

- any of us identify with more than one culture and can be thrust into situations in which we must choose a primary cultural allegiance.

Communicating Your Self

- The **face** we present to others is the self that others perceive and evaluate. Sometimes our face reflects our inner selves, and sometimes we adopt **masks**.
- According to **social penetration theory**, we develop relationships by delving deeper and more broadly into different layers of self. The more we reveal, the more **intimacy** we feel with others.
- Revealing private information about ourselves to others is **self-disclosure**, which, along with the responsiveness of listeners to such disclosure, makes up the **interpersonal process model of intimacy**.

The Social Media Self

- Information posted about you online has higher **warranting value** than what you post directly.

CHAPTER 3

Perceiving Others



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We rely on perception constantly to make sense of everything and everyone in our environment.



chapter outline

[Perception as a Process](#)

[Influences on Perception](#)

[Forming Impressions of Others](#)

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The letter arrived just two weeks after we had moved our son into his dorm room at a small liberal arts college. It was from the school's president, and our first, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, thought was "Are they kicking him out already?" The letter wasn't about our son, however—it was about recent campus protests regarding the inclusiveness of the core curriculum. The eloquent note assured us that our son "was not having his educational experience compromised," but of course, the comforting intent of the letter rendered the *opposite* effect upon *us* as parents. We anxiously Googled his school to see what was happening. Sure enough, news outlets and social media were replete with stories detailing "radical student protests" resulting in "canceled classes" and likening our son's school to other campuses and communities where protests had been taking place.

Panicked, we Skyped our son. He surprised us with "Things here are GREAT!" Yes, he said, it was true that protests had erupted and classes *had* been affected. But he viewed the events as educational rather than disruptive: not only was he learning class content, but he also was witnessing, firsthand, transformative cultural change toward greater inclusiveness, through dialog and social activism.

What's more, the situation on campus was more complicated than its portrayal in news and social media. Tensions were being fueled by competing perceptions, and political commentators amplified these tensions by caricaturizing the situation and foisting false narratives upon it. Many pundits were perceptually framing the events as a "spontaneous revolt," pitting "students against faculty," and led by "spoiled children complaining about nothing." Yet our son noted that the protests were led by dedicated students who were

deeply concerned about social justice and a required curriculum that favored privileged viewpoints and underrepresented the voices of marginalized groups. Rather than being “students versus faculty,” the perceptions of individual faculty and students varied widely. Most supported the protestors’ *right* to dissent, but were divided regarding *how* they were doing it. And the issues at play had long been simmering: faculty and students had been working collaboratively to revise the core classes for more than a year. This effort had been triggered by research documenting a deep perceptual divide among students: although 70 percent of straight, white, cisgender male students reported enjoying the required content, only 30 percent of female students described it positively, and 47 percent of students of color and 75 percent of transgender students thought that core texts should be changed ([Lydgate, 2017](#)). Our son concluded: “The whole thing has been really cool—I’ve gotten to see all these different lenses through which people see the same situation!”

No sooner had we closed our Skype session than Steve’s phone went off. It was his mother, extremely upset. “Oh, Steven!” she lamented, “*How can you have a son at that school!?* He’s not one of *those protestors*, is he!?” When Steve tried to share his son’s views of what was really happening, she interrupted. “There’s *no* excuse for disrupting class! These kids today see everything so differently, I just can’t understand it!”

People can experience the same events, yet live them in extraordinarily different ways. This is because everything we experience in the world around us is filtered through our own unique perceptual lenses. While information seems to enter our conscious minds clean and clear, what we *actually* see is refracted through our personal experiences and beliefs, and is interpreted based on the meanings we assign to people, their communication, and our relationships. We then look to these *mental creations*—not reality itself—to guide our interpersonal communication and relationship decisions.

These mental creations are shaped by both time and place. The United States, for example, is a culture originally founded upon, and filled with examples of, protest. From college campuses, to local communities and cities, protests have charted the course of the country. In his 1963 *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, “we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single

garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." Call to mind your mental images of social justice protests. Now consider how your mental images illustrate the "network of mutuality" about which King wrote. Each of us has our *direct* experiences—perceiving the world in ways that largely match our own beliefs, attitudes, and unique lived experiences. But *indirect* experiences—our perceptions about other people's beliefs, attitudes and experiences—also mold our mental images. If we focus only on our direct experiences, we can become tethered to our individual perspectives and miss the fact that other people's perceptions may be quite different. In our chapter opener, our son's firsthand campus experience informed his perspective on the student protests, which differed from his grandmother's perspective. To bridge perceptual divides, we first need to realize that we *all* share the flaws of human perceptual biases. Once we recognize our common perceptual limitations, we can move toward overcoming those limitations and understanding the interconnected network of mutuality about which King wrote—a network in which each of us can imagine what other people see, experience, and believe, and can conceive of how other people may be impacted, or impacted differently, by similar experiences.

We begin our studies of perception, and how *our communication behaviors are rooted in our perceptions*, by building on your [Chapter 2](#) knowledge that your capacity for self-awareness can be honed by turning a critical lens inward upon yourself. We now turn the lens outward, examining how we make sense of the world around us, and how improved perception can make you a better interpersonal communicator. You'll learn:

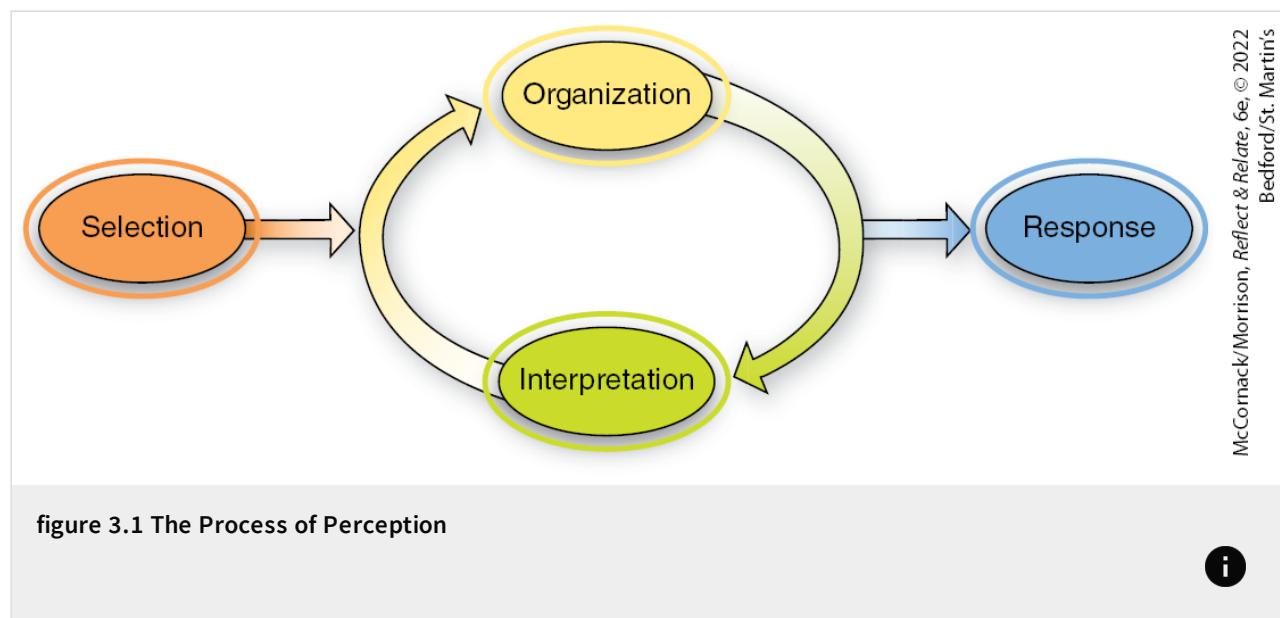
- How the perception process unfolds, and which perceptual errors you need to watch for
- The influence of culture, gender, and personality in shaping your perception of others and your interpersonal communication
- How you form impressions of others, and the benefits and limitations of the methods you use
- Strategies for improving your perceptual accuracy

We begin by defining the components involved in the process of perception.

Perception as a Process

Perception helps us understand our world

The start point for understanding perception is the realization that it isn't one discrete event, but instead, a *process*. Specifically, **perception** is the process of selecting, organizing, and interpreting information from our senses. We rely on perception constantly to make sense of everything and everyone in our environment. Perception begins when we select information on which to focus our attention. We then organize the information into an understandable pattern inside our minds and interpret its meaning. Each activity influences the other: our mental organization of information shapes how we interpret it, and our interpretation of information influences how we mentally organize it. (See [Figure 3.1](#).) Let's take a closer look at the perception process.



SELECTING INFORMATION

It's finals week, and you're in your room studying for a difficult exam. Exhausted, you decide to take a break and listen to some music. You don your headphones, press play, and close your eyes. Suddenly, you hear a noise. Startled, you open your eyes and remove your headphones to find that your housemate has just yanked open your bedroom door, snapping, "I've been yelling at you to pick up your phone for the last five minutes! What's going on?!"

The first step of perception, [**selection**](#), involves focusing attention on certain sights, sounds, tastes, touches, or smells in our environment. Consider the housemate example. Once you hear their entry, you would likely select their communication as the focus of your attention. The degree to which particular people or aspects of their communication attract our attention is known as [**salience** \(Fiske & Taylor, 2017\).](#) When something is salient, it stands out relative to the setting you are in and your expectations, and is experienced as especially noticeable and significant. We view aspects of interpersonal communication as salient under three conditions ([**Fiske & Taylor, 1991**](#)). First, communication is salient if the communicator behaves in a visually and audibly stimulating fashion. A housemate yelling and energetically gesturing is more salient than a quiet, motionless housemate. Second, communication becomes salient if our goals or expectations lead us to view it as significant. Even a housemate's softly spoken phone announcement will command our attention if we are anticipating an important call. Last, communication that deviates from our expectations is salient. An unexpected verbal attack will always be more salient than an expected one.

ORGANIZING THE INFORMATION YOU'VE SELECTED

Once you've selected something as the focus of your attention, you take that information and structure it into a coherent pattern in your mind, a phase of the perception process known as [**organization** \(Fiske & Taylor, 1991\)](#). For example, imagine that a cousin is telling you about a recent visit to your hometown. As they share their story with you, you select certain bits of their narrative on which to focus your attention based on salience, such as their sighting of a mutual friend or visiting

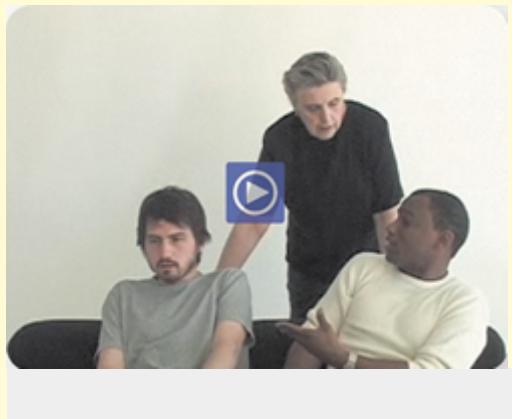
a favorite old hangout. You then organize your own representation of their story inside your head.

LaunchPad Video

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Punctuation

Watch this clip online to answer the questions below.



How does punctuation influence each person's perception and communication in the video? How might the previous communication between two people influence how each would punctuate a situation between a parent and a child or between romantic partners?

During organization, you engage in **punctuation**, structuring the information you've selected into a chronological sequence that matches how you experienced the order of events ([Watzlawick et al., 1967](#)). To illustrate punctuation, think about how you might punctuate the sequence of events in our housemate example. You hear a noise, open your eyes, see your housemate in your room, and then hear them yelling at you. But two people involved in the same interpersonal encounter may punctuate it in very different ways. Your housemate might punctuate the same incident by noting that your ringing phone in the common area disrupted their studying, and despite their efforts to get your attention, you never responded.

If you and another person organize and punctuate information from an encounter differently, the two of you may well feel frustrated with each other. Disagreements about punctuation, and especially disputes about who started unpleasant encounters, are a common source of interpersonal conflict ([Watzlawick et al., 1967](#)). For example, your housemate may contend that “you started it” because you ignored their request to get your phone. You may believe they “started it” by barging into your room without knocking.

We can avoid perceptual misunderstandings that lead to conflict by understanding how our organization and punctuation of information differ from those of other people. One helpful way to forestall such conflicts is to practice asking others to share their views of encounters. You might say, “Here’s what I saw, but that’s my perspective. What do you think happened?”

self-reflection

Recall a conflict in which you and a friend disagreed about “who started it.” How did you punctuate the encounter? How did your friend punctuate it? If each of you punctuated differently, how did those differences contribute to the conflict? If you could revisit the situation, what might you say or do differently to resolve the dispute?

INTERPRETING THE INFORMATION

As we organize information we have selected into a coherent mental model, we also engage in [interpretation](#), assigning meaning to that information. We call to mind familiar information that’s relevant to the current encounter, and use that information to make sense of what we’re hearing and seeing. We also create explanations for why things are happening as they are.

Using Familiar Information

We make sense of others’ communication in part by comparing what we currently perceive with knowledge that we already possess. For example, when Steve

proposed to Kelly, he surprised her after class. He had decorated her apartment with several dozen roses and carnations, was dressed in his best (and only!) suit, and was spinning “their song” on her turntable—the Spinners’ “Could It Be I’m Falling in Love” (we LOVE the Spinners!). When she opened the door and he asked her to marry him, she immediately interpreted his communication correctly. But how, given that she had never been proposed to before? Because she knew from friends, family members, movies, and television shows what “a marriage proposal looks and sounds like.” Drawing on this familiar information, she correctly figured out what he was up to and accepted his proposal.

The knowledge we draw on when interpreting interpersonal communication resides in schemata, mental structures that contain information defining the characteristics of various concepts, as well as how those characteristics are related to each other ([Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2001](#)). Each of us develops schemata for individual people, groups of people, places, events, objects, and relationships. In the previous example, Kelly had a schema (the singular form of *schemata*) for “marriage proposal” that enabled her to correctly interpret Steve’s actions.

Because we use familiar information to make sense of current interactions, our interpretations reflect what we presume to be true. For example, suppose you’re interviewing for a job with a manager who has been at the company for 18 years. You’ll likely interpret everything they say in light of your knowledge about “long-term employees.” This knowledge includes your assumption that “company veterans generally know insider information.” So, when your interviewer talks in glowing terms about the company’s future, you’ll probably interpret their comments as credible. Now imagine that you receive the same information from someone who has been with the company only a few weeks. Based on your perception of this person as a “new employee” and on the information you have in your “new employee” schema, you may interpret this message as naïve speculation rather than expert commentary, even if their statements are accurate.

Creating Explanations

In addition to drawing on our schemata to interpret information from interpersonal encounters, we create explanations for others' comments or behaviors, known as **attributions**. Attributions are our answers to the *why* questions we ask every day. "Why didn't my partner return my text message?" "Why did my best friend share that horrible, embarrassing photo of me on Instagram?"

Consider an example shared with us by a professor friend of ours, Sarah. She had finished teaching for the semester and was out of town and offline for a week. When she returned home and logged on to her email, she found a week-old note from Janet, a student who had failed her course, asking Sarah if there was anything she could do to improve her grade. She also found a second email from Janet, dated a few days later, accusing Sarah of ignoring her:

FROM: Janet [mailto:janet@school.edu]
SENT: Friday, December 14, 2018 10:46 AM
TO: Professor Sarah
SUBJECT: FW: Grade

Maybe my situation isn't a priority to you, and that's fine, but a response email would've been appreciated! Even if all you had to say was "there's nothing I can do." I came to you seeking help, not a handout!—Janet.¹

Put yourself in Janet's shoes for a moment. What attributions did Janet make about Sarah's failure to respond? How did these attributions shape Janet's communication in her second email? Now consider this situation from Sarah's perspective. If you were in her shoes, what attributions would you make about Janet, and how would they shape how you interpreted her email?

Attributions take two forms, internal and external (see [Table 3.1](#)). *Internal attributions* presume that a person's communication or behavior stems from internal causes, such as character or personality. For example, "My professor didn't respond to my email because she doesn't care about students" or "Janet sent this message because she's rude." *External attributions* hold that a person's communication is caused by factors unrelated to personal qualities, such as situational or outside sources: "My professor didn't respond to my email because she's out of town and

away from email" or "Janet sent this message because I didn't respond to her first message."

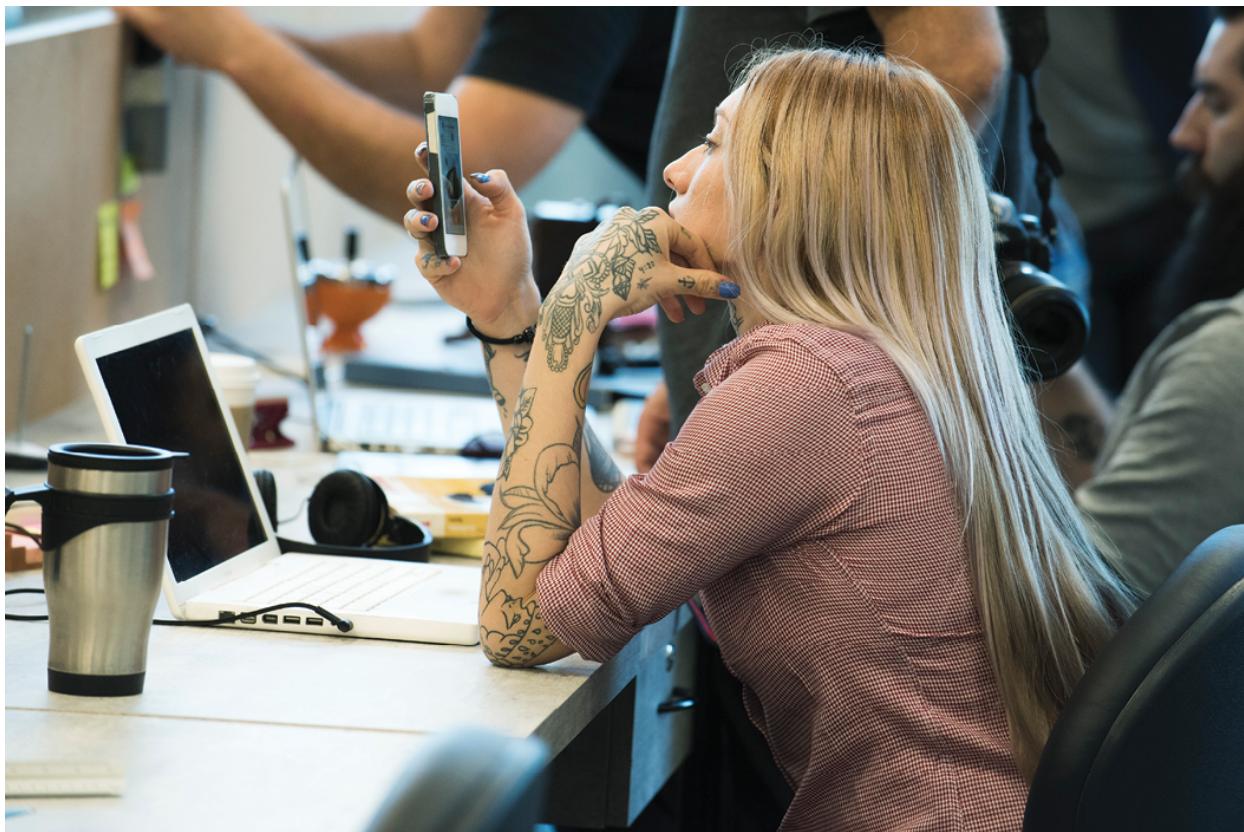
table 3.1 Internal versus External Attributions

Communication Event	Internal Attribution	External Attribution
Your romantic partner doesn't reply after you send a flirtatious text message.	"My partner doesn't care about me."	"My partner is probably too busy to respond."
Your unfriendly coworker greets you warmly.	"My coworker is friendlier than I thought."	"Something unusual must have happened to make my coworker act so friendly."
Your friend ridicules your taste in music.	"My friend has an unpredictable mean streak."	"My friend must be having a really bad day."

self-reflection

Recall a fight you've had with parents or other family members. Why did they behave as they did? What presumptions did they make about you and your behavior? When you assess both your and their attributions, are they internal or external? What does this tell you about the power and prevalence of the fundamental attribution error?

Like schemata, the attributions we make powerfully influence how we interpret and respond to others' communication. For example, if you think Janet's email was the result of her having a terrible day, you'll likely interpret her message as an understandable venting of frustration. If you think her message was caused by her personal rudeness, you'll probably interpret the email as inappropriate and offensive.



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People are especially susceptible to the fundamental attribution error when communicating electronically, as when texting.



Given the dozens of people with whom we communicate each day, it's not surprising that we often form invalid attributions. One common mistake is the [**fundamental attribution error**](#), the tendency to attribute others' behaviors solely to internal causes (the kind of person they are), rather than to the social or environmental forces affecting them ([Heider, 1958](#)). For example, communication scholar Alan Sillars and his colleagues found that during conflicts between parents and teens, both parties fall prey to the fundamental attribution error ([Sillars et al., 2010](#)). Parents commonly attribute teens' communication to "lack of responsibility" and "desire to avoid the issue," whereas teens attribute parents' communication to "desire to control my life." All these assumptions are internal causes. These errors make it harder for teens and parents to constructively resolve their conflicts, something we discuss in more depth in [Chapter 10](#).

The fundamental attribution error is so named because it is the most prevalent of all perceptual biases ([Langridge & Butt, 2004](#)). Why does this error occur? Because when we communicate with others, they dominate our perception, becoming most salient to us. We often do not see the situational factors, including our own behavior, that may be causing their behavior. Consequently, when we make judgments about why someone is acting in a certain way, we overestimate the influence of the person and underestimate the significance of their immediate environment ([Heider, 1958](#); [Langridge & Butt, 2004](#)). This is especially the case when we behave in negative ways that trigger undesirable behavior in other people. In such instances, we often perceptually overlook our own actions, focusing exclusively on the dispositional attributes of the other person ([Sillars & McLaren, 2015](#)). For example, one study of university math and science teachers found that professors who engaged in poor teaching practices were more likely to erroneously blame their students' low performance on internal factors such as "lack of work ethic" and "limited intellectual ability" than were professors who were exceptional teachers ([Wieman & Welsh, 2016](#)).

skills practice

Improving Online Attributions

Critically assessing your attributions while communicating online

1. Identify a negative text, email, or social media message you've received.
2. Consider why the person sent the message.
3. Write a response based on this attribution, and save it as a draft.
4. Think of and list other possible, external causes for the person's message.
5. Keeping these alternative attributions in mind, revisit and reevaluate your response draft, editing it as necessary to ensure competence before you send or post it.

The fundamental attribution error is especially common during online interactions ([Shedletsky & Aitken, 2004](#)). Because we aren't privy to the rich array of environmental factors that may be shaping our communication partners' messages

—all we perceive is words on a screen—we’re more likely to interpret others’ communication as stemming solely from internal causes ([Wallace, 1999](#)). As a consequence, when a text message, email, or social media post is even slightly negative in tone, we’re very likely to blame that negativity on bad character or personality flaws. Such was the case when Sarah presumed that Janet was a rude person based on her email.

A related error is the [actor-observer effect](#), the tendency to attribute other people’s behaviors to their dispositions, while explaining our own behaviors according to situational or external factors ([Fiske & Taylor, 2017](#)). Because our mental focus during interpersonal encounters is on factors external to us—especially the person with whom we’re interacting—we tend to credit these factors as causing our own communication. This is particularly prevalent during unpleasant or negative interactions. Our own impolite remarks during family conflicts, for example, are viewed as “reactions to their hurtful communication” rather than “messages caused by our own insensitivity.”

However, we don’t always make external attributions regarding our own behaviors. When we take credit for success, but deny responsibility for negative events or failures, we engage in the [self-serving bias](#). Suppose you’ve successfully persuaded a friend to lend you their car for the weekend. In this case, you will probably attribute this success to your charm and persuasive skill, rather than to luck or your friend’s generosity. The self-serving bias is driven by ego protection: by crediting ourselves for our life successes, we can feel happier about who we are. Research shows that people have a strong tendency to engage in this bias, regardless of age, gender, or culture ([Mezulis et al., 2004](#)).

Clearly, attributions play a powerful role in how we interpret communication. For this reason, it’s important to consider the attributions you make while you’re interacting with others. Check your attributions frequently, watching for the fundamental attribution error, the actor-observer effect, and the self-serving bias. If you think someone has spoken to you in an offensive way, ask yourself if it’s possible that outside forces—including *your own behavior*—could have caused the problem. Also

keep in mind that communication (like other forms of human behavior) rarely stems from *only* external or internal causes. It's caused by a combination of both ([Langdridge & Butt, 2004](#)).

Finally, when you can, check the accuracy of your attributions by asking people for the reasons behind their behavior. When you've made attribution errors that lead you to criticize or lose your patience with someone else, apologize and explain your mistake to the person. After Janet learned that Sarah hadn't responded because she had been out of town and offline, Janet apologized. She also explained why her message was so terse: she thought Sarah was intentionally ignoring her. Upon receiving Janet's apology, Sarah apologized also. She realized that she, too, had succumbed to the fundamental attribution error by wrongly presuming that Janet was a rude person.

REDUCING UNCERTAINTY



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Top to bottom: RgStudio/



When we are uncertain about other people's behavior, we can learn more about them by observing them, by asking their friends about them, or by interacting with them directly. This helps us make decisions about our future communication with them.



When intercultural communication scholar Patricia Covarrubias was a young girl, she and her family immigrated to the United States from Mexico. On her first day of school in her adoptive country, Patricia's third-grade teacher, Mrs. Williams, led her to the front of the classroom to introduce her to her new classmates. Growing up in Mexico, her friends and family called her *la chiquita* (the little one) or *mi Rosita de Jerico* (my rose of Jericho), but in the more formal setting of the classroom, Patricia expected her teacher to introduce her as Patricia Covarrubias, or perhaps Patricia. Instead, Mrs. Williams, her hand gently resting on Patricia's shoulder, turned to the class and said, "Class, this is Pat."

Patricia was dumbfounded. In her entire life, she had never been Pat, nor could she understand why someone would call her Pat. As she explains, “In one unexpected moment, all that I was and had been was abridged into three-letter, bottom-line efficiency” ([Covarrubias, 2000](#), pp. 10–11). And although Mrs. Williams was simply trying to be friendly—using a shortened name many people in the United States would consider informal—Patricia was mortified. The encounter bolstered her feeling that she was an outsider in an uncertain environment.

In most interpersonal interactions, the perception process unfolds in a rapid, straightforward manner. But sometimes we find ourselves in situations in which people communicate in perplexing ways. In such contexts, we experience *uncertainty*, the anxious feeling that comes about when we can’t predict or explain someone else’s communication.

Uncertainty is common during first encounters with new acquaintances, when we don’t know much about the people with whom we’re communicating. According to [**Uncertainty Reduction Theory**](#), our primary compulsion during initial interactions is to reduce uncertainty about our communication partners by gathering enough information about them that their communication becomes predictable and explainable ([Berger & Calabrese, 1975](#)). When we reduce uncertainty, we’re inclined to perceive people as attractive and likable, talk further, and consider forming relationships with them ([Burgoon & Hoobler, 2002](#)).

Uncertainty can be reduced in several ways, each of which has advantages and disadvantages ([Berger & Bradac, 1982](#)). First, you can observe how someone interacts with others. Known as *passive strategies*, these approaches can help you predict how someone may behave when interacting with you, thus reducing your uncertainty. Examples include observing them hanging out with friends at a party or checking out someone’s Facebook profile. Second, you can try *active strategies* by asking other people questions about someone you’re interested in. You might find someone who knows the person you’re assessing and ask them to disclose as much information as possible about that individual. Be aware, though, that this approach poses risks: the target person may find out that you’ve been asking

questions. That could embarrass you and upset the target. In addition, third-party information may not be accurate. Third, and perhaps most effective, are *interactive strategies*: starting a direct interaction with the person you're interested in. Inquire where they're from, what they do for a living, and about their interests. You should also disclose personal information about yourself. This enables you to test the other person's reactions to you. Is the person intrigued or bored? That information can help you reduce your uncertainty about how to communicate further.

self-reflection

When do you use passive strategies to reduce your uncertainty? Active strategies? Interactive strategies? Which do you prefer and why? What ethical concerns influence your own use of passive and active strategies?

Influences on Perception

Culture, gender, and personality affect perception

A sense of directness dominates the perceptual process. Someone says something to us, and with lightning speed we focus our attention, organize information, and interpret its meaning. Although this process seems unmediated, powerful forces outside our conscious awareness shape our perception during every encounter, whether we're communicating with colleagues, friends, family members, or lovers. Three of the most powerful influences on perception are culture, gender, and personality.

PERCEPTION AND CULTURE

Your cultural background influences your perception in at least two ways. Recall from [Chapter 1](#) that *culture* is an established, coherent set of beliefs, attitudes, values, and practices shared by a large group of people. Whenever you interact with others, you interpret their communication in part by drawing on information from your schemata. But your schemata are filled with the beliefs, attitudes, and values you learned in your own culture ([Gudykunst & Kim, 2003](#)). Consequently, people raised in different cultures have different knowledge in their schemata, so they interpret one another's communication in very different ways. Competent interpersonal communicators recognize this fact. When necessary and appropriate, they check the accuracy of their interpretation by asking questions such as "I'm sorry, could you clarify what you just said?"

Second, culture affects whether you perceive others as similar to or different from yourself. When you grow up valuing certain cultural beliefs, attitudes, and values as your own, you naturally perceive those who share these with you as fundamentally similar to yourself—people you consider **ingroupers** ([Allport, 1954](#)). You may

consider individuals from many different groups as your ingroupers as long as they share substantial points of cultural commonality with you, such as nationality, religious beliefs, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, or political views ([Turner et al., 1987](#)). In contrast, you may perceive people who aren't similar to yourself as **[outgroupers](#)**.

self-reflection

Consider people in your life whom you view as outgroupers. What points of difference lead you to see them that way? How does their outgroup status shape your communication toward them? Is there anything you could learn that would lead you to judge them as ingroupers?

Perceiving others as ingroupers or outgroupers is one of the most important perceptual distinctions we make. We often feel passionately connected to our ingroups, especially when they are tied to central aspects of our self-concepts, such as sexual orientation, religious beliefs, or ethnic heritage. Consequently, we are more likely to give valued resources, such as money, time, and effort, to those who are perceived as ingroupers versus those who are outgroupers ([Castelli et al., 2008](#)). Basically, we like, and want to support, people who are “like” us.

We also are more likely to form positive interpersonal impressions of people we perceive as ingroupers ([Giannakakis & Fritzsche, 2011](#)), including perceiving their communication as substantially more trustworthy, friendly, and honest than outgroupers’ communication ([Brewer & Campbell, 1976](#)). Similarly, when we learn that ingroupers possess negative traits, such as stubbornness or narrow-mindedness, we’re likely to dismiss the significance of this revelation, instead ascribing these traits to human nature ([Koval et al., 2012](#)). Discovering the same characteristics in outgroupers is likely to trigger a strong negative impression. And in cases where people communicate in rude or inappropriate ways, you’re substantially more inclined to form negative, internal attributions if you perceive them as outgroupers ([Brewer, 1999](#)). So, for example, if a person wearing a baseball cap with your favorite team’s logo says something rude to you, you might perceive

them as an ingrouper and make an external attribution to excuse their rudeness. But if a person says something rude while wearing a cap of a rival team, you are more likely to perceive them as an outgrouper and make a negative attribution assigning personal blame.

How can we bridge these perceptual divides? Research suggests that trust of an outgroup can be enhanced by messages from other ingroup members that present positive information about an outgroup by disavowing negative information, such as one St. Louis Cardinals fan telling another that “Chicago Cubs fans are *not* losers” ([Winter et al., 2020](#)). Moreover, recall the limits of our perception and the ease of mistakenly categorizing people as ingroupers or outgroupers. Even if you initially perceive someone to be different from yourself, they may hold beliefs, attitudes, and values similar to your own. If you assume they’re outgroupers based on surface-level differences, you may communicate with them in ways that are disrespectful and also prevent you from getting to know them better.

PERCEPTION AND GENDER



Fox Photos/Getty Images

Despite popular beliefs, most researchers from communication and psychology argue that men and women are more similar than different in how they interpersonally communicate.



Get your family or friends talking about gender differences, and chances are you'll hear many of them claim that men and women perceive interpersonal communication differently. Even though research across domains informs us that "behavioral differences between men and women have decreased in the last decades" ([Krahé & Papakonstantinou, 2020](#)), some people still may insist that "men are cool and logical," while "women see everything emotionally." The scientific relationship between gender and perception is much more complex. Consider research on brain differences between men and women. Historically, researchers have argued that men's and women's brains are substantially different, and that such differences mean that women can more accurately identify others' emotions, and

score higher in language comprehension and vocabulary tests, than men ([Schlaepfer et al., 1995](#)). But more recent analyses call such sweeping generalizations into question. For example, neuroscience professor Lise Eliot and her colleagues compared 58 studies looking at the size of the amygdala, the portion of the brain responsible for emotion, empathy, aggression, and sexual arousal ([Marwha et al., 2017](#)). When controlling for the differential physical size of men versus women, they found little difference between the sexes. Based on these results, Dr. Eliot argues, “Despite the common impression that men and women are profoundly different, large analyses of brain measures are finding far more similarity than difference: there is no categorically ‘male brain’ or ‘female brain,’ and much more overlap than difference between genders for nearly all brain measures” ([Science Daily, 2017](#), p. 1).

Research in communication and psychology is mostly consistent with this recent brain research. For example, [Dan Canary, Tara Emmers-Sommer, and Sandra Faulkner \(1997\)](#) reviewed data from over 1,000 gender studies and found that if you consider all the factors that influence our communication and compare their impact, only about 1 percent of people’s communication behavior is caused by gender. They concluded that when it comes to interpersonal communication, “men and women respond in a similar manner 99% of the time” ([p. 9](#)). As linguist [Deborah Cameron \(2009\)](#) summarized, the effect of gender “on most measures of verbal ability is small or close to zero.”

Despite the debate over differences, we know one thing about gender and perception for certain: people are socialized to believe that men and women communicate differently. Within Western cultures, people tend to believe that women talk more about their feelings than men do, talk about “less important” issues than men do (women “gossip,” whereas men “discuss”), and generally talk more than men do ([Spender, 1984](#)). But in one of the best-known studies of this phenomenon, researchers found that this was more a matter of perception than real difference ([Mulac et al., 1985](#)). Two groups of participants were given the same speech. One group was told that a man had authored and presented the speech, while the other was told that a woman had written and given it. Participants who thought the speech was a woman’s perceived it as having more “artistic quality.”

Those who believed it was a man's saw the speech as having more "dynamism." Participants also described the "man's" language as strong, active,