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FIGURE 3.5 *Context Effects on Perception*

Stroop effect. An individual is shown a series of color words (e.g., blue, green, or red) that are printed in different colors and is asked to "name the colors as quickly as you can." What happens is that the person has great difficulty in identifying the colors of the words, tending instead to read the words themselves. Knowledge of color words, coupled with reading skill, interferes with one's ability to perceive the colors. The same would hold true for proofreading; one has a tendency to read the words as they should be typed rather than as they actually are.

Solving problems can also require overcoming the effects of past experience on perception. In other words, some problem situations must be perceived in a new way in order for a solution to be reached. In Kohler's (1925) experiments with a chimpanzee, for example, bananas were placed just out of the chimpanzee's reach with a stick near at hand. In order to get at the bananas, the chimpanzee had to perceive the properties of the stick as affording its use as a tool to knock the bananas within reach. Similarly, solving an insight problem such as "If the lily pads on a pond double every day, and the pond is completely covered on the 100th day, on which day is it half-covered?" requires thinking of the problem in terms of logic rather than math.

Although little is known about how people come to be proficient at casting problems in a new light in order to solve them, there is evidence to suggest that practice on many different kinds of problems may help (Sternberg & Davidson, 1983). Practice with a variety of problems can make learners more aware of the role of context in problem solution and thus more open to the consideration of alternate assumptions.

The influences of past experience and context on perception can also come together in expectations about students. It has been well documented that teachers' expectations of students may affect their evaluations of student achievement, as well as their own behavior toward students (e.g., Good, 1987). In other words, expecting a student to be a problem in class can predispose the instructor to perceiving more problem behaviors. Similarly, a student with a reputation for high achievement is more likely to be perceived in that light.

The expectations themselves may develop from previous experiences of the teacher, from the immediate context, or both. For example, the teacher has learned to associate, and therefore comes to expect, certain behaviors with high- and low-achieving students, males and females, or well- and