whether something's bothering you [first interpretation] or whether you're just being quiet [second interpretation]. What's up? [request for clarification]"
"You said you really liked the job I did [behavior], but there was something about your voice that made me think you may not like it [first interpretation]. Maybe it's just my imagination, though [second interpretation]. How do you really feel? [request for clarification]"

Perception checking is a tool to help us understand others accurately instead of assuming that our first interpretation is correct. Because its goal is mutual understanding, perception checking is a cooperative approach to communication. Besides leading to more accurate perceptions, it signals an attitude of respect and concern for the other person, saying, in effect, "I know I'm not qualified to judge you without some help."

Sometimes an effective perception check won't need all of the parts listed in the preceding example to be effective:

"You haven't dropped by lately. Is anything the matter? [single interpretation]"
"I can't tell whether you're kidding me about being cheap or if you're serious [behavior combined with interpretations]. Are you mad at me?" [request for interpretation]
"Are you sure you don't mind driving? I can use a ride if it's no trouble, but I don't want to take you out of your way [request for clarification comes first; no need to describe behavior]."

The straightforward approach of perception checking has the best chance of working in what we identified in Chapter 2 as *low-context cultures*, ones in which members value candor and self-disclosure. American,

DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION

Distorting Perception: The Gaslight Effect

The gaslight effect (or "gaslighting") is a contemporary term for manipulating and controlling another person's perceptions. The term refers to the 1944 film classic *Gaslight*, in which a husband tries to convince his wife that she's insane by changing small elements in their environment—and then insisting she's wrong when she points out these changes.

Therapist Robin Stern has written extensively about the gaslight effect, identifying it as a form of mental abuse (2007; see also Sarkis, 2017). A less pathological form of gaslighting occurs when one person deceitfully tries to justify his or her behavior by blaming the other. "You never told me that," an accuser might say while knowing that the statement isn't true. Or more maliciously, "You expect me to be faithful when you're always coming on to other guys?" Shifting guilt to the innocent is a hallmark of gaslighting.

Victims of gaslighting tend to blame themselves, apologize, and offer excuses for another's behaviors. Depression and withdrawal often follow. It's hard to communicate freely when you've been led to believe you're always wrong.

Recognizing the symptoms of gaslighting is the first step in breaking the pattern. Another key is seeking out objective perspectives from trusted others. The perception-checking skills described in this section are useful tools in a healthy relationship. However, if you think you're being manipulated by a significant other, perception checking with people outside the relationship can help ensure that your perspective hasn't been distorted.

Australian, Canadian, and German dominant cultures, for example, fit into this category. Members of these groups are most likely to appreciate the kind of straight talking that perception checking embodies. On the other hand, members of *high-context cultures* (more common in Latin America and Asia) value social harmony over clarity. High-context communicators are more likely to regard candid approaches such as perception checking as potentially embarrassing, preferring instead less direct ways of understanding one another.

Along with clarifying meaning, perception checking can sometimes be a face-saving way to raise an issue without directly threatening or attacking the other person. Consider these examples:

"Were you going to drop off the rent check tomorrow?"

"Am I boring you, or do you have something else on your mind?"

In the first case, you might have been quite sure your roommate had forgotten to deliver the rent check, and in the second that the other person was bored. Even so, a perception check is a less threatening way of pointing out their behavior than direct confrontation. Remember that one element of competent communication is the ability to choose the best option from a large repertoire, and perception checking can be a useful strategy at times.

BUILDING EMPATHY

Perception checking can help us decode messages more accurately, but it doesn't provide enough information for us to claim that we fully understand another person. For example, a professor who uses perception checking might learn that a student's reluctance to ask questions is due to confusion and not lack of interest. This information would be helpful, but imagine how much more effective the professor would be if she or he could get a sense of the confusion from the student's perspective. Likewise, parents who use perception checking might find that their teenager's outlandish behavior grows from a desire to be accepted. But to truly understand this behavior, the parents

would need to consider (or perhaps recall) what it feels like to crave that acceptance.

Empathy Defined

What we need, then, to understand others more completely is **empathy**—the ability to recreate another person's perspective, to experience the world from his or her point of view (Geist, 2013). It is impossible to achieve total empathy, but with enough effort and skill, we can come closer to this goal (Krause, 2010).

"How would you feel if the mouse did that to you?"

Empathy has three dimensions. On one level, empathy involves *perspective taking*—the ability to take on the viewpoint of another person (Manohar & Appiah, 2016). This understanding requires a suspension of judgment so that for the moment you set aside your own opinions and take on those of the other person. Besides cognitive understanding, empathy also has an affective dimension—what social scientists term *emotional contagion*. In everyday language, emotional contagion means that we experience the same feelings that others have. We know their fear, joy, sadness, and so on. A third ingredient of empathy is a genuine *concern* for the welfare of the other person. Not only do we think and feel as others do, but we have a sincere interest in their well-being. Full empathy requires both intellectual understanding of the other person's position and an affective understanding of the other's feelings (Carré et al., 2013; Kerem et al., 2001).

It's easy to confuse empathy with *sympathy*, but the concepts are different. With sympathy, you view the other person's situation from your point of view. With empathy, you view it from the other person's perspective. Consider the difference between sympathizing and empathizing with a single parent or a homeless person. When you sympathize, your feelings focus on the other person's confusion, joy, or pain. When you empathize, the experience becomes your own, at least for the moment. It's one thing to feel bad (or good) *for* someone; it's more profound to feel bad (or good) *with* someone.

Experiencing Empathy

Empathy may be valuable, but it isn't always easy to achieve (Ickes & Hodges, 2013). In fact, it's hardest to empathize with people who are radically different from us in categories such as age, sex, and socioeconomic status (Goleman, 2013). To make such perceptual leaps, you need to develop open-mindedness, imagination, and commitment. The good news is that researchers are learning that empathy is less an inborn trait, like height, than a learnable skill, like playing chess. This is especially true

Media Clip

Gaining Empathy: *Undercover Boss*

The long-running reality series *Undercover Boss* depicts how walking in another's shoes can increase interpersonal empathy. In the show, high-ranking company officials don disguises and take on the roles of entry-level employees in their organizations. Some of the bosses rediscover what it was like when they were working their way up the occupational ladder. Others gain new appreciation for a world they've never known.

Versions of the show run in 15 different countries, suggesting there's international appeal in watching a boss spend time in the organizational trenches. Researchers interviewed 13 CEOs who had been on the series to see what they learned from the experience (Cumberland & Alagaraja, 2016). The executives uniformly agreed they gained new empathy for workers in their company, and they also gleaned a better understanding of their organization's culture. Better yet, most said they made changes in company policies as a result of being on the program.

Although you may never become a CEO or be on a reality show, the empathy lesson of *Undercover Boss* should be clear: When communicating interpersonally, it's important to understand what the world looks like from the other person's vantage point.

when there's a will to empathize, and a belief that doing so is possible (Schumann, et al., 2014).

The best way to gain empathy for people whose point of view differs from yours is by interacting with them (Zhang, 2016). We can also empathize by attempting to experience the world from another's perspective. Rachel Kolb (2016) describes such a moment. As a deaf person born to a hearing family, she is fluent in both American Sign Language (ASL) and spoken English (which she understands by lip reading). Kolb was having lunch with a hearing friend, who agreed to converse in ASL instead of spoken English. That conversation was an eye-opener.

> . . . after a few minutes, my usually bold, un-self-conscious friend stopped. She chuckled and shrugged a little, and said, "I feel like everyone here is *looking at us.*"
>
> I glanced around the small cafe, at all the hearing people sitting at their tables. Indeed, some had craned their necks to look at our movements, but this was behavior I'd long ago ceased to notice. "Yeah," I signed back, bluntly. "That often happens."
>
> My friend smiled. A moment later, we started conversing again, and I think then she understood: *This* is what it can be like to occupy a signing body.

Simulations can also help you experience another person's reality. For instance, spending even a short time in a virtual body of someone whose race differs from yours can help you understand how the world looks and feels to them (Hogenboom, 2013). Literally—or, at least, virtually—inhabiting the body of another provides the basis for developing empathy, which can lead to a reduction in bias. Similarly, college students who took on avatars of elderly people and entered their virtual environment came away with new attitudes toward the aged (Yee & Bailenson, 2006).

Empathy and Ethics

The "golden rule" of treating others as we want to be treated points to the clear relationship between empathy and the ethical principles that enable society to function (Howe, 2013).

ASSESSING YOUR COMMUNICATION

Your Empathy Quotient

Respond to each of the following statements using a scale ranging from 0 to 4, where 0 = "never" and 4 = "always." Also have someone who knows you well fill out the instrument about you and compare notes afterward.

_____ **1.** When someone else is feeling excited, I tend to get excited too.

_____ **2.** Other people's misfortunes do not disturb me a great deal.

_____ **3.** It upsets me to see someone being treated disrespectfully.

_____ **4.** I remain unaffected when someone close to me is happy.

_____ **5.** I enjoy making other people feel better.

_____ **6.** I have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than I am.

_____ **7.** When a friend starts to talk about his/her problems, I try to steer the conversation toward something else.

_____ **8.** I can tell when others are sad even when they do not say anything.

_____ **9.** I find that I am "in tune" with other people's moods.

_____ **10.** I do not feel sympathy for people who cause their own serious illnesses.

_____ **11.** I become irritated when someone cries.

_____ **12.** I am not really interested in how other people feel.

_____ **13.** I get a strong urge to help when I see someone who is upset.

_____ **14.** When I see someone being treated unfairly, I do not feel very much pity for them.

_____ **15.** I find it silly for people to cry out of happiness.

_____ **16.** When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel a bit protective toward him/her.

Adapted from Spreng, R., McKinnon, M. C., Mar, R. A., & Levine, B. (2009). The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire: Scale development and initial validation of a factor-analytic solution to multiple empathy measures. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 91*, 62–71.

For scoring information, see page 132 at the end of the chapter.

A look at criminal behavior demonstrates the link between empathy, ethics, and communication. Typically, people who have committed the most offensive crimes against others, such as rape and child abuse, do not express any sense of how their actions affected the victims (Clements et al., 2007). New treatments attempt to change behavior by instilling the ability to imagine how others are feeling (Day et al., 2010). In these programs, offenders read and watch emotional accounts of crimes similar to the ones they have committed. Offenders also write accounts of what their crimes must have felt like to the victim, read these stories to others in therapy groups, and even experience simulated reenactments in which they play the role of the victim. Through strategies such as these, therapists try to help offenders develop the empathy required to have an ethical approach to the world.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Objective 4.1 Understand the subjective nature of perceiving interpersonal messages and relationships.

The reality we perceive is constructed through communication with others. First-order realities involve things and events that are objectively observable; second-order realities are the meanings we assign to those things and events. Interpersonal perception involves four phases: selection, organization, interpretation, and negotiation.

Q: Recall an important exchange in which you viewed matters differently than your relational partner. Describe how you selected, organized, and interpreted the other person's behavior and how your partner perceived the exchange differently. How successful were you in negotiating a shared perception of what happened?

Objective 4.2 Identify the variety of influences on interpersonal perception.

Physiological influences on perception include our senses, age, health and fatigue, biological cycles, hunger, and neurobehavioral challenges. Psychological influences such as mood and self-concept also have a strong influence on how we regard others. In addition, social influences such as sex and gender roles, occupational roles, and relational roles play an important part in the way we view those with whom we interact. Finally, cultural influences shape how we recognize and make sense of others' words and actions.

Q: Identify instances in which the physiological, psychological, social, and cultural influences described in this chapter shaped your perceptions and consequently your interpersonal communication.

Objective 4.3 Recognize how common tendencies in perception shape interpersonal communication.

We tend to make snap judgments and cling to first impressions, even if they are mistaken. We are more likely to blame others than ourselves for misfortunes. We are influenced by our expectations. We also are influenced by obvious stimuli, even if they are not the most important factors. Finally, we assume others are similar to us.