

## 3.4: Perception

### Learning Objectives

1. Understand the influence of self in the process of perception.
2. Describe how we perceive visual objects and how these tendencies may affect our behavior.
3. Describe the biases of self-perception.
4. Describe the biases inherent in perception of other people.
5. Explain what attributions mean, how we form attributions, and their consequences for organizational behavior.

Our behavior is not only a function of our personality, values, and preferences, but also of the situation. We interpret our environment, formulate responses, and act accordingly. **Perception** may be defined as the process with which individuals detect and interpret environmental stimuli. What makes human perception so interesting is that we do not solely respond to the stimuli in our environment. We go beyond the information that is present in our environment, pay selective attention to some aspects of the environment, and ignore other elements that may be immediately apparent to other people. Our perception of the environment is not entirely rational. For example, have you ever noticed that while glancing at a newspaper or a news Web site, information that is interesting or important to you jumps out of the page and catches your eye? If you are a sports fan, while scrolling down the pages you may immediately see a news item describing the latest success of your team. If you are the parent of a picky eater, an advice column on toddler feeding may be the first thing you see when looking at the page. So what we see in the environment is a function of what we value, our needs, our fears, and our emotions (Higgins & Bargh, 1987; Keltner, Ellsworth, & Edwards, 1993). In fact, what we see in the environment may be objectively, flat-out wrong because of our personality, values, or emotions. For example, one experiment showed that when people who were afraid of spiders were shown spiders, they inaccurately thought that the spider was moving toward them (Riskin, Moore, & Bowley, 1995). In this section, we will describe some common tendencies we engage in when perceiving objects or other people, and the consequences of such perceptions. Our coverage of biases and tendencies in perception is not exhaustive—there are many other biases and tendencies on our social perception.

### Visual Perception

Our visual perception definitely goes beyond the physical information available to us. First of all, we extrapolate from the information available to us. Take a look at the following figure. The white triangle you see in the middle is not really there, but we extrapolate from the information available to us and see it there (Kellman & Shipley, 1991).



Figure 3.4.7: Our visual perception goes beyond the information physically available. In this figure, we see the white triangle in the middle even though it is not really there.

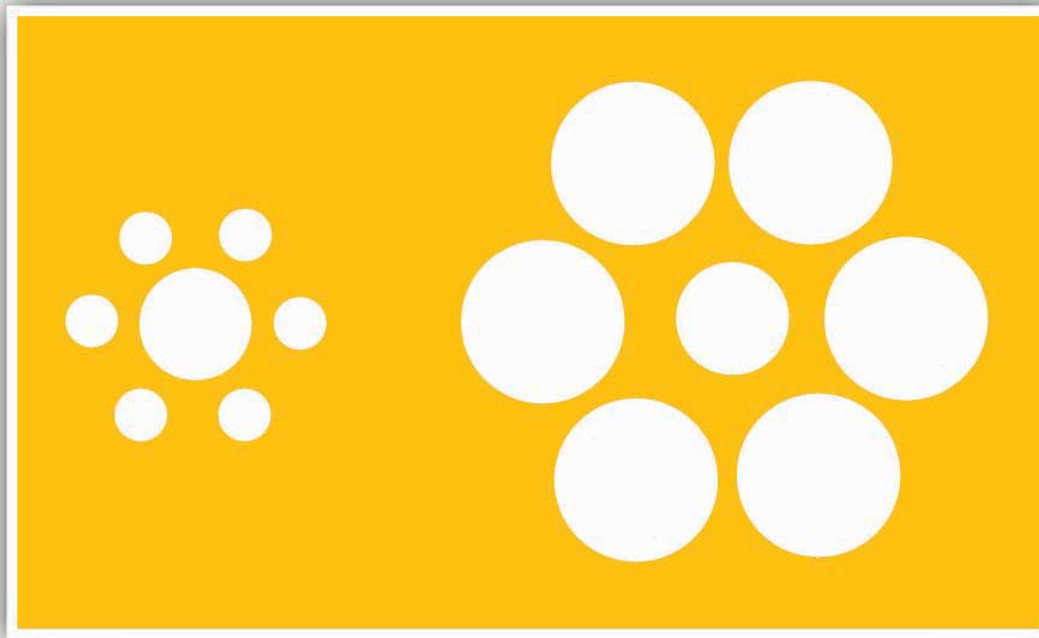


Figure 3.4.8: Which of the circles in the middle is bigger? At first glance, the one on the left may appear bigger, but they are in fact the same size. We compare the middle circle on the left to its surrounding circles, whereas the middle circle on the right is compared to the bigger circles surrounding it.

Our visual perception is often biased because we do not perceive objects in isolation. The contrast between our focus of attention and the remainder of the environment may make an object appear bigger or smaller. This principle is illustrated in the figure with circles. Which of the middle circles is bigger? To most people, the one on the left appears bigger, but this is because it is surrounded by smaller circles. The contrast between the focal object and the objects surrounding it may make an object bigger or smaller to our eye.

How do these tendencies influence behavior in organizations? You may have realized that the fact that our visual perception is faulty may make witness testimony faulty and biased. How do we know whether the employee you judge to be hardworking, fast, and neat is really like that? Is it really true, or are we comparing this person to other people in the immediate environment? Or let's say that you do not like one of your peers and you think that this person is constantly surfing the Web during work hours. Are you sure? Have you really seen this person surf unrelated Web sites, or is it possible that the person was surfing the Web for work-related purposes? Our biased visual perception may lead to the wrong inferences about the people around us.

### Self-Perception

Human beings are prone to errors and biases when perceiving themselves. Moreover, the type of bias people have depends on their personality. Many people suffer from [self-enhancement bias](#). This is the tendency to overestimate our performance and capabilities and see ourselves in a more positive light than others see us. People who have a narcissistic personality are particularly subject to this bias, but many others are still prone to overestimating their abilities (John & Robins, 1994). At the same time, other people have the opposing extreme, which may be labeled as [self-effacement bias](#). This is the tendency for people to underestimate their performance, undervalue capabilities, and see events in a way that puts them in a more negative light. We may expect that people with low self-esteem may be particularly prone to making this error. These tendencies have real consequences for behavior in organizations. For example, people who suffer from extreme levels of self-enhancement tendencies may not understand why they are not getting promoted or rewarded, while those who have a tendency to self-efface may project low confidence and take more blame for their failures than necessary.

When perceiving themselves, human beings are also subject to the [false consensus error](#). Simply put, we overestimate how similar we are to other people (Fields & Schuman, 1976; Ross, Greene, & House, 1977). We assume that whatever quirks we have are shared by a larger number of people than in reality. People who take office supplies home, tell white lies to their boss or colleagues, or take credit for other people's work to get ahead may genuinely feel that these behaviors are more common than they really are.

The problem for behavior in organizations is that, when people believe that a behavior is common and normal, they may repeat the behavior more freely. Under some circumstances this may lead to a high level of unethical or even illegal behaviors.

## Social Perception

How we perceive other people in our environment is also shaped by our values, emotions, feelings, and personality. Moreover, how we perceive others will shape our behavior, which in turn will shape the behavior of the person we are interacting with.

One of the factors biasing our perception is [stereotypes](#). Stereotypes are generalizations based on group characteristics. For example, believing that women are more cooperative than men, or men are more assertive than women, is a stereotype. Stereotypes may be positive, negative, or neutral. Human beings have a natural tendency to categorize the information around them to make sense of their environment. What makes stereotypes potentially discriminatory and a perceptual bias is the tendency to generalize from a group to a particular individual. If the belief that men are more assertive than women leads to choosing a man over an equally (or potentially more) qualified female candidate for a position, the decision will be biased, potentially illegal, and unfair.

Stereotypes often create a situation called a [self-fulfilling prophecy](#). This cycle occurs when people automatically behave as if an established stereotype is accurate, which leads to reactive behavior from the other party that confirms the stereotype (Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977). If you have a stereotype such as “Asians are friendly,” you are more likely to be friendly toward an Asian yourself. Because you are treating the other person better, the response you get may also be better, confirming your original belief that Asians are friendly. Of course, just the opposite is also true. Suppose you believe that “young employees are slackers.” You are less likely to give a young employee high levels of responsibility or interesting and challenging assignments. The result may be that the young employee reporting to you may become increasingly bored at work and start goofing off, confirming your suspicions that young people are slackers!

Stereotypes persist because of a process called selective perception. [Selective perception](#) simply means that we pay selective attention to parts of the environment while ignoring other parts. When we observe our environment, we see what we want to see and ignore information that may seem out of place. Here is an interesting example of how selective perception leads our perception to be shaped by the context: As part of a social experiment, in 2007 the *Washington Post* newspaper arranged Joshua Bell, the internationally acclaimed violin virtuoso, to perform in a corner of the Metro station in Washington DC. The violin he was playing was worth \$3.5 million, and tickets for Bell’s concerts usually cost around \$100. During the rush hour in which he played for 45 minutes, only one person recognized him, only a few realized that they were hearing extraordinary music, and he made only \$32 in tips. When you see someone playing at the metro station, would you expect them to be extraordinary? (Weingarten, 2007)

Our background, expectations, and beliefs will shape which events we notice and which events we ignore. For example, the functional background of executives affects the changes they perceive in their environment (Waller, Huber, & Glick, 1995). Executives with a background in sales and marketing see the changes in the demand for their product, while executives with a background in information technology may more readily perceive the changes in the technology the company is using. Selective perception may perpetuate stereotypes, because we are less likely to notice events that go against our beliefs. A person who believes that men drive better than women may be more likely to notice women driving poorly than men driving poorly. As a result, a stereotype is maintained because information to the contrary may not reach our brain.



Figure 3.4.9: First impressions are lasting. A job interview is one situation in which first impressions formed during the first few minutes may have consequences for your relationship with your future boss or colleagues. World Relief Spokane – [Job Interviews](#) – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Let's say we noticed information that goes against our beliefs. What then? Unfortunately, this is no guarantee that we will modify our beliefs and prejudices. First, when we see examples that go against our stereotypes, we tend to come up with subcategories. For example, when people who believe that women are more cooperative see a female who is assertive, they may classify this person as a "career woman." Therefore, the example to the contrary does not violate the stereotype, and instead is explained as an exception to the rule (Higgins & Bargh, 1987). Second, we may simply discount the information. In one study, people who were either in favor of or opposed to the death penalty were shown two studies, one showing benefits from the death penalty and the other discounting any benefits. People rejected the study that went against their belief as methodologically inferior and actually reinforced the belief in their original position even more (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979). In other words, trying to debunk people's beliefs or previously established opinions with data may not necessarily help.

One other perceptual tendency that may affect work behavior is that of [first impressions](#). The first impressions we form about people tend to have a lasting impact. In fact, first impressions, once formed, are surprisingly resilient to contrary information. Even if people are told that the first impressions were caused by inaccurate information, people hold onto them to a certain degree. The reason is that, once we form first impressions, they become independent of the evidence that created them (Ross, Lepper, & Hubbard, 1975). Any information we receive to the contrary does not serve the purpose of altering the original impression. Imagine the first day you met your colleague Anne. She treated you in a rude manner and when you asked for her help, she brushed you off. You may form the belief that she is a rude and unhelpful person. Later, you may hear that her mother is very sick and she is very stressed. In reality she may have been unusually stressed on the day you met her. If you had met her on a different day, you could have thought that she is a really nice person who is unusually stressed these days. But chances are your impression that she is rude and unhelpful will not change even when you hear about her mother. Instead, this new piece of information will be added to the first one: She is rude, unhelpful, and her mother is sick. Being aware of this tendency and consciously opening your mind to new information may protect you against some of the downsides of this bias. Also, it would be to your advantage to pay careful attention to the first impressions you create, particularly during job interviews.

### OB Toolbox: How Can I Make a Great First Impression in the Job Interview?

A job interview is your first step to getting the job of your dreams. It is also a social interaction in which your actions during the first 5 minutes will determine the impression you make. Here are some tips to help you create a positive first impression.

- *Your first opportunity to make a great impression starts even before the interview, the moment you send your résumé.* Be sure that you send your résumé to the correct people, and spell the name of the contact person correctly! Make sure that your résumé looks professional and is free from typos and grammar problems. Have someone else read it before you hit the send button or mail it.
- *Be prepared for the interview.* Many interviews have some standard questions such as "tell me about yourself" or "why do you want to work here?" Be ready to answer these questions. Prepare answers highlighting your skills and accomplishments, and practice your message. Better yet, practice an interview with a friend. Practicing your answers will prevent you from regretting your answers or finding a better answer after the interview is over!

- *Research the company.* If you know a lot about the company and the job in question, you will come out as someone who is really interested in the job. If you ask basic questions such as “what does this company do?” you will not be taken as a serious candidate. Visit the company’s Web site as well as others, and learn as much about the company and the job as you can.
- *When you are invited for an office interview, be sure to dress properly.* Like it or not, the manner you dress is a big part of the impression you make. Dress properly for the job and company in question. In many jobs, wearing professional clothes, such as a suit, is expected. In some information technology jobs, it may be more proper to wear clean and neat business casual clothes (such as khakis and a pressed shirt) as opposed to dressing formally. Do some investigation about what is suitable. Whatever the norm is, make sure that your clothes fit well and are clean and neat.
- *Be on time to the interview.* Being late will show that you either don’t care about the interview or you are not very reliable. While waiting for the interview, don’t forget that your interview has already started. As soon as you enter the company’s parking lot, every person you see on the way or talk to may be a potential influence over the decision maker. Act professionally and treat everyone nicely.
- *During the interview, be polite.* Use correct grammar, show eagerness and enthusiasm, and watch your body language. From your handshake to your posture, your body is communicating whether you are the right person for the job!

Sources: Adapted from ideas in Bruce, C. (2007, October). Business Etiquette 101: Making a good first impression. *Black Collegian*, 38(1), 78–80; Evenson, R. (2007, May). Making a great first impression. *Techniques*, 14–17; Mather, J., & Watson, M. (2008, May 23). Perfect candidate. *The Times Educational Supplement*, 4789, 24–26; Messmer, M. (2007, July). 10 minutes to impress. *Journal of Accountancy*, 204(1), 13; Reece, T. (2006, November–December). How to wow! *Career World*, 35, 16–18.

## Attributions

Your colleague Peter failed to meet the deadline. What do you do? Do you help him finish up his work? Do you give him the benefit of the doubt and place the blame on the difficulty of the project? Or do you think that he is irresponsible? Our behavior is a function of our perceptions. More specifically, when we observe others behave in a certain way, we ask ourselves a fundamental question: Why? Why did he fail to meet the deadline? Why did Mary get the promotion? Why did Mark help you when you needed help? The answer we give is the key to understanding our subsequent behavior. If you believe that Mark helped you because he is a nice person, your action will be different from your response if you think that Mark helped you because your boss pressured him to.

An **attribution** is the causal explanation we give for an observed behavior. If you believe that a behavior is due to the internal characteristics of an actor, you are making an **internal attribution**. For example, let’s say your classmate Erin complained a lot when completing a finance assignment. If you think that she complained because she is a negative person, you are making an internal attribution. An **external attribution** is explaining someone’s behavior by referring to the situation. If you believe that Erin complained because finance homework was difficult, you are making an external attribution.

When do we make internal or external attributions? Research shows that three factors are the key to understanding what kind of attributions we make.

**Consensus:** Do other people behave the same way?

**Distinctiveness:** Does this person behave the same way across different situations?

**Consistency:** Does this person behave this way in different occasions in the same situation?

Let’s assume that in addition to Erin, other people in the same class also complained (high consensus). Erin does not usually complain in other classes (high distinctiveness). Erin usually does not complain in finance class (low consistency). In this situation, you are likely to make an external attribution, such as thinking that finance homework is difficult. On the other hand, let’s assume that Erin is the only person complaining (low consensus). Erin complains in a variety of situations (low distinctiveness), and every time she is in finance, she complains (high consistency). In this situation, you are likely to make an internal attribution such as thinking that Erin is a negative person (Kelley, 1967; Kelley, 1973).

Interestingly though, our attributions do not always depend on the consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency we observe in a given situation. In other words, when making attributions, we do not always look at the situation objectively. For example, our overall relationship is a factor. When a manager likes a subordinate, the attributions made would be more favorable (successes are attributed to internal causes, while failures are attributed to external causes) (Heneman, Greenberger, & Anonyou, 1989).

Moreover, when interpreting our own behavior, we suffer from [self-serving bias](#). This is the tendency to attribute our failures to the situation while attributing our successes to internal causes (Malle, 2006).

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