You should understand:

1. How common perceptual tendencies and situational factors influence perception.

2. The influence of culture on perception and the self-concept.

3. The importance of empathy in communication.

4. The communicative influences that shape the self-concept.

5. How self-fulfilling prophecies influence behavior.

6. How the process of identity management can result in presentation of multiple selves.

7. The reasons for and the ethical dimensions of identity management.

You should be able to:

1. Identify how the perceptual tendencies in this chapter have led you to develop distorted perceptions of yourself and others.

2. Use perception checking and empathy to be more accurate in your perceptions of others' behavior.

3. Identify the ways you influence the self-concepts of others and the ways significant others influence your self-concept.

4. Identify the communication-related self-fulfilling prophecies that you have imposed on yourself, that others have imposed on you, and that you have imposed on others.

5. Describe the various identities you attempt to create and the ethical merit of your identity management strategies.

Perception, the Self, and Communication

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

Our perceptions of others shape the way we communicate with them. Several factors influence these perceptions:

- Our success at constructing shared narratives through communication.
- Our tendency to make several perceptual errors.
- Factors arising from our own experience and from our prior relationship with that person.
- Our cultural background.
- Our ability to empathize.

The skill of perception checking can help clarify mistaken perceptions, leading to a shared narrative and smoother communication.

Communication depends on the way we perceive ourselves, as well as others. You will appreciate the importance of the self as you read about

- How communication shapes the self-concept.

- The way culture shapes our self-perceptions.
- The role of personality in shaping our perceptions.
- How self-fulfilling prophecies can lead to either more-satisfying or less-productive communication.

As Chapter 1 explained, one reason we communicate is to persuade others to view ourselves as we want to be seen. To understand how this principle of identity management operates, Chapter 2 explains

- The difference between perceived and presenting selves.
- How we communicate to manage our identities, both via face-to-face and mediated channels.
- Reasons why we communicate to manage our identities.

CULTURAL IDIOM

botched: destroyed, ruined

long-winded: speaking for a long time

jibe: agree

- Two classmates, one black and the other white, are discussing their latest reading assignment in an American history class. "Malcolm X was quite a guy," the white student says sincerely to the black one. "You must be very proud of him." The black student is offended at what sounds like a condescending remark.
- A student is practicing his first speech for a public address class with several friends. "This is a stupid topic," he laments. The others assure him that the topic is interesting and that the speech sounds good. Later in class he becomes flustered because he believes that his speech is awful. As a result of his unenthusiastic delivery, the student receives a low grade on the assignment.
- In biology class, a shy but earnest student mistakenly uses the term *orgasm* instead of *organism* when answering the professor's question. The entire class breaks into raucous laughter. The student remains quiet for the remainder of the semester.
- Despite her nervousness, a graduating student does her best to look and sound confident in a job interview. Although she leaves the session convinced she botched a big chance, a few days later she is surprised to receive a job offer.

Stories like these probably sound familiar. Yet behind this familiarity lie principles that affect our communication more than almost any others discussed in this book.

- Two or more people often perceive the world in radically different ways, which presents major challenges for successful communicating.
- The beliefs each of us holds about ourselves—our self-concept—have a powerful effect on our own communication behavior.
- The messages we send can shape others' self-concepts and thus influence their communication.
- The image we present to the world varies from one situation to another.

These simple truths play a role in virtually all the important messages we send and receive. The goal of this chapter is to demonstrate the significance of these truths by describing the nature of perception and showing how it influences the way we view ourselves and how we relate to others.

PERCEIVING OTHERS

Suppose you woke up tomorrow in another person's body. Imagine how different the world would seem if you were fifteen years older or younger, a member of the opposite sex or a different ethnic group, far more or less intelligent, vastly more attractive or ugly, more wealthy or poverty-stricken. It doesn't take much imagination to understand that the world feels like a different place to each of us, depending on our physical condition as well as our social and personal backgrounds.

Narratives and Perception

We all have our own story of the world, and often our story is quite different from those of others. A family member or roommate might think your sense of humor is inappropriate, whereas you think you're quite clever. You might blame an unsatisfying class on the professor, who you think is a long-winded bore. On the other hand, the professor might characterize the students as superficial and lazy

"I know what you're thinking, but let me offer a competing narrative."

and blame the class environment on them. (Chapter 3 will talk about the sort of name-calling embedded in the previous sentences.)

Social scientists call the personal stories that we and others create to make sense of our personal world **narratives.**[1] In a few pages we will look at how a tool called "perception checking" can help bridge the gap between different narratives. For now, though, the important point is that differing narratives can lead to problematic communication.

After they take hold, narratives offer a framework for explaining behavior and shaping future communication. One study of sense making in organizations illustrates how the process operates on the job.[2] Researchers located employees who had participated in office discussions about cases where a fellow worker had received "differential treatment" from management about matters such as time off, pay, or work assignments. The researchers then analyzed the conversations that employees held with fellow workers about the differential treatment. The analysis revealed that these conversations were the occasion in which workers created and reinforced the meaning of the employee's behavior and management's response. For example, consider the way workers made sense of Jane Doe's habit of taking late lunches. As Jane's coworkers discuss her behaviors, they might decide that her late lunches aren't fair—or they might agree that late lunches aren't a big deal. Either way, the coworker's narrative of office events *defines* those events. Once they are defined, coworkers tend to seek reinforcement for their perceptions by keeping a mental scorecard rating their fellow employees and management. ("Did you notice that Bob came in late again today?" "Did you notice that the boss chose Jane to go on that trip to New York?") Although most of us like to think we make judgments about others on our own, this research suggests that sense making is an *interactive* process. In other words, reality in the workplace and elsewhere isn't "out there"; rather, we create it with others through communication.

Research on long-term happy marriages demonstrates that shared narratives don't have to be accurate to be powerful.[3] Couples who report being happily married after fifty or more years seem to collude in a relational narrative that doesn't always jibe with the facts. They agree that they rarely have conflict, although objective analysis reveals that they have had their share of disagreements and challenges. Without overtly agreeing 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. They seem willing to forgive, or even forget, transgressions. Examining this research, one scholar concludes:

> 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![4]

Common Perceptual Tendencies

Shared narratives may be desirable, but they can be hard to achieve. Some of the biggest problems that interfere with understanding and agreement arise from errors in what psychologists call *attribution*—the process of attaching meaning to behavior. We attribute meaning to both our own actions and to the actions of others, but we often use different yardsticks. Research has uncovered several perceptual errors that can lead to inaccurate attributions—and to troublesome communication.[5] By becoming aware of these errors, we can guard against them and avoid unnecessary conflicts.

WE OFTEN JUDGE OURSELVES MORE CHARITABLY THAN WE JUDGE OTHERS In an attempt to convince ourselves and others that the positive face we show to the world is true, we tend to judge ourselves in the most generous terms possible. Social scientists have labeled this tendency the **self-serving bias.**[6] When others suffer, we often blame the problem on their personal qualities. On the other hand, when we suffer, we find explanations outside ourselves. Consider a few examples:

- When they botch a job, we might think they weren't listening well or trying hard enough; when we botch a job, the problem was unclear directions or not enough time.
- When he lashes out angrily, we say he's being moody or too sensitive; when we blow off steam, it's because of the pressure we've been under.
- When she gets caught speeding, we say she should have been more careful; when we get caught, we deny we were driving too fast or say, "Everybody does it."

The egocentric tendency to rate ourselves more favorably than others see us has been demonstrated experimentally.[7] In one study, members of a random sample of men were asked to rank themselves on their ability to get along with others.[8] Defying mathematical laws, all subjects—every last one—put themselves in the top half of the population. Sixty percent rated themselves in the top 10 percent of the population, and an amazing 25 percent believed they were in

the top 1 percent. In the same study, 70 percent of the men ranked their leadership in the top 25 percent of the population, whereas only 2 percent thought they were below average. Sixty percent said they were in the top 25 percent in athletic abilities, whereas only 6 percent viewed themselves as below average.

Evidence like this suggests how uncharitable attitudes toward others can affect communication. Your harsh opinions of others can lead to judgmental messages, and self-serving defenses of your own actions can result in a defensive response when others question your behavior.

WE ARE INFLUENCED BY WHAT IS MOST OBVIOUS   Every time we encounter another person, we are bombarded with more information than we can possibly manage. You can appreciate this by spending two or three minutes just reporting on what you can observe about another person through your five senses. ("Now I see you blinking your eyes . . . Now I notice you smiling . . . Now I hear you laugh and then sigh . . . Now I notice you're wearing a red shirt . . .") You will find that the list seems almost endless and that every time you seem to near the end, a new observation presents itself.

Faced with this tidal wave of sense data, we need to whittle down the amount of information we will use to make sense of others. There are three factors that cause us to notice some messages and ignore others. For example, we pay attention to stimuli that are *intense* (loud music, brightly dressed people), *repetitious* (dripping faucets, persistent people), or *contrastive* (a normally happy person who acts grumpy or vice versa). *Motives* also determine what information we select from our environment. If you're anxious about being late for a date, you'll notice whatever clocks may be around you; if you're hungry, you'll become aware of any restaurants, markets, and billboards advertising food in your path. Motives also determine how we perceive people. For example, someone on the lookout for a romantic adventure will be especially aware of attractive potential partners, whereas the same person at a different time might be oblivious to anyone but police or medical personnel in an emergency.

If intense, repetitious, or contrastive information were the most important thing to know about others, there would be no problem. But the most noticeable behavior of others isn't always the most important. For example:

- When two children (or adults, for that matter) fight, it may be a mistake to blame the one who lashes out first. Perhaps the other one was at least equally responsible, by teasing or refusing to cooperate.
- You might complain about an acquaintance whose malicious gossiping or arguing has become a bother, forgetting that, by previously tolerating that kind of behavior, you have been at least partially responsible.
- You might blame an unhappy working 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.

WE CLING TO FIRST IMPRESSIONS, EVEN IF WRONG   Labeling people according to our first impressions is an inevitable part of the perception process. These labels are a way of making interpretations. "She seems cheerful." "He seems sincere." "They sound awfully conceited."

If they're accurate, impressions like these can be useful ways of deciding how to respond best to people in the future. Problems arise, however, when the labels we attach are inaccurate, because after we form an opinion of someone, we tend to hang on to it and make any conflicting information fit our image.

Suppose, for instance, you mention the name of your new neighbor to a friend. "Oh, I know him," your friend replies. "He seems nice at first, but it's all an act." Perhaps this appraisal is off-base. The neighbor may have changed since your friend knew him, or perhaps your friend's judgment is simply unfair. Whether the judgment is accurate or not, after you accept your friend's evaluation, it will probably influence the way you respond to the neighbor. You'll look for examples of the insincerity you've heard about—and you'll probably find them. Even if the neighbor were a saint, you would be likely to interpret his behavior in ways that fit your expectations. "Sure he *seems* nice," you might think, "but it's probably just a front." Of course, this sort of suspicion can create a self-fulfilling prophecy, transforming a genuinely nice person into someone who truly becomes an undesirable neighbor as he reacts to your suspicious behavior.

Given the almost unavoidable tendency to form first impressions, the best advice we can offer is to keep an open mind and be willing to change your opinion as events prove that the first impressions were mistaken.

WE TEND TO ASSUME THAT OTHERS ARE SIMILAR TO US People commonly imagine that others possess the same attitudes and motives that they do. For example, research shows that people with low self-esteem imagine that others view them unfavorably, whereas people who like themselves imagine that others like them, too.[9] 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 raunchy joke that you found funny. You might assume that it won't offend a somewhat conservative 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 know if anything you were doing was creating problems for your students, so you decide that your instructor will probably be grateful for some constructive criticism. 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.

Examples like these show that others don't always think or feel the way we do and that assuming that similarities exist can lead to problems. For example, one study revealed that men evaluate women who initiate first dates as being more interested in sex than do the women who initiated the dates.[10]

How can you find out the other person's real position? Sometimes 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 that everyone would react the way you do.

WE TEND TO FAVOR NEGATIVE IMPRESSIONS OVER POSITIVE ONES   What do you think about Harvey? He's handsome, hardworking, intelligent, and honest. He's also very conceited.

Did the last quality mentioned make a difference in your evaluation? If it did, you're not alone. Research shows that when people are aware of both the positive and negative traits of another, they tend to be more influenced by the negative traits. In one study, for example, researchers found that job interviewers were likely to reject candidates who revealed negative information even when the total amount of information was highly positive.[11]

Sometimes this attitude makes sense. If the negative quality clearly outweighs any positive ones, you'd be foolish to ignore it. A surgeon with shaky hands and a teacher who hates children, for example, would be unsuitable for their jobs whatever their other virtues. But much of the time it's a bad idea to pay excessive attention to negative qualities and overlook positive ones. This is the mistake some people make when screening potential friends or dates. They find some who are too outgoing or too reserved, others who aren't intelligent enough, and still others who have the wrong sense of humor. Of course, it's important to find people you truly enjoy, but expecting perfection can lead to much unnecessary loneliness.

Don't misunderstand: We don't always commit the kind of perceptual errors described in this section. Sometimes, for instance, people *are* responsible for their misfortunes, and sometimes 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 proved again and again that our perceptions of others are often distorted in the ways listed here. The moral, then, is clear: Don't assume that your first judgment of a person is accurate.

Situational Factors Influencing Perception

Along with the attribution errors described in the preceding pages, we consider a whole range of additional factors when trying to make sense of others' behavior.

I have heard students say things like, "It was John's fault, his speech was so confusing nobody could have understood it." Then, two minutes later, the same student remarked, "It wasn't my fault, what I said could not have been clearer. John must be stupid." Poor John! He was blamed when he was the sender and when he was the receiver. John's problem was that he was the other person, and that's who is always at fault.

Stephen W. King

1. You can gain appreciation for the way perceptual errors operate by making two attributions for each situation that follows: Develop your first explanation for the behavior as if you were the person involved. Your second explanation for the behavior should be developed as if someone you dislike were the person described.
   - Dozing off in class
   - Getting angry at a customer on the job
   - Dressing sloppily in public
   - Being insensitive to a friend's distress
   - Laughing at an inappropriate or offensive joke
2. If your explanations for these behaviors differ, ask yourself why. Are the differing attributions justifiable, or do they support the tendency to make the perceptual errors listed on pages 36–39?
3. How do these perceptual errors operate in making judgments about others' behavior, especially when those others come from different social groups?

Relational Satisfaction   The behavior that seems positive when you are in a satisfying relationship might seem completely different when the relationship isn't going well. For example, you might regard the quirks of a housemate with amusement when things are going smoothly, but find them very annoying when you are unhappy with his other behavior. (In this sense, our willingness to tolerate the potentially bothersome behavior of people we like is rather like the amusement we get when a beloved cat climbs the Christmas tree or the dog sneaks a hamburger when nobody is looking.)

Degree of Involvement with the Other Person   We sometimes view people with whom we have or seek a relationship more favorably than those whom we observe from a detached perspective.[12] One study revealed how this principle operates in everyday life. A group of male subjects was asked to critique presentations by women who allegedly owned restaurants. Half of these presentations were designed to be competent and half incompetent. The men who were told they would be having a casual date with the female speakers judged their presentations—whether competent or not—more highly than did those who didn't expect any involvement with the speakers.[13]

Past Experience   What meaning have similar events held? If, for example, you've been gouged by landlords in the past, you might be skeptical about an apartment manager's assurances that careful housekeeping will assure the refund of your cleaning deposit.

Expectations   Anticipation shapes interpretations. If you imagine that your boss is unhappy with your work, you'll probably feel threatened by a request to "see me in my office first thing Monday morning." On the other hand, if you imagine that your work will be rewarded, your weekend will probably be pleasant.

Social Roles   A number of social relationships can influence the way we perceive others. For example, one recent study of communication in the workplace revealed that observers—both men and women—interpret facial expressions dif-

ferently depending on their status relative to the other person.[14] Subjects were shown a photo of someone and asked to judge how that person was feeling. When the person pictured was a manager, subjects saw less fear than when they were told that the person pictured was an employee. Gender also makes a difference in how we perceive others: Seeing a woman and a man pose an anger display of the same intensity, subjects saw more anger and less fear in a man's expression than in a woman's, probably because gender stereotypes of emotion guided their interpretations.

Knowledge   If you know that a friend has just been jilted by a lover or been fired from a job, you'll interpret his aloof behavior differently than you would if you were unaware of what had happened. If you work in an environment where socializing is common and colleagues have friendly relationships, you may be less likely to perceive a fellow worker's remark as sexual harassment than you would if you were in an unfamiliar environment.[15]

Self-Concept   When you're feeling insecure, the world is a very different place from the world you experience when you're confident. For example, the recipient's self-concept has proved to be the single greatest factor in determining whether people who are on the receiving end of being teased interpret the teaser's motives as being friendly or hostile and whether they respond with comfort or defensiveness.[16] The same goes for happiness and sadness or any other opposing emotions. The way we feel about ourselves strongly influences how we interpret others' behavior.

Perception and Culture

Perceptual differences make communication challenging enough between members of the same culture. But when communicators come from different cultures, the potential for misunderstandings is even greater. Culture provides a

UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY

NON-WESTERN VIEWS OF WESTERN MEDICAL CARE

Author Anne Fadiman explains why Hmong emigrants from the mountains of Laos preferred their traditional shamanistic healers, called txiv neebs, to American doctors.[17] *After the Hmong's objections are made explicit, it becomes clear why Western medicine can feel threatening and intrusive to patients who are already uncomfortable in a strange new environment.*

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.

perceptual filter that influences the way we interpret even the simplest events. This fact was demonstrated in studies exploring the domination of vision in one eye over the other.[18] Researchers used a binocular-like device that projects different images to each eye. The subjects were twelve Americans and twelve Mexicans. Each was presented with ten pairs of photographs, each pair containing one picture from U.S. culture (e.g., a baseball game) and one from Mexican culture (e.g., a bullfight). After viewing each pair of images, the subjects reported what they saw. The results clearly indicated the power of culture to influence perceptions: Subjects had a strong tendency to see the image from their own background.

The same principle causes people from different cultures to interpret similar events in different ways. Blinking while another person talks may be hardly noticeable to North Americans, but the same behavior is considered impolite in Taiwan. A "V" sign made with two fingers means "victory" in most of the Western world—as long as the palm is facing out. But in some European countries the same sign with the palm facing in roughly means "shove it." The beckoning finger motion that is familiar to Americans is an insulting gesture in most Middle and Far Eastern countries.

Even beliefs about the very value of talk differ from one culture to another.[19] North American culture views talk as desirable and uses it to achieve social purposes as well as to perform tasks. Silence in conversational situations has a negative value in this culture. It is likely to be interpreted as lack of interest, unwillingness to communicate, hostility, anxiety, shyness, or a sign of interpersonal incompatibility. Westerners are uncomfortable with silence, which they find embarrassing and awkward. Furthermore, the *kind* of talk that Westerners admire is characterized by straightforwardness and honesty. Being indirect or vague—"beating around the bush," it might be labeled—has a negative connotation.

On the other hand, most Asian cultures discourage the expression of thoughts and feelings. Silence is valued, as Taoist sayings indicate: "In much talk there is great weariness," or "One who speaks does not know; one who knows

CULTURAL IDIOM

jilted: rejected

does not speak." Unlike Westerners, who are uncomfortable with silence, Japanese and Chinese believe that remaining quiet is the proper state when there is nothing to be said. To Easterners, a talkative person is often considered a show-off or insincere. And when an Asian does speak up on social matters, the message is likely to be phrased indirectly to "save face" for the recipient.

It is easy to see how these different views of speech and silence can lead to communication problems when people from different cultures meet. Both the talkative Westerner and the silent Easterner are behaving in ways they believe are proper, yet each views the other with disapproval and mistrust. Only when they recognize the different standards of behavior can they adapt to one another, or at least understand and respect their differences.

Perceptual differences are just as important right at home when members of different cocultures interact. Failure to recognize cocultural differences can lead to unfortunate and unnecessary misunderstandings. For example, an uninformed white teacher or police officer might interpret the downcast eyes of a Latino female as a sign of avoidance, or even dishonesty, when in fact this is the proper behavior in her culture for a female being addressed by an older man. To make direct eye contact in such a case would be considered undue brashness or even a sexual come-on.

Eye contact also differs in traditional black and white cultures. Whereas whites tend to look away from a conversational partner while speaking and at the partner while listening, blacks do just the opposite, looking at their partner more when talking and less when listening.[20] This difference can cause communication problems without either person's realizing the cause. For instance, whites are likely to use eye contact as a measure of how closely the other person is listening: The more others make eye contact, the more they seem to be paying attention. A white speaker, therefore, might interpret a black partner's lack of eye contact as a sign of inattention or rudeness when quite the opposite could be true.

Cross-cultural differences can be quite subtle. For example, when meeting with academic counselors, Latinos preferred to be respected as members of their own culture as well as individuals. On the other hand, blacks preferred to be acknowledged as individuals rather than being identified as members of an ethnic group.[21]

Along with ethnicity, geography also can influence perception. A fascinating series of studies revealed that climate and geographic latitude were remarkably accurate predictors of communication predispositions.[22] People living in southern latitudes of the United States are more socially isolated, less tolerant of ambiguity, higher in self-esteem, more likely to touch others, and more likely to verbalize their thoughts and feelings. This sort of finding helps explain why communicators who travel from one part of a country to another find that their old patterns of communicating don't work as well in their new location. A southerner whose relatively talkative, high-touch style seemed completely normal at home might be viewed as pushy and aggressive in a new northern home.

Empathy and Perception

By now it is clear that differing perceptions present a major challenge to communicators. One solution is to increase the ability to empathize. **Empathy** is the ability to re-create another person's perspective, to experience the world from the other's point of view.

When I meet someone from another culture, I behave in the way that is natural to me, while the other behaves in the way that is natural to him or her. The only problem is that our "natural" ways do not coincide.

Raymonde Carroll

UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY

TODAY'S LESSON: EMPATHY

Time and time again, it was the bathroom stalls that got to Laura Manis and Kevin McCarthy.

"It's doable, but it's tight," said Manis, as she maneuvered a three-point turn into one stall.

"I should have come in forward," she observed after spending several minutes backing into another.

"I'm glad I didn't really have to go to the bathroom," said McCarthy after emerging from a third.

The pair, both second-year students in the University of Cincinnati's physical therapy assisting program, visited four suburban restaurants Thursday in an exercise that was part lesson in empathy and part consumer survey. Though neither has any physical disability, they and their classmates spent the day in wheelchairs to see how accessible 44 area restaurants were. Working off a checklist, 11 pairs of students tested the ramps, entrances, tables, salad bar and bathrooms of establishments.

"Students come away with the impression that there are a lot of barriers and obstacles for (disabled) people if they want to lead a normal life," said Tina Whalen, the instructor who organized a similar exercise two years ago. "I think it's really

an eye-opener, too, as far as an energy expenditure. By the time they get into a restaurant, through the door and up to a table, some of them are too tired to eat."

Recent legislation such as the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act has made it illegal for businesses to discriminate on the basis of physical handicaps, and most buildings are now required to have wheelchair access and other provisions for the disabled. But Thursday, the students found that legal doesn't always mean easy—or safe. Take, for instance, the wheelchair ramp into the front door of Wendy's fast-food restaurant near Tri-County Mall. It slopes out of a pair of wide doors—and into the restaurant's drive-through lane.

McCarthy and Manis found the excursion a reinforcement of lessons learned in the classroom. "This (exercise) allows us the opportunity to experience the reality of life of someone who's disabled, as opposed to just learning about it in a textbook," said Manis.

Julie Irwin

DIMENSIONS OF EMPATHY   As we'll use the term here, *empathy* has three dimensions.[23] On one level, empathy involves *perspective taking*—the ability to take on the viewpoint of another person. 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 *emotional* dimension that allows us to experience the feelings that others have. We know their fear, joy, sadness, and so on. When we combine the perspective-taking and emotional dimensions, we see that empathizing allows us to experience the other's perception—in effect, to become that person temporarily. A third dimension of empathy is a genuine *concern* for the welfare of the other person. When we empathize we go beyond just thinking and feeling as others do and genuinely care about their well-being.

It is easy to confuse empathy with **sympathy,** but the concepts are different in two important ways. First, sympathy means you feel compassion *for* another person's predicament, whereas empathy means you have a personal sense of what that predicament is like. Consider the difference between sympathizing with an unwed mother or a homeless person and empathizing with them—imagining what it would be like to be in their position. Despite your concern, sympathy lacks the degree of identification that empathy entails. When you sympathize, it is the other's confusion, joy, or pain. When you empathize, the experience becomes your own, at least for the moment. Both perspectives are important ones, but empathy is clearly the more complete of the two.

Empathy is different from sympathy in a second way. We only sympathize when we accept the reasons for another's pain as valid, whereas it's possible to empathize without feeling sympathy. You can empathize with a difficult relative, a rude stranger, or even a criminal without feeling much sympathy for that person. Empathizing allows you to understand another person's motives without requiring you to agree with them. After empathizing, you will almost certainly understand a person better, but sympathy won't always follow.

The ability to empathize seems to exist in a rudimentary form in even the youngest children.[24] Virtually from birth, infants become visibly upset when they hear another infant crying, and children who are a few months old cry when they observe another child crying. Young children have trouble distinguishing others' distress from their own. If, for example, one child hurts his finger, another child might put her own finger in her mouth as if she was feeling pain. Researchers report cases in which children who see their parents crying wipe their own eyes, even though they are not crying.

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

Although infants and toddlers may have a basic capacity to empathize, studies with twins suggest that the degree to which we are born with the ability to sense how others are feeling varies according to genetic factors. Although some people may have an inborn edge, environmental experiences are the key to developing the ability to understand others. Specifically, the way in which parents communicate with their children seems to affect their ability to understand others' emotional states. When parents point out to children the distress that others feel from their misbehavior ("Look how sad Jessica is because you took her toy. Wouldn't you be sad if someone took away your toys?"), those children gain a greater appreciation that their acts have emotional consequences than they do when parents simply label behavior as inappropriate ("That was a mean thing to do!").

There is no consistent evidence that suggests that the ability to empathize is greater for one sex or the other.[25] Some people, however, seem to have a hereditary capacity for greater empathizing than do others.[26] Studies of identical and fraternal twins indicate that identical female twins are more similar to one another in their ability to empathize than are fraternal twins. Interestingly, there seems to be no difference between males. Although empathy may have a biological basis, environment can still play an important role. For example, parents who are sensitive to their children's feelings tend to have children who reach out to others.[27]

Total empathy is impossible to achieve. Completely understanding another person's point of view is simply too difficult a task for humans with different backgrounds and limited communication skills. Nonetheless, it is possible to get a strong sense of what the world looks like through another person's eyes.

The value of empathy is demonstrated by the results of a simple experiment.[28] In a study, college students were asked to list their impressions of people either shown in a videotaped discussion or described in a short story. Half the students were instructed to empathize with the person shown as much as possi-

ble, and the other half were not given any instructions about empathizing. The results were impressive: The students who did not practice empathy were prone to explain the person's behavior in terms of personality characteristics. For example, they might have explained a cruel statement by saying that the speaker was mean, or they might have attributed a divorce to the partners' lack of understanding. The empathetic students, on the other hand, were more aware of possible elements in the situation that might have contributed to the reaction. For instance, they might have explained a person's unkind behavior in terms of job pressures or personal difficulties. In other words, practicing empathy seems to make people more tolerant.

A willingness to empathize can make a difference in everyday disputes. For example, communication researchers have spelled out how understanding opposing views can increase understanding and constructive problem solving in conflicts between environmentalists who want to preserve native species and landowners who want to earn a profit. After the parties begin to see one another's point of view, they can discover ways of protecting native species *and* allow landowners to carry on their enterprises.[29]

You might argue here, "Why should I be more tolerant? Maybe the other person's position or behavior isn't justified." Perhaps so, but research clearly shows that we are much more charitable when finding explanations for our own behavior.[30] When explaining our own actions, we are quick to suggest situational causes: "I was tired," "She started it," "The instructions weren't clear." In other words, we often excuse ourselves by saying, "It wasn't my fault!" As we've already said, we're less forgiving when we judge others. Perhaps becoming more empathetic can help even the score a bit, enabling us to treat others at least as kindly as we treat ourselves.

PERCEPTION CHECKING Good intentions and a strong effort to empathize are one way to understand others. Along with a positive attitude, however, there is a simple tool that can help you interpret the behavior of others more accurately. To see how this tool operates, consider how often others jump to mistaken conclusions about your thoughts, feelings, and motives:

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

As you'll learn in Chapter 7, even if your interpretation is correct, a dogmatic, mind-reading statement is likely to generate defensiveness. The skill of **perception checking** provides a better way to handle your interpretations. A complete perception check has three parts:

- A description of the behavior you noticed
- At least two possible interpretations of the behavior
- 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].* I wonder whether something's bothering you *[first interpretation]* or whether you're just feeling quiet
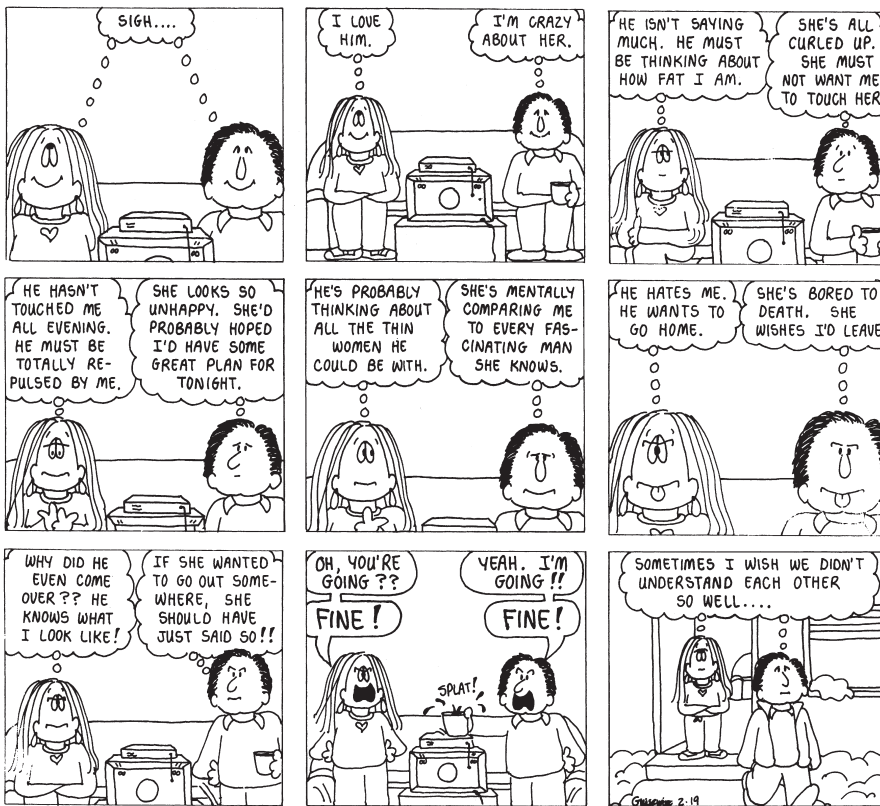
[second interpretation]. What's up *[request for clarification]*?"

"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 for helping 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 minimizes defensiveness by preserving the other person's face. Instead of saying in effect "I know what you're thinking . . ." a perception check takes the more respectful approach that states or implies "I know I'm not qualified to judge you without some help."

Sometimes a perception check won't need all of the parts listed earlier to be effective:

"You haven't dropped by lately. Is anything the matter *[single interpretation combined with request for clarification]*?"

"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?"

"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 *[no need to describe behavior]*."

CULTURAL IDIOM

preserving the other person's face: protecting the other's dignity

dropped by: made an unplanned visit

Retrospectively, one can ask "Who am I?" But in practice, the answer has come before the question.

J. M. Yinger

Of course, a perception check can succeed only if your nonverbal behavior reflects the open-mindedness of your words. An accusing tone of voice or a hostile glare will contradict the sincerely worded request for clarification, suggesting that you have already made up your mind about the other person's intentions.

PERCEIVING THE SELF

It should be clear by now that our perceptions of others are subjective and that it takes a real effort to bridge the gap between our ideas about others and the way they view themselves. Now we will turn our examination inward, exploring the way we perceive ourselves and discussing how our self-perceptions affect our communication.

Self-Concept Defined

The **self-concept** is a set of relatively stable perceptions that each of us holds about ourselves. The self-concept includes our conception about what is unique about us and what makes us both similar to, and different from, others. To put it differently, the self-concept is rather like a mental mirror that reflects how we view ourselves: not only physical features, but also emotional states, talents, likes and dislikes, values, and roles.

We will have more to say about the nature of the self-concept shortly, but first you will find it valuable to gain a personal understanding of how this theoretical construct applies to you. You can do so by answering a simple question: "Who are you?"

How do you define yourself? As a student? A man or woman? By your age? Your religion? Occupation?

There are many ways of identifying yourself. Take a few more minutes and list as many ways as you can to identify who you are. You'll need this list later in this chapter, so be sure to complete it now. Try to include all the characteristics that describe you:

- Your moods or feelings
- Your appearance and physical condition
- Your social traits
- Talents you possess or lack
- Your intellectual capacity
- Your strong beliefs
- Your social roles

Even a list of twenty or thirty terms would be only a partial description. To make this written self-portrait complete, your list would have to be hundreds—or even thousands—of words long.

Of course, not all items on such a list would be equally important. For example, the most significant part of one person's self-concept might consist of social roles, whereas for another it might consist of physical appearance, health, friendships, accomplishments, or skills.

An important element of the self-concept is **self-esteem:** our evaluations of self-worth. One person's self-concept might include being religious, tall, or athletic. That person's self-esteem would be shaped by how he or she felt about these

qualities: "I'm glad that I am athletic," or "I am embarrassed about being so tall," for example.

Self-esteem has a powerful effect on the way we communicate.[31] People with high self-esteem are more willing to communicate than people with low self-esteem. They are more likely to think highly of others and expect to be accepted by others. They aren't afraid of others' reactions and perform well when others are watching them. They work harder for people who demand high standards of performance, and they are comfortable with others whom they view as superior in some way. When confronted with critical comments, they are comfortable defending themselves. By contrast, people with low self-esteem are likely to be critical of others and expect rejection from them. They are also critical of their own performances. They are sensitive to possible disapproval of others and perform poorly when being watched. They work harder for undemanding, less critical people. They feel threatened by people they view as superior in some way and have difficulty defending themselves against others' negative comments.

Communication and Development of the Self

So far we've talked about what the self-concept is; but at this point you may be asking what it has to do with the study of human communication. We can begin to answer this question by looking at how you came to possess your own self-concept.

Our identity comes almost exclusively from communication with others. As psychologists Arthur Combs and Donald Snygg put it:

> The self is essentially a social product arising out of experience with people. . . . We learn the most significant and fundamental facts about ourselves from . . . "reflected appraisals," inferences about ourselves made as a consequence of the ways we perceive others behaving toward us.[32]

The term **reflected appraisal,** coined by Harry Stack Sullivan,[33] is a good one, because it metaphorically describes the fact that we develop an image of our-

We are not only our brother's keeper; in countless large and small ways, we are our brother's maker.

Bonaro Overstreet

UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY

WAIT, YOU'RE NOT CHINESE? NAMING AND PERCEPTION

Recently I married and took my husband's name: Chang. I am white and I am Jewish and now I am Chinese—at least on paper. I grew up on 1970's feminism; I went to law school, became a professional, and always imagined I would keep my birth name to celebrate my selfhood. Yet when I married a Chinese man, I realized that I could support our marriage best by changing my name to his.

Hyphenation was an option, but hyphenated names often create a cumbersome jingle. In my case, Berk-Chang. It sounded like a stomach ailment ("I've been in the bathroom all night with the Berk-Changs"). I thought of keeping my birth name but did not want the burden of repeatedly explaining, "My husband is Chinese, you know."

People sometimes take offense when they discover that I am not Chinese, as if I were engaged in a form of false advertising. Friends recalled the "Seinfeld" episode in which Jerry speaks to a woman named Donna Chang after dialing a wrong number, asks her out and is disappointed to find she is a white woman from Long Island. She had shortened her name from Changstein.

When a group of women friends from out of town unexpectedly visited me in Manhattan, I called a popular Chinese restaurant and asked if it could possibly seat eight people that evening. "You need to call further in advance for a party that large," the hostess told me. "I have only 11 P.M." I asked to be put on the waiting list and gave her my name. Then I heard the rustling of pages. "Well," she said, "I could squeeze you in at 8:30."

When we arrived, I announced my name. "Chang party? You're the Changs?" the hostess said. "That's us," I said. I felt guilty as she begrudgingly led us to our table, but what are we Donna Changsteins of the world to do? Should I have interjected on the telephone that afternoon, "Incidentally, ma'am, I am not Chinese—but my husband is"?

I also unwittingly confused the personnel department at the law firm where I practiced at the time of my wedding. After I notified it that I had changed my name from Pari Berk to Pari Chang, a switch was made in the company directory and on my office door. I quickly learned that this meant the assumption of a completely new professional identity. I received the following e-mail message from a work friend the next day:

1. Who the heck is Pari Chang?
2. Does she count in the firm's minority statistics for recruitment purposes?
3. Do the Asian attorneys now view her as competition for the partnership?

During recruitment season, people in the personnel department, not having met me, must have assumed I was Asian, and asked me to interview anyone who was of Asian descent. No doubt some of the candidates I interviewed were perplexed. I noticed a few sidelong glances that suggested "Is she half?"

As time passes, I feel emboldened by my new identity. Losing my birth name, ironically, has been for me a matter of self-definition. I am tickled by the irony of having made a modern decision by doing the most traditional of all things wifely: taking my husband's name.

Pari Chang

selves from the way we think others view us. This notion of the "looking-glass self" was introduced in 1902 by Charles H. Cooley, who suggested that we put ourselves in the position of other people and then, in our mind's eye, view ourselves as we imagine they see us.[34]

As we learn to speak and understand language, verbal messages—both positive and negative—also contribute to the developing self-concept. These messages continue later in life, especially when they come from what social scientists term **significant others**—people whose opinions we especially value. A teacher from long ago, a special friend or relative, or perhaps a barely known acquaintance whom you respected can all leave an imprint on how you view yourself. To see the importance of significant others, ask yourself how you arrived at your opinion of you as a student, as a person attractive to the opposite sex, as a competent

worker, and so on and you will see that these self-evaluations were probably influenced by the way others regarded you.

As we grow older, the influence of significant others is less powerful.[35] The evaluations of others still influence beliefs about the self in some areas, such as physical attractiveness and popularity. In other areas, however, the looking glass of the self-concept has become distorted, so that it shapes the input of others to make it conform with our existing beliefs. For example, if your self-concept includes the element "poor student," you might respond to a high grade by thinking "I was just lucky" or "The professor must be an easy grader."

You might argue that not every part of one's self-concept is shaped by others, insisting there are certain objective facts that are recognizable by self-observation. After all, nobody needs to tell you that you are taller than others, speak with an accent, can run quickly, and so on. These facts are obvious.

Though it's true that some features of the self are immediately apparent, the *significance* we attach to them—the rank we assign them in the hierarchy of our list and the interpretation we give them—depends greatly on the social environment. The interpretation of characteristics such as weight depends on the way people important to us regard them. Being anything less than trim and muscular is generally regarded as undesirable because others tell us that slenderness is an ideal. In one study, young women's perceptions of their bodies changed for the worse after watching just thirty minutes of televised images of the "ideal" female form.[36] Furthermore, these distorted self-images can lead to serious behavioral disorders such as depression, anorexia nervosa, bulimia, and other eating disorders. In cultures and societies where greater weight is considered beautiful, a Western supermodel would be considered unattractive. In the same way, the fact that one is single or married, solitary or sociable, aggressive or passive takes on meaning depending on the interpretation that society attaches to those traits. Thus, the importance of a given characteristic in your self-concept has as much to do with the significance that you and others attach to it as with the existence of the characteristic.

Premier Artiste

Watch me perform!
I walk a tightrope of unique design.
I teeter, falter, recover and bow.
You applaud.
I run forward, backward, hesitate and
    bow.
You applaud.
If you don't applaud, I'll fall.
Cheer me! Hurray me!
Or you push me
Down.

Lenni Shender Goldstein

ETHICAL CHALLENGE

IS HONESTY THE BEST POLICY?

By now it should be clear that each of us has the power to influence others' self-concepts. Even with the best of intentions, there are cases when an honest message is likely to reduce another person's self-esteem. Consider a few examples:

- Your friend, an aspiring artist, asks "What do you think of my latest painting?" You think it's terrible.
- After a long, hard week you are looking forward to spending the evening at home. A somewhat insecure friend who just broke off a long romantic relationship calls to ask if you want to get together. You don't.
- A good friend asks to use your name as a reference for a potential employer. You can't honestly tell the employer that your friend is qualified for the job.

In situations like these, how do you reconcile the desire to avoid diminishing another person's self-esteem with the need to be honest? Based on your conclusions, is it possible to always be both honest and supportive?

UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY

DEAFNESS AND IDENTITY[37]

The experience of Howard offers a dramatic example of how reference groups and reflected appraisal can shape identity. Every member of Howard's immediate family—parents, brother, aunts, and uncles—was deaf. He spent his entire early childhood around deaf people and in his preschool life accepted this way of being as the natural state of affairs.

Even as a young child, Howard knew about deafness. The American Sign Language sign for "deaf" was part of his everyday vocabulary. But when he began school, Howard soon discovered that the same sign had a subtle but dramatically different meaning. Among his family, "deaf" meant "us—people who behave as expected." But in a mostly hearing world, the same term meant "a remarkable condition—different from normal."

This sense of difference can shape the identity of a deaf child, especially in environments where sign language is discouraged in favor of communication forms that are favored in the hearing world, such as lip reading and speaking. In such an environment, it's not hard to imagine how the identity "I'm deaf" can come to mean "I'm different," and then "I'm deficient." Howard's physical condition didn't change when he began school, but his sense of himself shifted due to the reflected appraisal of his teachers and the broader reference groups he experienced in the hearing world.

Culture and the Self-Concept

At the dawn of a new millennium, the challenges and opportunities that come from cultural diversity are becoming more apparent. But the power of culture is far more basic and powerful than most people realize. Although we seldom recognize the fact, our whole notion of the self is shaped by the culture in which we have been reared.[38]

The most obvious feature of a culture is the language its members use. If you live in an environment where everyone speaks the same tongue, then language will have little noticeable impact. But when your primary language is not the majority one, or when it is not prestigious, the sense of being a member of what social scientists call the "out-group" is strong. At this point the speaker of a nondominant language can react in one of two ways: either to feel pressured to assimilate by speaking the "better" language, or to refuse to accede to the majority language and maintain loyalty to the ethnic language.[39] In either case, the impact of language on the self-concept is powerful. On one hand, the feeling is likely to be "I'm not as good as speakers of the native language," and on the other, the belief is "there's something unique and worth preserving in my language." A case study of Hispanic managers illustrates the dilemma of speaking a nondominant language.[40] The managers—employees in a predominantly Anglo organization—felt their "Mexican" identity threatened when they found that the road to advancement would be smoother if they deemphasized their Spanish and adopted a more colloquial English style of speaking.

Cultures affect the self-concept in more subtle ways, too. Most Western cultures are highly individualistic, whereas other cultures—most Asian ones, for example—are traditionally much more collective.[41] When asked to identify themselves, Americans, Canadians, Australians, and Europeans would probably respond by giving their first name, surname, street, town, and country. Many Asians do it the other way

CULTURAL IDIOM

tongue: language

around.[42] If you ask Hindus for their identity, they will give you their caste and village as well as their name. The Sanskrit formula for identifying one's self begins with lineage and goes on to family and house and ends with one's personal name.[43]

These conventions for naming aren't just cultural curiosities: They reflect a very different way of viewing one's self.[44] In collective cultures a person gains identity by belonging to a group. This means that the degree of interdependence among members of the society and its subgroups is much higher. Feelings of pride and self-worth are likely to be shaped not only by what the individual does, but also by the behavior of other members of the community. This linkage to others explains the traditional Asian denial of self-importance—a strong contrast to the self-promotion that is common in individualistic Western cultures. In Chinese written language, for example, the pronoun "I" looks very similar to the word for "selfish."[45] Table 2–1 summarizes some differences between individualistic Western cultures and more collective Asian ones.

This sort of cultural difference isn't just an anthropological curiosity. It shows up in the level of comfort or anxiety that people feel when communicating. In societies where the need to conform is great, there is a higher degree of communication apprehension. For example, as a group, residents of China, Korea, and Japan exhibit significantly more anxiety about speaking out than do members of individualistic cultures such as the United States and Australia.[46] It's important to realize that different levels of communication apprehension don't mean that shyness is a "problem" in some cultures. In fact, just the opposite is true: In these cultures, reticence is valued. When the goal is to *avoid* being the nail that sticks out, it's logical to feel nervous when you make yourself appear different by calling attention to yourself. A self-concept that includes "assertive" might make a Westerner feel proud, but in much of Asia it would more likely be cause for shame.

In Japan, in fact, everything had been made level and uniform—even humanity. By one official count, 90 percent of the population regarded themselves as middle-class; in schools, it was not the outcasts who beat up the conformists, but vice versa. Every Japanese individual seemed to have the same goal as every other—to become like every other Japanese individual. The word for "different," I was told, was the same as the word for "wrong." And again and again in Japan, in contexts varying from the baseball stadium to the watercolor canvas, I heard the same unswerving, even maxim: "The nail that sticks out must be hammered down."

Pico Iyer
Video Night in Katmandu

TABLE 2-1   The Self in Individualistic and Collectivistic Cultures

Individualistic Cultures	Collectivistic Cultures
Self is separate, unique individual; should be independent, self-sufficient	People belong to extended families or in-groups; "we" or group orientation
Individual should take care of self and immediate family	Person should take care of extended family before self
Many flexible group memberships; friends based on shared interests and activities	Emphasis on belonging to a very few permanent in-groups, which have a strong influence over the person
Reward for individual achievement and initiative; individual decisions encouraged; individual credit and blame assigned	Reward for contribution to group goals and well-being; cooperation with in-group members; group decisions valued; credit and blame shared
High value on autonomy, change, youth, individual security, equality	High value on duty, order, tradition, age, group security, status, hierarchy

Adapted by Sandra Sudweeks from H. C. Triandis, "Cross-cultural Studies of Individualism and Collectivism," in J. Berman, ed., *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation* 37 (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), pp. 41–133, and E. T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976).

The difference between individualism and collectivism shows up in everyday interaction. Communication researcher Stella Ting-Toomey has developed a theory that explains cultural differences in important norms, such as honesty and directness.[47] She suggests that in individualistic Western cultures where there is a strong "I" orientation, the norm of speaking directly is honored, whereas in collectivistic cultures where the main desire is to build connections between the self and others, indirect approaches that maintain harmony are considered more desirable. "I gotta be me" could be the motto of a Westerner, but "If I hurt you, I hurt myself" is closer to the Asian way of thinking.

The Self-Concept, Personality, and Communication

Whereas the self-concept is an internal image we hold of ourselves, the personality is the view others hold of us. We use the notion of **personality** to describe a relatively consistent set of traits people exhibit across a variety of situations.[48] We use the notion of personality to characterize others as friendly or aloof, energetic or lazy, smart or stupid, and in literally thousands of other ways. In fact, one survey revealed almost eighteen thousand trait words in the English language that can be used to describe a personality.[49] People do seem to possess some innate personality traits. Psychologist Jerome Kagan reports that 10 percent of all children seem to be born with a biological disposition toward shyness.[50] Babies who stop playing when a stranger enters the room, for example, are more likely than others to be reticent and introverted as adolescents. Likewise, Kagan found that another 10 percent of children seem to be born with especially sociable dispositions. Research with twins also suggests that personality may be at least partially a matter of physical destiny.[51] Biologically identical twins are much more similar in sociability than are fraternal twins. These similarities are apparent not only in infancy but also when the twins have grown to adulthood and are noticeable even when the twins have had different experiences.

Despite its common use, the term *personality* is often an oversimplification. Much of our behavior isn't consistent. Rather, it varies from one situation to another. You may be quiet around strangers but gregarious around friends and family. You might be optimistic about your schoolwork or career but pessimistic about your romantic prospects. The term *easygoing* might describe your behavior at home, whereas you might be a fanatic at work. This kind of diversity is not only common; it's also often desirable. The argumentative style you use with friends wouldn't be well received by the judge in traffic court when you appeal a citation. Likewise, the affectionate behavior you enjoy with a romantic partner at home probably wouldn't be appropriate in public. As you read in Chapter 1, a wide range of behaviors is an important ingredient of communication competence. In this sense, a consistent personality can be more of a liability than an asset—unless that personality is "flexible."

Figure 2–1 pictures the relationship between the self-concept and behavior. It illustrates how the self-concept both shapes much of our communication behavior and is shaped by it. We can begin to examine the process by considering the self-concept you bring to an event. Suppose, for example, that one element of your self-concept is "nervous with authority figures." That image probably comes from the evaluations of significant others in the past—perhaps teachers or former employers. If you view yourself as nervous with authority figures like these, you will probably behave in nervous ways when you encounter them in the

COMMUNICATION STYLE
Nervous with
authority figures

PERCEPTIONS
OF EVENTS
"They didn't think
much of me"

BEHAVIOR
Stammer,
blush

OTHERS'
RESPONSES
Disapproval,
unresponsive

COMMUNICATION STYLE
Comfortable with
authority figures

PERCEPTIONS
OF EVENTS
"I handled that
situation well"

BEHAVIOR
Speak calmly
and fluently
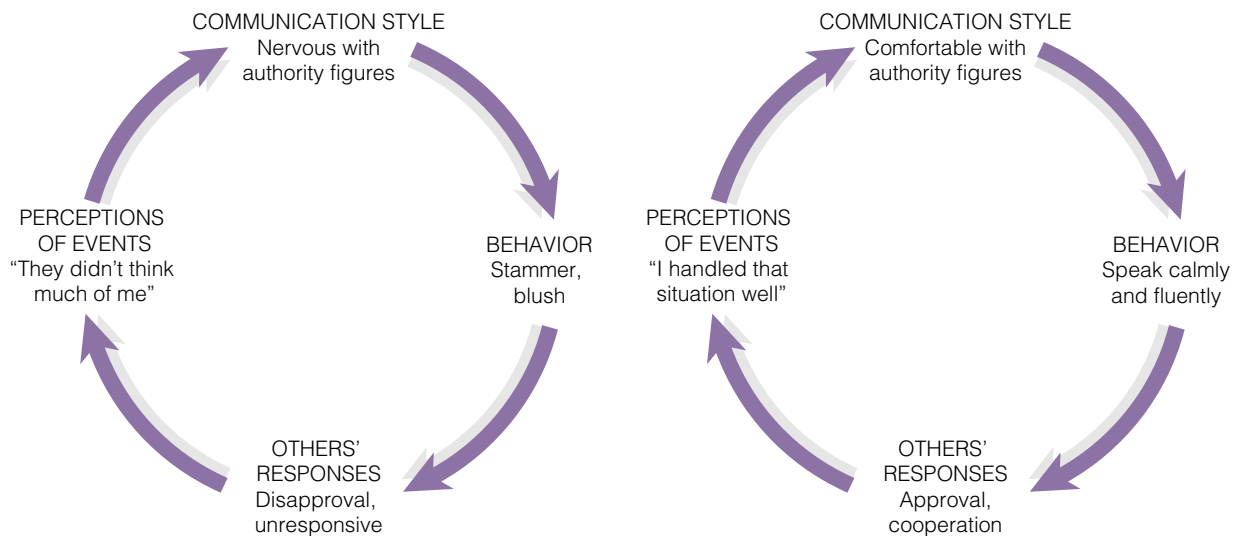
OTHERS'
RESPONSES
Approval,
cooperation

Figure 2-1   The Relationship between the Self-Concept and Behavior

future—in a teacher-student conference or a job interview. That nervous behavior is likely to influence how others view your personality, which in turn will shape how they respond to you—probably in ways that reinforce the self-concept you brought to the event. Finally, the responses of others will affect the way you interpret future events: other job interviews, meetings with professors, and so on. This cycle illustrates how the chicken-and-egg nature of the self-concept, which is shaped by significant others in the past, helps to govern your present behavior, and influences the way others view you.

The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

The self-concept is such a powerful force on the personality that it not only determines how we communicate in the present, but also can actually influence our behavior and that of others in the future. Such occurrences come about through a phenomenon called the self-fulfilling prophecy.

A **self-fulfilling prophecy** occurs when a person's expectation of an outcome makes the outcome more likely to occur than would otherwise have been true. Self-fulfilling prophecies occur all the time although you might never have given them that label. For example, think of some instances you may have known:

- You expected to become nervous and botch a job interview and later did so.
- You anticipated having a good (or terrible) time at a social affair and found your expectations being met.
- A teacher or boss explained a new task to you, saying that you probably wouldn't do well at first. You did not do well.
- A friend described someone you were about to meet, saying that you wouldn't like the person. The prediction turned out to be correct—you didn't like the new acquaintance.

CULTURAL IDIOM

the chicken-and-egg nature: refers to the philosophical question, "Which came first, the chicken or the egg?"

CULTURAL IDIOM

botch: destroy, ruin

psyched yourself: affected your behavior by changing your thinking

In each of these cases, there is a good chance that the outcome happened because it was predicted to occur. You needn't have botched the interview, the party might have been boring only because you helped make it so, you might have done better on the new task if your boss hadn't spoken up, and you might have liked the new acquaintance if your friend hadn't given you preconceptions. In other words, what helped make each outcome occur was the expectation that it would happen.

There are two types of self-fulfilling prophecies. The first type occurs when your own expectations influence your behavior. Like the job interview and the party described earlier, there are many times when an outcome that needn't have occurred does occur because you expect it to. In sports you have probably psyched yourself into playing either better or worse than usual, so that the only explanation for your unusual performance was your attitude that you would behave differently. The same principle operates for anxious public speakers: Communicators who feel anxious about facing an audience often create self-fulfilling prophecies about doing poorly that cause them to perform less effectively.[52] (Chapter 12 offers advice on overcoming this kind of stage fright.)

Research has demonstrated the power of self-fulfilling prophecies. In one study, communicators who believed they were incompetent proved less likely than others to pursue rewarding relationships and more likely to sabotage their existing relationships than did people who were less critical of themselves.[53] On the other hand, students who perceived themselves as capable achieved more academically.[54] In another study, subjects who were sensitive to social rejection tended to expect rejection, perceive it where it might not have existed, and overreact to their exaggerated perceptions in ways that jeopardized the quality of their relationships.[55] The self-fulfilling prophecy also operates on the job. For example, salespeople who perceive themselves as being effective communicators are more successful than those who perceive themselves as less effective, despite the fact that there was no difference in the approach that members of each group used with customers. In other words, the apparent reason why some salespeople are successful is because they expect to succeed. As the nearby cartoon suggests, self-fulfilling prophecies can be physiologically induced: Researchers have found that putting a smile on your face, even if you're not in a good mood, can lead to a more positive disposition.[56]

A second type of self-fulfilling prophecy occurs when the expectations of one person govern another's actions. The classic example was demonstrated by Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson:

Twenty percent of the children in a certain elementary school were reported to their teachers as showing unusual potential for intellectual growth. The names of these 20 percent were drawn by means of a table of random numbers, which is to say that the names were drawn out of a hat. Eight months later these unusual or "magic" children showed significantly greater gains in IQ than did the remaining children who had not been singled out for the teachers' attention. The change in the teachers' expectations regarding the intellectual performance of these allegedly "special"

"I don't sing because I am happy. I am happy because I sing."

children had led to an actual change in the intellectual performance of these randomly selected children.[57]

In other words, some children may do better in school, not because they are any more intelligent than their classmates, but because they learn that their teacher, a significant other, believes they can achieve.

To put this phenomenon in context with the self-concept, we can say that when a teacher communicates to students the message, "I think you're bright," they accept that evaluation and change their self-concepts to include that evaluation. Unfortunately, we can assume that the same principle holds for those students whose teachers send the message, "I think you're stupid."

This type of self-fulfilling prophecy has been shown to be a powerful force for shaping the self-concept and thus the behavior of people in a wide range of settings outside of the schools. In medicine, patients who unknowingly receive placebos—substances such as injections of sterile water or doses of sugar pills that have no curative value—often respond just as favorably to treatment as do people who actually receive a drug. The patients believe they have taken a substance that will help them feel better, and this belief actually brings about a "cure." In psychotherapy, Rosenthal and Jacobson describe several studies that suggest that patients who believe they will benefit from treatment do so, regardless of the type of treatment they receive. In the same vein, when a doctor believes a patient will improve, the patient may do so precisely because of this expectation, whereas another person for whom the doctor has little hope often fails to recover. Apparently the patient's self-concept as sick or well—as shaped by the doctor—plays an important role in determining the actual state of health.

The self-fulfilling prophecy operates in families as well. If parents tell their children long enough that they can't do anything right, the children's self-concepts will soon incorporate this idea, and they will fail at many or most of the tasks they attempt. On the other hand, if children are told they are capable or lovable or kind persons, there is a much greater chance of their behaving accordingly.[58]

The self-fulfilling prophecy is an important force in communication, but it doesn't explain all behavior. There are certainly times when the expectation of an event's outcome won't bring about that outcome. Your hope of drawing an ace in a card game won't in any way affect the chance of that card's turning up in an already shuffled deck, and your belief that good weather is coming won't stop the rain from falling. In the same way, believing you'll do well in a job interview when you're clearly not qualified for the position is unrealistic. Similarly, there will probably be people you don't like and occasions you won't enjoy, no matter what your attitude. To connect the self-fulfilling prophecy with the "power of positive thinking" is an oversimplification.

In other cases, your expectations will be borne out because you are a good predictor and not because of the self-fulfilling prophecy. For example, children are not equally well equipped to do well in school, and in such cases it would be wrong to say that a child's performance was shaped by a parent or teacher even though the behavior did match what was expected. In the same way, some workers excel and others fail, some patients recover and others don't—all according to our predictions but not because of them.

As we keep these qualifications in mind, it's important to recognize the tremendous influence that self-fulfilling prophecies play in our lives. To a great extent we are what we believe we are. In this sense we and those around us constantly create our self-concepts and thus ourselves.

There is an old joke about a man who was asked if he could play a violin and answered, "I don't know. I've never tried." This is psychologically a very wise reply. Those who have never tried to play a violin really do not know whether they can or not. Those who say too early in life and too firmly, "No, I'm not at all musical," shut themselves off prematurely from whole areas of life that might have proved rewarding. In each of us there are unknown possibilities, undiscovered potentialities—and one big advantage of having an open self-concept rather than a rigid one is that we shall continue to discover more and more about ourselves as we grow older.

S. I. Hayakawa

CULTURAL IDIOM

in the same vein: similarly

Explore how self-fulfilling prophecies affect your communication by answering the following questions:

1. Identify three communication-related predictions you make about others. What are the effects of these predictions? How would others behave differently if you did not impose these predictions?
2. Identify three self-fulfilling prophecies you impose on yourself. What are the effects of these prophecies? How would you communicate differently if you did not subscribe to them?

IDENTITY MANAGEMENT: COMMUNICATION AS IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

So far we have described how communication shapes the way communicators view themselves and others. In the remainder of this chapter we turn the tables and focus on **impression management**—the communication strategies people use to influence how others view them. In the following pages you will see that many of our messages aim at creating desired impressions.

Public and Private Selves

To understand why impression management exists, we have to discuss the notion of self in more detail. So far we have referred to the "self" as if each of us had only one identity. In truth, each of us possesses several selves, some private and others public. Often these selves are quite different.

The **perceived self** is a reflection of the self-concept. Your perceived self is the person you believe yourself to be in moments of honest self-examination. We can call the perceived self "private" because you are unlikely to reveal all of it to another person. You can verify the private nature of the perceived self by reviewing the self-concept list you developed while reading page 48. You'll probably find some elements of yourself there that you would not disclose to many people, and some that you would not share with anyone. You might, for example, be reluctant to share some feelings about your appearance ("I think I'm rather unattractive"), your intelligence ("I'm not as smart as I wish I was"), your goals ("the most important thing to me is becoming rich"), or your motives ("I care more about myself than about others").

In contrast to the perceived self, the **presenting self** is a public image—the way we want to appear to others.

In most cases the presenting self we seek to create is a socially approved image: diligent student, loving partner, conscientious worker, loyal friend, and so on. Social norms often create a gap between the perceived and presenting selves. For instance, Table 2–2 shows that the self-concepts of the members of one group of male and female college students were quite similar, but that their public selves were different in several respects from both their private selves and from the public selves of the opposite sex.[59]

Sociologist Erving Goffman used the word **face** to describe the presenting self, and he coined the term **facework** to describe the verbal and nonverbal ways

TABLE 2-2   **Self-Selected Adjectives Describing Perceived and Presenting Selves of College Students**

Perceived Self		Presenting Self	
Men	**Women**	**Men**	**Women**
1. Friendly	1. Friendly	1. Wild	1. Active
2. Active	2. Responsible	2. Able	2. Responsible
3. Responsible	3. Independent	3. Active	3. Able
4. Independent	4. Capable	4. Strong	4. Bright
5. Capable	5. Sensible	5. Proud	5. Warm
6. Polite	6. Active	6. Smart	6. Funny
7. Attractive	7. Happy	7. Brave	7. Independent
8. Smart	8. Curious	8. Capable	8. Proud
9. Happy	9. Faithful	9. Responsible	9. Sensible
10. Funny	10. Attractive	10. Rough	10. Smart

Adapted from C. M. Shaw and R. Edwards, "Self-Concepts and Self-Presentations of Males and Females: Similarities and Differences," *Communication Reports* 10 (1997): 55–62.

we act to maintain our own presenting image and the images of others.[60] He argued that each of us can be viewed as a kind of playwright, who creates roles that we want others to believe, as well as the performer who acts out those roles.

Facework involves two tasks: Managing our own identity and communicating in ways that reinforce the identities that others are trying to present.[61] You can see how these two goals operate by recalling a time when you've used self-deprecating humor to defuse a potentially unpleasant situation. Suppose, for example, that a friend gave you confusing directions to a party that caused you to be late. "Sorry I got lost," you might have said. "I'm a terrible navigator." This sort of mild self-putdown accomplishes two things at once: It preserves the other person's face by implicitly saying "It's not your fault." At the same time, your mild self-debasement shows that you're a nice person who doesn't find faults in others or make a big issue out of small problems.[62]

Characteristics of Identity Management

Now that you have a sense of what identity management is, we can look at some characteristics of this process.

WE STRIVE TO CONSTRUCT MULTIPLE IDENTITIES   In the course of even a single day, most people play a variety of roles: respectful student, joking friend, friendly neighbor, and helpful worker, to suggest just a few. We even play a variety of roles with the same person. As you grew up you almost certainly changed

"Hah! This is the Old King Cole nobody ever sees."

characters as you interacted with your parents. In one context you acted as the responsible adult ("You can trust me with the car!"), and in another context you were the helpless child ("I can't find my socks!"). At some times—perhaps on birthdays or holidays—you were a dedicated family member, and at other times you may have played the role of rebel. Likewise, in romantic relationships we switch among many ways of behaving, depending on the context: friend, lover, business partner, scolding critic, apologetic child, and so on.

The ability to construct multiple identities is one element of communication competence. For example, the style of speaking or even the language itself can reflect a choice about how to construct one's identity. We recall an African-American colleague who was also minister of a Southern Baptist congregation consisting mostly of black members. On campus his manner of speaking was typically professorial; but a visit to hear him preach one Sunday revealed a speaker whose style was much more animated and theatrical, reflecting his identity in that context. Likewise, one scholar pointed out that bilingual Latinos in the United States often choose whether to use English or Spanish depending on the kind of identity they are seeking in a given conversation.[63]

IDENTITY MANAGEMENT IS COLLABORATIVE   As we perform like actors trying to create a front, our "audience" is made up of other actors who are trying to create their own characters. Identity-related communication is a kind of process theater in which we collaborate with other actors to improvise scenes in which our characters mesh.

You can appreciate the collaborative nature of identity management by thinking about how you might handle a gripe with a friend or family member who has failed to pass along a phone message that arrived while you were away from home. Suppose that you decide to raise the issue tactfully in an effort to avoid seeming like a nag (desired role for yourself: "nice person") and also to save the other person from the embarrassment of being confronted (hoping to avoid suggesting that the other person's role is "screw-up"). If your tactful bid is accepted, the dialogue might sound like this:

You: ". . . By the way, Jenny told me she called yesterday. If you wrote a note, I guess I missed seeing it."

Other: "Oh . . . sorry. I meant to write a note, but as soon as I hung up, the doorbell rang, and then I had to run off to class."

You   (in friendly tone of voice): "That's okay. I sure would appreciate from now on if you'd leave me a note."

Other: "No problem."

In this upbeat conversation, both you and the other person accepted one another's bids for identity as basically thoughtful people. As a result, the conversation ran smoothly. Imagine, though, how different the outcome would be if the other person didn't accept your role as "nice person":

You: ". . . By the way, Jenny told me she called yesterday. If you wrote a note, I guess I missed seeing it."

Other (defensively)**:**   "Okay, so I forgot. It's not that big a deal. You're not perfect yourself, you know!"

Your first bid as "nice, face-saving person" was rejected. At this point you have the choice of persisting in trying to play the original role: "Hey, I'm not

mad at you, and I know I'm not perfect!" Or, you might switch to the new role of "unjustly accused person," responding with aggravation "I never said I was perfect. But we're not talking about me here . . ."

As this example illustrates, *collaboration* doesn't mean the same thing as *agreement.*[64] The small issue of the phone message might mushroom into a fight in which you and the other person both adopt the role of combatants. The point here is that virtually all conversations provide an arena in which communicators construct their identities in response to the behavior of others. As you read in Chapter 1, communication isn't made up of discrete events that can be separated from one another. Instead, what happens at one moment is influenced by what each party brings to the interaction and by what happened in their relationship up to that point.

IDENTITY MANAGEMENT CAN BE CONSCIOUS OR UNCONSCIOUS   At this point you might object to the notion of strategic identity management, claiming that most of your communication is spontaneous and not a deliberate attempt to present yourself in a certain way. However, you might acknowledge that some of your communication involves a conscious attempt to manage impressions.

There's no doubt that sometimes we are highly aware of managing impressions. Most job interviews and first dates are clear examples of conscious identity management. But in other cases we unconsciously act in ways that are really small public performances.[65] For example, experimental subjects expressed facial disgust in reaction to eating sandwiches laced with a supersaturated saltwater solution only when there was another person present: When they were alone, they made no faces when eating the same sandwiches.[66] Another study showed that communicators engage in facial mimicry (such as smiling or looking sympathetic in response to another's message) in face-to-face settings only when their expressions can be seen by the other person. When they are speaking over the phone and their reactions cannot be seen, they do not make the same expressions.[67] Studies like these suggest that most of our behavior is aimed at sending messages to others—in other words, identity management.

The experimental subjects described in the last paragraph didn't consciously think, "Somebody is watching me eat this salty sandwich, so I'll make a face," or, "Since I'm in a face-to-face conversation I'll show I'm sympathetic by mimicking the facial expressions of my conversational partner." Reactions like these are often instantaneous and outside of our conscious awareness.

In the same way, many of our choices about how to act in the array of daily interactions aren't deliberate, strategic decisions. Rather, they rely on "scripts" that we have developed over time. You probably have a variety of roles for managing your identity from which to choose in familiar situations
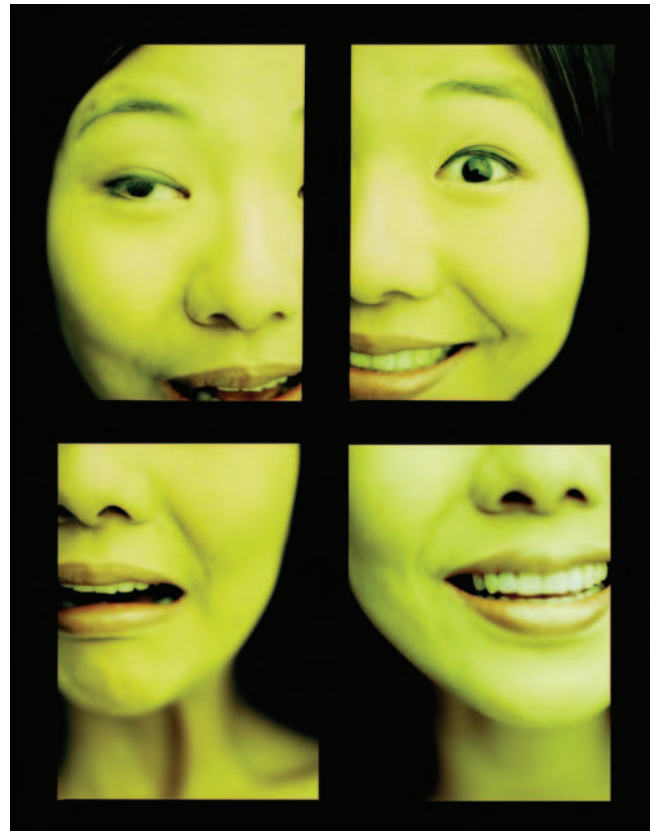
such as dealing with strangers, treating customers at work, interacting with family members, and so on. When you find yourself in familiar situations like these, you probably slip into these roles quite often. Only when those roles don't seem quite right do you deliberately construct an approach that reflects how you want the scene to play out.

Despite the claims of some theorists, it seems like an exaggeration to suggest that *all* behavior is aimed at making impressions. Young children certainly aren't strategic communicators. A baby spontaneously laughs when pleased, and cries when sad or uncomfortable, without any notion of creating an impression in others. Likewise, there are almost certainly times when we, as adults, act spontaneously. But when a significant other questions the presenting self we try to present, the likelihood of acting to prop it up increases. This process isn't always conscious: At a nonconscious level of awareness we monitor others' reactions and swing into action when our face is threatened—especially by significant others.[68]

PEOPLE DIFFER IN THEIR DEGREE OF IDENTITY MANAGEMENT   Some people are much more aware of their impression management behavior than others. These high self-monitors have the ability to pay attention to their own behavior and others' reactions, adjusting their communication to create the desired impression. By contrast, low self-monitors express what they are thinking and feeling without much attention to the impression their behavior creates.[69]

There are certainly advantages to being a high self-monitor.[70] People who pay attention to themselves are generally good actors who can create the impression they want, acting interested when bored, or friendly when they really feel quite the opposite. This allows them to handle social situations smoothly, often putting others at ease. They are also good "people-readers" who can adjust their behavior to get the desired reaction from others. Along with these advantages, there are some potential disadvantages to being an extremely high self-monitor. The analytical nature of high self-monitors may prevent them from experiencing events completely, because a portion of their attention will always be viewing the situation from a detached position. High self-monitors' ability to act means that it is difficult to tell how they are really feeling. In fact, because high self-monitors change roles often, they may have a hard time knowing *themselves* how they really feel.

People who score low on the self-monitoring scale live life quite differently from their more self-conscious counterparts. They have a simpler, more focused idea of who they are and who they want to be. Low self-monitors are likely to have a narrower repertoire of behaviors, so that they can be expected to act in more or less the same way regardless of the situation. This means that low self-monitors are easy to read. "What you see is what you get" might be their motto. Although this lack of flexibility may make their social interaction less smooth in many situations, low self-monitors can be counted on to be straightforward communicators.

By now it should be clear that neither extremely high nor low self-monitoring is the ideal. There are some situations when paying attention to yourself and adapting your behavior can be useful, but there are other situations when reacting without considering the effect on others is a better approach. This need for a range of behaviors demonstrates again the notion of communicative competence outlined in Chapter 1: Flexibility is the key to successful relationships.

Prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet.

T. S. Eliot
"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

Why Manage Impressions?

Why bother trying to shape others' opinions? Sometimes we create and maintain a front to follow social rules. As children we learn to act polite, even when bored. Likewise, part of growing up consists of developing a set of manners for various occasions: meeting strangers, attending school, going to religious services, and so on. Young children who haven't learned all the do's and don'ts of polite society often embarrass their parents by behaving inappropriately ("Mommy, why is that man so fat?"); but by the time they enter school, behavior that might have been excusable or even amusing just isn't acceptable. Good manners are often aimed at making others more comfortable. For example, able-bodied people often mask their discomfort upon encountering someone who is disabled by acting nonchalant or stressing similarities between themselves and the disabled person.[71]

Social rules govern our behavior in a variety of settings. It would be impossible to keep a job, for example, without meeting certain expectations. Salespeople are obliged to treat customers with courtesy. Employees need to appear reasonably respectful when talking to the boss. Some forms of clothing would be considered outrageous at work. By agreeing to take on a job, you are signing an unwritten contract that you will present a certain face at work, whether or not that face reflects the way you might be feeling at a particular moment.

Even when social roles don't dictate the proper way to behave, we often manage impressions for a second reason: to accomplish personal goals. You might, for example, dress up for a visit to traffic court in the hope that your front (responsible citizen) will convince the judge to treat you sympathetically. You might act sociable to your neighbors so they will agree to your request that they keep their dog off your lawn. We also try to create a desired impression to achieve one or more of the social needs described in Chapter 1: affection, inclusion, control, and so on. For instance, you might act more friendly and lively than you feel upon meeting a new person, so that you will appear likable. You could sigh and roll your eyes when arguing politics with a classmate to gain an advantage in an argument. You might smile and preen to show the attractive stranger at a party that you would like to get better acquainted. In situations like these you aren't being deceptive as much as putting "your best foot forward."

All these examples show that it is difficult—even impossible—*not* to create impressions. After all, you have to send *some* sort of message. If you don't act friendly when meeting a stranger, you have to act aloof, indifferent, hostile, or in some other manner. If you don't act businesslike, you have to behave in an alternative way: casual, goofy, or whatever. Often the question isn't whether or not to present a face to others; the question is only which face to present.

How Do We Manage Impressions?

How do we create a public face? In an age when technology provides many options for communicating, the answer depends in part on the communication channel chosen.

FACE-TO-FACE IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT   In face-to-face interaction, communicators can manage their front in three ways: manner, appearance, and setting.[72] *Manner* consists of a communicator's words and nonverbal actions.

Not all messages are about identity,
but identity is part of all messages.

Michael L. Hecht

Physicians, for example, display a wide variety of manners as they conduct physical examinations. Some are friendly and conversational, whereas others adopt a brusque and impersonal approach. Still others are polite but businesslike. Much of a communicator's manner comes from what he or she says. A doctor who remembers details about your interests and hobbies is quite different from one who sticks to clinical questions. Along with the content of speech, nonverbal behaviors play a big role in creating impressions. A doctor who greets you with a friendly smile and a handshake comes across quite differently from one who gives nothing more than a curt nod. The same principle holds in personal relationships. Your manner plays a major role in shaping how others view you. Chapters 3 and 5 will describe in detail how your words and nonverbal behaviors create impressions. Because you *have* to speak and act, the question isn't whether or not your manner sends messages; rather, the question is whether or not these messages will be intentional.

Along with manner, a second dimension of impression management is *appearance*—the personal items people use to shape an image. Sometimes appearance is part of creating a professional image. A physician's white lab coat and a police officer's uniform both set the wearer apart as someone special. A tailored suit or a rumpled outfit create very different impressions in the business world. Off the job, clothing is just as important. We choose clothing that sends a message about ourselves, sometimes trendy and sometimes traditional. Some people dress in ways that accent their sexuality, whereas others hide it. Clothing can say "I'm an athlete," "I'm wealthy," or "I'm an environmentalist." Along with dress, other aspects of appearance play a strong role in impression management. Are you suntanned or pale? What is your hair style?

A third way to manage impressions is through the choice of *setting*—physical items we use to influence how others view us. Consider the artifacts that people use to decorate the space where they live. For example, the posters and other items a college student uses to decorate her dorm room function as a kind of "who I am" statement.[73] In modern Western society the automobile is a major part of impression management. This explains why many people lust after cars that are far more expensive and powerful than they really need. A sporty convertible or fancy imported coupe doesn't just get drivers from one place to another: It also makes statements about the kind of people they are. The physical setting we choose and the way we arrange it are other important ways to manage impressions. What colors do you choose for the place you live? What artwork? What music do you play? Of course, we choose a setting that we enjoy; but in many cases we create an environment that will present the desired front to others. If you doubt this fact, just recall the last time you straightened up the house before important guests arrived. Backstage you might be comfortable with a messy place, but your public front—at least to some people—is quite different.

"I loved your E-mail, but I thought you'd be older."

IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT IN MEDIATED COMMUNICATION   At first glance, computer-mediated communication (CMC) seems to have limited potential for identity management. E-mail messages, for example, appear to lack the "richness" of other channels. They don't convey the postures, gestures, or facial expressions that are an important part of face-to-face communication. They even lack the vocal information available in telephone messages. These limitations might seem to make it harder to create and manage an identity when communicating via computer.

Recently, though, communication scholars have begun to recognize that what is missing in computer-mediated communication can actually be an *advantage* for communicators who want to manage the impressions they make.[74] E-mail authors can edit their messages until they create just the desired impression.[75] They can choose the desired level of clarity or ambiguity, seriousness or humor, logic or emotion. Unlike face-to-face communication, electronic correspondence allows a sender to say difficult things without forcing the receiver to respond immediately, and it permits the receiver to ignore a message rather than give an unpleasant response. Options like these show that CMC can serve as a tool for impression management at least as well as face-to-face communication.

In CMC, communicators have much greater control over what kinds of information to reveal or hide. A Web page designer who doesn't want to be judged by his appearance (too young/old, not physically attractive, male or female) can hide or manipulate these characteristics in ways that aren't possible in face-to-face settings. A telecommuter working at home can close a big deal via computer while chomping on an apple, muttering about the client, or even belching—none of which is recommended in face-to-face interaction!

Along with providing greater control over *what* to say, mediated channels give communicators greater control over *how* to shape a message in ways that enhance the management of their own identity and preserve the face of others. On the Internet, it's possible to shape a message until it creates just the desired impression. You can edit remarks to get just the right tone of sincerity, humor, irony, or concern—or not send any message at all, if that is the best way to maintain face.

Some statistics from a survey by the Pew Internet and American Life Project reveals how much people—especially younger ones—manage their identities on the Web. Fifty-six percent of online teens had more than one screen name or e-mail address, and many reported that they used some of these names to hide their real identities from strangers, and even friends. Roughly a quarter of the online teens said they had given false information about themselves in e-mails or instant messages.[76]

Recent research has revealed that communicators who are concerned with impression management don't always prefer computer-mediated channels. People are generally comfortable with face-to-face interaction when they feel confident that others support the image they want to present. On the other hand, people are more likely to prefer mediated channels when their own self-presentation is threatened.[77]

Impression Management and Honesty

After reading this far, you might think that impression management sounds like an academic label for manipulation or phoniness. If the perceived self is the "real" you, it might seem that any behavior that contradicts it would be dishonest.

CULTURAL IDIOM

straightened up: cleaned and/or organized

"richness": completeness

Public Selves on Parade

But in any case he took care to avoid catching anyone's eye. First of all, he had to make it clear to those potential companions of his holiday that they were of no concern to him whatsoever. He stared through them, round them, over them—eyes lost in space. The beach might have been empty. If by chance a ball was thrown his way, he looked surprised; then let a smile of amusement lighten his face (Kindly Preedy), looked round dazed to see that there were people on the beach, tossed it back with a smile to himself and not a smile at the people, and then resumed carelessly his nonchalant survey of space.

But it was time to institute a parade, the parade of the Ideal Preedy. By devious handling he gave any who wanted to look a chance to see the title of his book—a Spanish translation of Homer, classic thus, but not daring, cosmopolitan too—and then gathered together his beach-wrap and bag into a neat sand-resistant pile (Methodical and Sensible Preedy), rose slowly to stretch and ease his huge frame (Big-Cat Preedy), and tossed aside his sandals (Carefree Preedy, after all).

William Sansom
A Contest of Ladies

UNDERSTANDING COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY
VIRTUAL REALITY: WHO AM WE?

This provocative piece describes the world of MUDs, a type of online gaming where players construct one or sometimes many identities. It extends the notion that we have multiple selves, and raises profound questions about who we are and how we communicate with others.

In the early 1970s, the face-to-face role-playing game Dungeons and Dragons swept the game culture. The term "dungeon" persisted in the high-tech culture to connote a virtual place. So when virtual spaces were created that many computer users could share and collaborate within, they were deemed Multi-User Dungeons or MUDs, a new kind of social virtual reality. In MUDs, virtual characters converse with each other, exchange gestures, express emotions, win and lose virtual money, and rise and fall in social status. A virtual character can also die.

A 26-year-old clerical worker says, "I'm not one thing, I'm many things. Each part gets to be more fully expressed in MUDs than in the real world. So even though I play more than one self on MUDs, I feel more like 'myself' when I'm MUDding." In real life, this woman sees her world as too narrow to allow her to manifest certain aspects of the person she feels herself to be. Creating screen personae is thus an opportunity for self-expression, leading to her feeling more like her true self when decked out in an array of virtual masks.

As a new social experience, MUDs pose many psychological questions: If a persona in a role-playing game drops defenses that the player in real life has been unable to abandon, what effect does this have? What if a person enjoys success in some area (say, flirting) that the player has not been able to achieve?

Doug is a Midwestern college junior. He plays four characters distributed across three different MUDs. One is a seductive woman. One is a macho, cowboy type whose self-description stresses that he is a "Marlboros rolled in the T-shirt sleeve kind of guy." The third is a rabbit of unspecified gender who wanders its MUD introducing people to each other, a character he calls Carrot. Doug says, "Carrot is so low-key that people let it be around while they are having private conversations. So I think of Carrot as my passive, voyeuristic character." Doug's fourth character is one that he plays only on a MUD in which all the characters are furry animals. "I'd rather not even talk about that character because my anonymity there is very important to me,"Doug says. "Let's just say that on FurryMUDs I feel like a sexual tourist."

Stewart, a 23-year-old physics graduate student, uses MUDs to have experiences he can't imagine for himself in RL [Real Life]. His only friend is his roommate, another physics student whom he describes as even more reclusive than himself. He has had heart trouble since he was a child; one small rebellion, a ski trip when he was a college freshman, put him in the hospital for a week. He has lived life within a small compass.

Stewart is logged on to one MUD or another for at least 40 hours a week. It seems misleading to call what he does there playing. He spends his time constructing a life that is more expansive than the one he lives in physical reality. Stewart, who has traveled very little and has never been to Europe, explains with delight that his favorite MUD, although played in English, is physically located on a computer in Germany and has many European players.

On the German MUD, Stewart shaped a character named Achilles, but he asks his MUD friends to call him Stewart as much as possible. He wants to feel that his real self exists somewhere between Stewart and Achilles. He wants to feel that his MUD life is part of his real life. Stewart insists that he does not role play, but that MUDs simply allow him to be a better version of himself.

Beyond expanding his social world, MUDs have brought Stewart the only romance and intimacy he has ever known. Achilles met Winterlight, a character played by one of the three female players on that MUD. Stewart, who has known little success in dating and romantic relationships, was able to charm this desirable player.

The intimacy Achilles experienced during his courtship of Winterlight is unknown to Stewart in other contexts. Finally, Achilles asked for Winterlight's hand. When she accepted, they had a formal engagement ceremony on the MUD.

In real life, Stewart felt constrained by his health problems, his shyness and social isolation, and his narrow economic straits. In the MUD, he bypassed these obstacles, at least temporarily.

Gender-swapping on MUDs is not a small part of the game action. Case, a 34-year-old industrial designer who is happily married to a co-worker, is currently MUDding as a female character. Case describes his RL persona as a nice guy, a "Jimmy Stewart type like my father."He says that in general he likes his father and he likes himself, but he feels he pays a price for his low-key ways. In particular, he feels at a loss when it comes to confrontation, both at home and in business dealings. Case likes MUDding as a female because it makes it easier for him to be aggressive and confrontational. Case plays several online "Katharine Hepburn types,"strong, dynamic, "out there" women who remind him of his mother, "who says exactly what's on her mind and is a take-no-prisoners sort."For Case, if you are assertive as a man, it is coded as "being a bastard."If you are assertive as a woman, it is coded as "modern and together."

Some women who play male characters desire invisibility or permission to be more outspoken or aggressive. "I was born in the South and taught that girls don't speak up to disagree with men,"says Zoe, a 34-year-old woman who plays male and female characters on four MUDs. "I got really good at playing a man, so good that whoever was on the system would accept me as a man and talk to me as a man. So, other guys talked to Ulysses guy to guy. It was very validating. All those years I was paranoid about how men talked about women. Or I thought I was paranoid. Then I got a chance to be a guy and I saw that I wasn't paranoid at all."

Virtual sex, whether in MUDs or in a private room on a commercial online service, consists of two or more players typing descriptions of physical actions, verbal statements, and emotional reactions for their characters. In cyberspace, this activity is not only common but, for many people, it is the centerpiece of their online experience.

Martin and Beth, both 41, have been married for 19 years and have four children. Early in their marriage, Martin regretted not having had more time for sexual experimentation and had an extramarital affair. The affair hurt Beth deeply, and Martin decided he never wanted to do it again. When Martin discovered MUDs he was thrilled. "I really am monogamous. I'm really not interested in something

outside my marriage. But being able to have, you know, a [virtual] romance is kind of cool."

Martin decided to tell Beth about his MUD sex life and she decided to tell him that she does not mind. Beth has made a conscious decision to consider Martin's sexual relationships on MUDs as more like his reading an erotic novel than like his having a rendezvous in a motel room. For Martin, his online affairs are a way to fill the gaps of his youth, to broaden his sexual experience without endangering his marriage.

Other partners of virtual adulterers do not share Beth's accepting attitude. Janet, 24, a secretary at a New York law firm, is very upset by her husband TIm's sex life in cyber-space. This distressed wife struggles to decide whether her husband is unfaithful when his persona collaborates on writing real-time erotica with another persona in cyberspace. And beyond this, should it make a difference if unbeknownst to the husband his cyberspace mistress turns out to be a 19-year-old male college freshman? What if "she" is an infirm 80-year-old man in a nursing home? And even more disturb-ing, what if she is a 12-year-old girl? Or a 12-year-old boy?

[Virtual sex] poses the question of what is at the heart of sex and fidelity. Is it the physical action? Is it emotional intimacy with someone other than one's primary partner? Is infidelity in the head or in the body? Is it in the desire or in the action? What constitutes the violation of trust?

And once we take virtuality seriously as a way of life, we need a new language for talking about the simplest things. Each individual must ask: What is the nature of my relationships? What are the limits of my responsibility? And even more basic: Who and what am I?

People can get lost in virtual worlds. Some are tempted to think of life in cyberspace as insignificant, as escape or meaningless diversion. It is not. Our experiences there are serious play. We belittle them at our risk. We must understand the dynamics of virtual experience both to foresee who might be in danger and to put these experiences to best use. Without a deep understanding of the many selves that we express in the virtual, we cannot use our experiences there to enrich the real.

Sherry Turkle

There certainly are situations where impression management is dishonest. A manipulative date who pretends to be affectionate in order to gain sexual favors is clearly unethical and deceitful. So are job applicants who lie about academic records to get hired or salespeople who pretend to be dedicated to customer service when their real goal is to make a quick buck. But managing impressions doesn't necessarily make you a liar. In fact, it is almost impossible to imagine how we could communicate effectively without making decisions about which front to present in one situation or another. It would be ludicrous for you to act the same way with strangers as you do with close friends, and nobody would show the same face to a two-year-old as to an adult.

Each of us has a repertoire of faces—a cast of characters—and part of being a competent communicator is choosing the best role for the situation. Consider a few examples:

- You offer to teach a friend a new skill: playing the guitar, operating a computer program, or sharpening a tennis backhand. Your friend is making slow progress with the skill, and you find yourself growing impatient.
- At a party with a companion, you meet someone you find very attractive, and you are pretty sure that the feeling is mutual. You feel an obligation to spend most of your time with the person with whom you came, but the opportunity here is very appealing.
- At work you face a belligerent customer. You don't believe that anyone has the right to treat you this way.
- A friend or family member makes a joke about your appearance that hurts your feelings. You aren't sure whether to make an issue of the remark or pretend that it doesn't bother you.

In each of these situations—and in countless others every day—you have a choice about how to act. It is an oversimplification to say that there is only one honest way to behave in each circumstance and that every other response would be insincere and dishonest. Instead, impression management involves deciding which face—which part of yourself—to reveal. For example, when teaching a

ETHICAL CHALLENGE

HONESTY AND MULTIPLE IDENTITIES

Your text argues that presenting different identities to the world isn't inherently dishonest. Nonetheless, there are certainly cases when it is deceitful to construct an identity that doesn't match your private self.

You can explore the ethics of multiple identities by identifying two situations from your life:

1. A time when you presented a public identity that didn't match your private self in a manner that wasn't unethical.
2. A situation (real or hypothetical) in which you have presented or could present a dishonest identity.

Based on the situations you and your classmates present, develop a code of ethics that identifies the boundary between ethical and unethical identity management.

new skill you can choose to display the patient instead of the impatient side of yourself. In the same way, at work you have the option of acting hostile or non-defensive in difficult situations. With strangers, friends, or family you can choose whether or not to disclose your feelings. Which face to show to others is an important decision, but in any case you are sharing a real part of yourself. You may not be revealing *everything*—but, as you will learn in Chapter 6, complete self-disclosure is rarely appropriate.

SUMMARY

Perceptions of others are always selective and are often distorted. The chapter began by describing how personal narratives shape our perceptions. It then outlined several perceptual errors that can affect the way we view and communicate with others. Along with universal psychological influences, cultural factors affect perceptions. Increased empathy is a valuable tool for increasing understanding of others and hence communicating more effectively with them. Perception checking is one tool for increasing the accuracy of perceptions and for increasing empathy.

Perceptions of one's self are just as subjective as perceptions of others, and they influence communication at least as much. Although individuals are born with some innate personality characteristics, the self-concept is shaped dramatically by communication with others, as well as by cultural factors. Once established, the self-concept can lead us to create self-fulfilling prophecies that determine how we behave and how others respond to us.

Impression management consists of strategic communication designed to influence others' perceptions of an individual. Impression management operates when we seek, consciously or unconsciously, to present one or more public faces to others. These faces may be different from the private, spontaneous behavior that occurs outside of others' presence. Identity management is usually collaborative: Communication goes most smoothly when we communicate in ways that support others' faces, and they support ours. Some communicators are high self-monitors who are highly conscious of their own behavior, whereas others are low self-monitors who are less aware of how their words and actions affect others.

Impression management occurs for two reasons. In many cases it aims at following social rules and conventions. In other cases it aims at achieving a variety of content and relational goals. In either case, communicators engage in creating impressions by managing their manner, appearance, and the settings in which they interact with others. Although impression management might seem manipulative, it can be an authentic form of communication. Because each person has a variety of faces that he or she can present, choosing which one to present need not be dishonest.

KEY TERMS

empathy *43*
face *58*
facework *58*
impression
    management *58*
narratives *35*
perceived self *58*
perception
    checking *46*
personality *54*

presenting self *58*
reflected appraisal *49*
self-concept *48*
self-esteem *48*
self-fulfilling
    prophecy *55*
self-serving bias *36*
significant others *49*
sympathy *44*

ACTIVITIES

1. **Exploring Narratives** Think about a situation where relational harmony is due to you and the other people involved sharing the same narrative. Then think about another situation where you and the other person use different narratives to describe the same situation. What are the consequences of having different narratives in this situation?

2. **Experiencing Another Culture** Spend at least an hour in a culture that is unfamiliar to you and where you are a minority. Visit an area where another cultural, age, or ethnic group is the majority. Attend a meeting or patronize an establishment where you are in the minority. Observe how communication practices differ from those of your own culture. Based on your experience, discuss what you can do to facilitate communication with people from other cultural backgrounds whom you may encounter in your everyday life. (As you develop a list of ideas, realize that what you might consider helpful behavior could make communicators from different cultures even more uncomfortable.)

3. **Empathy Exercise** Choose a disagreement you presently have with another person or group. The disagreement might be a personal one—such as an argument about how to settle a financial problem or who is to blame for a present state of affairs—or it might be a dispute over a contemporary public issue, such as the right of women to obtain abortions on demand or the value of capital punishment.

    1. In three hundred words or so, describe your side of the issue. State why you believe as you do, just as if you were presenting your position to an important jury.

    2. Now take three hundred words or so to describe in the first-person singular the other person's perspective of the same issue. For instance, if you are a religious person, write this section as if you were an atheist: For a short while get in touch with how the other person feels and thinks.

    3. Now show the description you wrote to your "opponent," the person whose beliefs are different from yours. Have that person read your account and correct any statements that don't reflect his or her position accurately. Remember: You're doing this so that you can more clearly understand how the issue looks to the other person.

    4. Make any necessary corrections in the account you wrote, and again show it to your partner. When your partner agrees that you understand his or her position, have your partner sign your paper to indicate this.

    5. Now record your conclusions to this experiment. Has this perceptual shift made any difference in how you view the issue or how you feel about your partner?

4. **Perception Checking Practice** Practice your perception-checking ability by developing three-part verifications for the following situations:

    1. You made what you thought was an excellent suggestion to an instructor. The instructor looked uninterested but said she would check on the matter right away. Three weeks have passed, and nothing has changed.

    2. A neighbor and good friend has not responded to your "Good morning" for three days in a row. This person is usually friendly.

    3. You haven't received the usual weekly phone call from the folks back home in over a month. The last time you spoke, you had an argument about where to spend the holidays.

    4. An old friend with whom you have shared the problems of your love life for years has recently changed when around you: The formerly casual hugs and kisses have become longer and stronger, and the occasions where you "accidentally" brush up against one another have become more frequent.

5. **Identifying Your Identities** Keep a one-day log listing the identities you create in different situations: at school, at work, with strangers, various family members, and different friends. For each identity,

    1. Describe the persona you are trying to project (e.g., "responsible son or daughter," "laid-back friend," "attentive student.")

    2. Explain how you communicate to promote this identity. What kinds of things do you say (or not say)? How do you act?

FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

Print Resources

For a more detailed list of readings about perception and the self, see the CD-ROM that came with this book, and the *Understanding Human Communication* Web site at www.oup.com/us/uhc.

Bolter, David J. "Identity," in Thomas Swiss, ed., *Unspun: Key Concepts for Understanding the World Wide Web.* New York: NYU Press, 2000.

This essay points out ways in which we can create desired identities on the Internet in ways that differ fundamentally from identity management in face-to-face relationships.

Cupach, William R., and Sandra Metts. *Facework.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994.

The authors summarize research on how communicators manage their own identity and maintain the face of others, especially in problematic situations.

Gergen, Kenneth. *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life.* New York: Basic Books, 1992.

Gergen's thesis is that in today's fast-paced society, traditional notions of the self are being crowded out by a variety of alternatives. Chapter 6, "From Self to Relationship," describes how creating (and communicating) any self-image one desires is becoming increasingly possible in emerging postmodern society.

Goss, Blaine. *The Psychology of Human Communication,* 2nd ed. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1995.

A brief, readable introduction to the perceptual factors that affect human communication. Chapters focus selectively on topics, including the physiology of perception, memory, and the self-concept.

Ickes, William E., ed. *Empathic Accuracy.* New York: Guilford, 1997.

This edited volume offers an array of scholarly articles describing the nature and importance of empathic accuracy. Chapters deal with topics including the evolutionary and social factors that contribute to empathy, the psychological characteristics and influences that affect empathic ability, and the relationship of empathy and gender.

Macrae, C. Neil, Charles Stangor, and Miles Hewstone, eds. *Stereotypes and Stereotyping.* New York: Guilford, 1996.

This collection of scholarly works provides a comprehensive look at stereotyping. Chapters deal with the formation and development of stereotypes, how stereotyping operates in everyday interaction, and how to minimize the harmful effects of stereotyping.

O'Brien, Jodi, and Peter Kollock, eds. *The Production of Reality: Essays and Readings on Social Interaction,* 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2001.

Part III of this fascinating collection includes six selections describing how the self is a product of social interaction. Part IV offers five readings illustrating how the self-fulfilling prophecy operates in a variety of contexts ranging from first impressions in social situations to mental institutions.

Opposing Viewpoints series. San Diego: Greenhaven Press.

This series of pamphlets provides balanced, informative viewpoints on both sides of a series of hotly debated topics that often generate strong emotions. From a communication perspective, the contrasting views can serve as empathy-builders by illuminating perspectives that differ from one's own.

Walther, Joseph B., and Malcom R. Parks. "Cues Filtered Out, Cues Filtered In: Computer-Mediated Communication and Relationships," in Mark L. Knapp and John A. Daly, eds., *Handbook of Interpersonal Communication,* 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002.

The authors point out some ways in which computer-mediated communication differs from face-to-face interaction. A section of this reading focuses on how identity management operates in online relationships.

Feature Films

For descriptions of each film below and descriptions of other movies that illustrate nonverbal communication, see the CD-ROM that came with this book, and the Understanding Human Communication Web site at www.oup.com/us/uhc.

Building Empathy

Freaky Friday (2003). Rated PG.

Through a freak event, mother Tess Coleman (Jamie Lee Curtis) and her teenage daughter Annabell (Lindsay Lohan) find themselves trapped in each other's body. Before Tess steps into Annabell's world, she has little empathy for the issues in her daughter's life, such as Annabell's struggles with a classmate who bullies her and a teacher who treats her unfairly. Once Tess spends time in Annabell's shoes, she realizes that she hasn't been listening to or understanding her daughter—and that some of Annabell's "whining" was actually legitimate complaining about unjust treatment. Likewise, when Annabell becomes Tess for a few days, she learns that it's not easy to balance the many responsibilities and demands of adulthood, parenthood, and a career.

Forgoing an Identity

Real Women Have Curves (2002). Rated PG-13.

Ana (America Ferrera) is overweight and sensitive about her appearance. Her mother, Carmen (Lupe Ontiveros), calls her daughter "Fatty" both to her face and in front of others. As she comes of age, Ana decides her physical appearance is not a problem to be solved but a fact to be celebrated. She realizes that her mother's criticisms come from her own lack of self-esteem.

Once Anna comes to grips with her appearance, she "evangelizes" the other women in the dress factory where she works. In a humorous and poignant scene, Ana and her coworkers strip down to their underwear on a hot day in the factory and compare notes about their weight, stretch marks, and cellulite. Ana declares, "Ladies, look at how beautiful we are"—and her colleagues revel in that revelation.

This story shows that appraisals from and comparisons with others can lead to low self-esteem, but also that it's possible to reject negative messages and change one's self-appraisal.

Whale Rider (2002). Rated PG-13.

In present-day New Zealand, twelve-year-old Pai (Keisha Castle-Hughes) is growing up in an all-Maori community. As leader of the people, her grandfather Koro's most important task is to find and train their next chief. Maori tradition mandates that chiefs are always males, but Pai believes that she could become the next leader. Despite his love for his granddaughter, Koro fiercely resists this ambition. He responds to Pai's determination by almost constantly criticizing her and questioning her achievements. The harder Pai tries, the more critical her grandfather becomes. His judgments cause Pai great pain.

From a sociological angle, the film captures the challenge of adapting long-standing traditions to social change. But from a communication perspective, the film illustrates that it is difficult but possible to create a unique identity in the face of rejection by a powerful significant other with different ideas about who we should be.

Perception Is Subjective

Shallow Hal (2001). Rated PG-13.

Hal Larsen (Jack Black) is an aging, out-of-shape lounge lizard who foolishly thinks he can seduce attractive women. After being hypnotized by self-help guru Tony Robbins, Hal begins to look beyond appearances and see the inner beauty of people. When Hal first sees Rosemary (Gwyneth Paltrow), her beauty takes his breath away. But whereas Hal sees Rosemary as a willowy beauty, in reality she is a grossly obese woman who draws snickers and stares from clear-eyed spectators.

Although the film will never be considered a classic, it does illustrate in an exaggerated way that perception is subjective, showing that what we think about one another (and ourselves) is more powerful than a more objective perspective. The film also illustrates the power we have to shape one another's self concept: As Hal treats Rosemary well, she starts to feel better about herself.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Class Act (1992). Rated PG-13.

Class Act follows the lives of brilliant, nerdish high school student Duncan Pinderhughes (Christopher Reid) and delinquent Blade Brown (Christopher Martin), who has been given the alternative of staying in school or going to jail. A mixup in school records puts Pinderhughes into the remedial program with troublemakers and losers, while Brown winds up in the gifted students.

The story is a case study in self-fulfilling prophecies: After the students are labeled, they wind up matching the expectations that are imposed on them. Because Brown has the reputation of being smart, he gets better grades no matter what he does. By contrast, when Pinderhughes is labeled as a loser, he gets poor evaluations no matter how hard he tries.

Pay It Forward (2000). Rated PG-13.

Trevor (Haley Joel Osment) is a junior high schooler whose teacher, Mr. Simonet (Kevin Spacey), gives a provocative assignment: Think of an idea that could change the world. Trevor's idea is simple but profound: You have to do something that really helps people. It has to be something they can't do by themselves. The recipients of the favor "pay it forward" by doing the same thing for three other people.

Trevor's "pay it forward" acts become powerful self-fulfilling prophecies, helping to transform formerly hopeless and cynical people into powerful agents who really do help make the world a better place.

Identity Management

In and Out (1997). Rated PG-13.

Howard Brackett (Kevin Kline) is a high school English teacher in an idyllic small Indiana town. Brackett is dumbfounded to hear one of his former students accept an Oscar by publicly thanking him and then announcing—to most of the world—that Brackett is gay.

Not surprisingly, pandemonium ensues as Brackett feverishly defends his heterosexual identity, often with macho posturing that is so overdone that it becomes a parody of traditional male behavior. This lighthearted comedy provides an entertaining illustration of how much communication is dedicated to managing one's identity.

You've Got Mail (1999). Rated PG.

Joe Fox (Tom Hanks) and Kathleen Kelly (Meg Ryan) are thirty-something New Yorkers who detest each other—at least in person. Face-to-face, Kathleen despises Joe because his discount bookstore chain threatens to bankrupt Kathleen's family-owned bookshop. She also hates Joe's arrogant, self-absorbed style of communicating.

But in cyberspace, Joe seems like a different person. Unknown to both Joe and Kathleen, they have been communicating anonymously for months after meeting in an online chat room, using the names "NY152" and "Shopgirl." The e-mail messages Joe sends Kathleen are tender and self-disclosing. She falls for NY152 without knowing that the same man she can't stand in person writes the enchanting messages.

For students of communication, this romance demonstrates that each of us has many identities and that the way we present ourselves can shape the fate of our relationships.