Perception of Self and Others

When you've finished this chapter, you will be able to:

- Describe the perception process.

- Explain how self-perception is formed and maintained.

- Employ communication strategies to improve self-perceptions.

- Examine how we form perceptions of others.

- Employ strategies to improve your perceptions of others.

MindTap

Start with a quick warm-up activity.

Donna approached her friend Camille and said, "David and I are having a really tough time. I think he's going to break up with me."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Donna," replied Camille. "What's up?"

"Well, did you notice how quiet he was at the restaurant last night? And, on top of that, he hasn't responded to any of my texts today. He must be really mad at me."

"Yeah, he was quiet, but I just thought he was tired from the all-nighter he pulled finishing his history paper. And didn't he have to go to work really early today? You know he's not allowed to respond to texts at work."

"Yeah."

"So, if his quietness at dinner is the only thing you noticed, I think you may be jumping to a wrong conclusion," Camille said.

"Really? Do you think so? I just can't figure out what he's thinking. What do you think I should do?"

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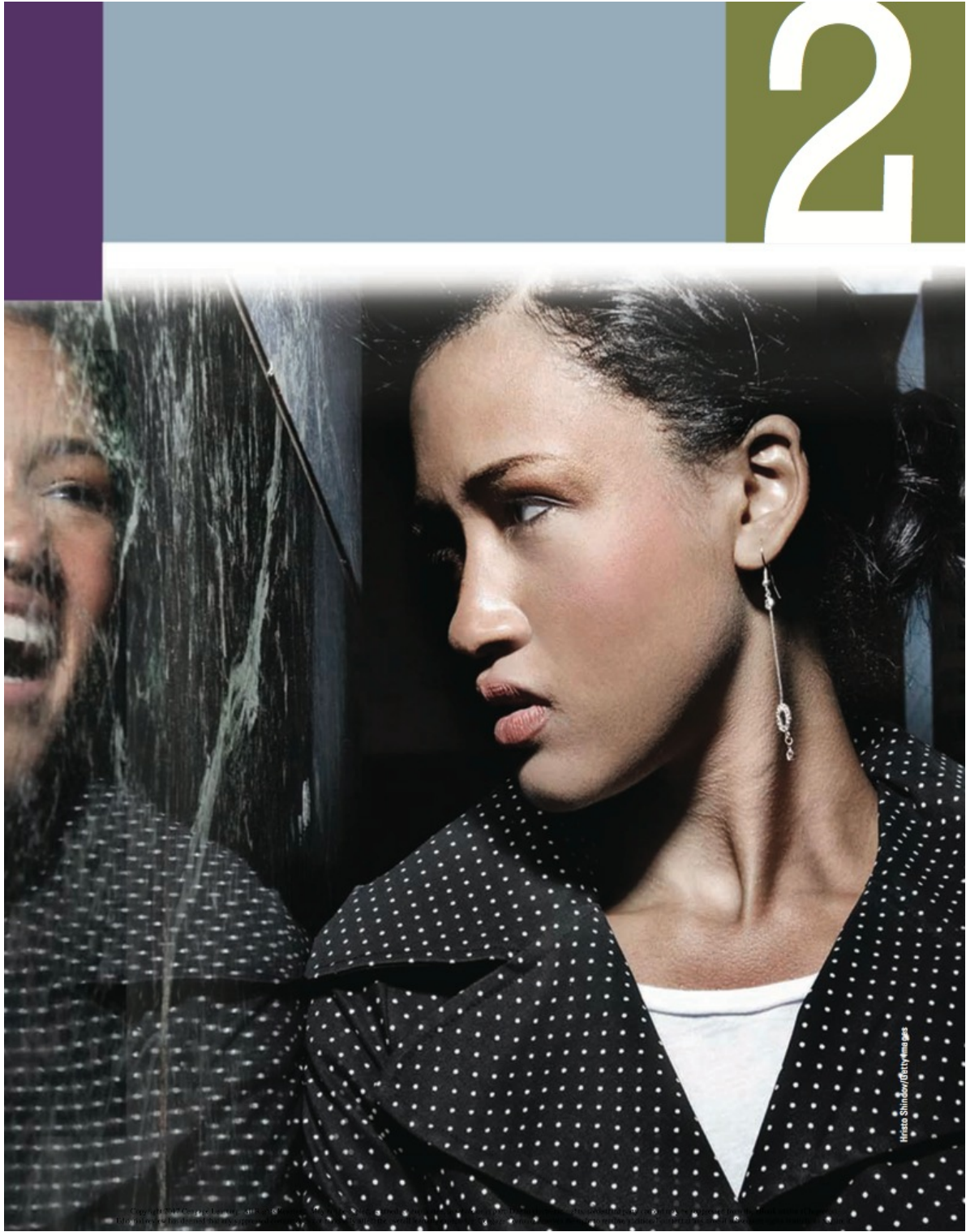
MindTap

Read, highlight, and take notes online.

social perception
who we believe ourselves and others to be

Two different women had two different interpretations of the same man's behavior. Who's right? Is David about to break up with Donna or is he just tired? **Social perception**—who we believe ourselves and others to be—influences how we communicate. To explain how, we begin this chapter by reviewing the basics of sensory perception. Then we explore the role communication plays in forming self-perceptions. From there, we discuss how we form perceptions of others and offer communication strategies for improving them. Ultimately, what you learn in this chapter will equip you to make conscious choices to promote a positive self-concept and self-esteem, as well as foster positive interactions and relationships with others.

The Perception Process

perception
the process of selectively attending and assigning meaning to information

Perception is the process of selectively attending and assigning meaning to information (Gibson, 1966). At times, our perceptions of the world, other people, and ourselves agree with the perceptions of others. At other times, our perceptions differ significantly from those of others. For each person, however, perception becomes our reality. What one person sees, hears, and interprets is real and considered true to that person. When our perceptions differ from those with whom we interact, sharing meaning becomes more challenging. So how does perception work? Essentially, the brain selects some of the information it receives from the senses (sensory stimuli), organizes the information, and then interprets it.

Attention and Selection

APPLY IT

Pick a topic that interests you and do a Google search of it. How many "hits" does it generate? Can you imagine perusing all of these sites? Why or why not?

MindTap

Although we are constantly exposed to a barrage of sensory stimuli, we focus our attention on relatively little of it. Just think about how many TV channels you watch regularly compared to the number of channels offered. Or consider how many Web sites pop up when you do an Internet search. Can you imagine visiting all of them? Because we cannot focus on everything we see and hear all the time, we choose what stimuli to concentrate on based on our needs, interests, and expectations.

Needs We choose to pay attention to information that meets our biological and psychological needs. When we go to class, attend a workshop, or participate in a meeting, how well we pay attention usually depends on whether we believe the information is relevant. Our brains communicate intrapersonally by asking such questions as, "Will what I learn here help me in school, in the work world, and/or in my personal life?"

Interests We are likely to pay attention to information that piques our interests. Our interests are piqued when we see its relevance to us or those we care about (Sellnow, et al., 2014). For instance, when we hear or see a news story about a crisis event or natural disaster, we are more likely to pay attention when it is happening in our local community.

Expectations Finally, we are likely to see what we expect to see and miss what violates our expectations. Take a quick look at the phrases in the triangles in Figure 2.1. If you have never seen these triangles, you probably read "Paris in the springtime," "Once in a lifetime," and "Bird in the hand." Now take a closer look. Do you see the repeated words? They are easy to miss because we don't *expect* to see the word repeated.
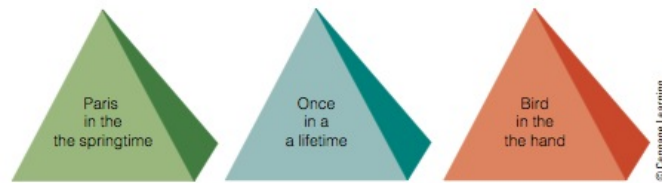
Figure 2.1

Expectations and perception

Organization

Through the process of attention and selection we reduce the number of stimuli our brains must process. Still, the number of stimuli we attend to at any moment is substantial. So our brains organize these stimuli using the principles of simplicity and pattern.

Simplicity If the stimuli we attend to are complex, our brains simplify them into some commonly recognized form. We simplify both the nonverbal and verbal messages we receive. Based on a quick look at what someone is wearing, how she is standing, and the expression on her face, we may perceive her as a business executive, a doctor, or a soccer mom. Similarly, after Tony's boss described four major strengths and two minor areas for improvement during a performance review, Tony simplified the message by saying to his coworker, Jerry, "Well, I'd better shape up or I'm going to get fired!"

Pattern The brain also makes sense of complex stimuli by relating them to things it already recognizes. For example, when we see a crowd of people, instead of perceiving each individual, we may focus on sex and "see" men and women or on age and "see" children, teens, and adults.

Interpretation

As the brain selects and organizes information, it also assigns meaning to it (Photo 2.1). Look at these three sets of numbers. What are they?

 A. 631 7348

 B. 285 37 5632

 C. 4632 7364 2596 2174

If you are used to seeing similar sets of numbers every day, you might interpret A as a telephone number, B as a Social Security number, and C as a credit card number. But your ability to interpret these numbers depends on your familiarity with the patterns. A French person may not recognize *631 7348* as a phone number since the pattern for phone numbers in France is: *0x xx xx xx xx.*

Throughout this chapter, we apply this basic information about perception to the study of social perceptions of self and others as they influence and are influenced by communication.

Photo 2.1 What assumptions do you make about this person based on how you organize and interpret what you see? Why?

Dual Processing

At this point, you may be thinking, "Hey, I don't go through all of these steps. I just automatically 'understand' what's going on." If so, you are right. Most of the perceptual processing we do happens subconsciously (Baumeister, 2005). This **automatic processing** is a subconscious approach to making sense of what we encounter. In other words, we use **heuristics**, which are our short-cut *rules of thumb* for understanding how to perceive something based on past experiences with similar stimuli. Consider, for example, sitting at a red light. When it turns green, you go. You probably don't consciously think about taking your foot off the brake and applying it to the gas pedal.

But what happens when we encounter things that are out of the realm of our normal experiences or expectations? Then we must exert conscious effort to make sense of what is going on. **Conscious processing** is a slow deliberative process of examining and reflecting about the stimuli. Remember when you were first learning to drive? It took a lot of concentration to figure out what was happening on the road and how you were supposed to react. You probably thought carefully about doing things like taking your foot off the brake and applying it to the gas pedal when the light turned green.

Whether we engage in automatic or conscious processing, perception influences and is influenced by communication in a number of ways. The rest of this chapter is devoted to how we form perceptions of ourselves and others and the role communication plays in each.

automatic processing
a subconscious approach to making sense of what we encounter

heuristics
short-cut rules of thumb for understanding how to perceive something based on past experience with similar stimuli

conscious processing
a slow deliberative process of examining and reflecting about the stimuli

Perception of Self

Self-perception is the overall view we have of ourselves, which includes both self-concept and self-esteem. **Self-concept** is the perception we have of our skills, abilities, knowledge, competencies, and personality (Weiten, Dunn, & Hammer, 2012). **Self-esteem** is the evaluation we make about our personal worthiness based on our self-concept (Hewitt, 2009; Smith & Mackie, 2007). In this section, we explain how self-concept and self-esteem are formed.

self-perception
the overall view we have of ourselves, which includes both our self-concept and self-esteem

self-concept
the perception we have of our skills, abilities, knowledge, competencies, and personality

self-esteem
the evaluation we make about our personal worthiness based on our self-concept

Self-Concept

How do we decide what our skills, abilities, competencies, and personality traits are? We do so based on the interpretations we make about our personal experiences and how others react and respond to us.

Our personal experiences are critical to forming our self-concept. We cannot know if we are competent at something until we've tried doing it, and we cannot discover our personality traits until we uncover them through experience. We place a great deal of emphasis on our first experiences with particular phenomena (Bee & Boyd, 2011). When we have a positive first experience, we are likely to believe we possess the competencies and personality traits associated with that experience. So if Sonya discovers at an early age that she does well on math problems and exams, she is likely to incorporate "competent mathematician" into her self-concept. If Sonya continues to excel at math throughout her life, that part of self-concept will be reinforced and maintained.

Similarly, when our first experience is negative, we are likely to conclude we do not possess that particular skill or trait. For instance, if you get anxious and draw a blank while giving a speech for the first time, you might conclude that you are a poor public speaker. Unfortunately, once we've had a negative first experience, it will likely take more several

APPLY IT

Identify a skill you believe you are good at and one you believe you are not good at (e.g., "I am a good piano player. I am a terrible cook."). Now describe some personal experiences you've had that helped reinforce these beliefs.

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positive experiences to change our negative self-concept. So even if you succeed the second time you give a speech, it will probably take several more positive public speaking experiences for you to change your original conclusion about not being a good public speaker.

Our self-concept is also shaped by how others react and respond to us in two important ways (Weiten, Dunn, & Hammer, 2012). First, we use other people's comments to validate, reinforce, or alter our perceptions of who we think we are. For example, if during a brainstorming session, one of your co-workers says, "You're really a creative thinker," you may decide this comment fits your image of who you are, thus reinforcing your self-concept as someone who can think "outside the box."

Second, the feedback we receive from others may reveal abilities and personality characteristics we had never before associated with ourselves. For example, on the way back to campus after volunteering at the local Head Start Center, Janet commented to her friend Michael, "Gee, you're a natural with kids, they just flock to you." Michael thought about Janet's comment and similar ones he had received from others and decided to explore careers in early childhood education. Today he owns his own day care center and credits Janet with helping him recognize his natural ability to connect with preschoolers.

Not all reactions and responses have the same effect on our self-concept. For instance, reactions and responses coming from someone we respect or someone we are close to tend to be more powerful (Berk, 2012). This is especially important in families. Since self-concept begins to form early in life, information we receive from our family deeply shapes our self-concept (Photo 2.2) (Bee & Boyd, 2011). Thus, one major ethical responsibility of family members is to notice and comment on traits and abilities that help develop accurate and positive self-concepts in other family members. When Jeff's dad compliments him for keeping his bedroom clean because he is "so organized" or Carla's brother tells her she did a great job on her science project because she is "really smart," they are encouraging positive self-concepts.

As we interact with others, we also form an **ideal self-concept**, which is what we would like to be (Abel, Buff, & O'Neill, 2013). For example, although Jim may know he is not naturally athletic, in his ideal self-concept he wants to be. So he plays on an intramural basketball team, works out at the gym daily, and runs in local 5k and 10k races regularly.

ideal self-concept
what we would like to be

Photo 2.2 Our family members shape our self-concept. Can you recall a time when someone in your family praised you for something you did? Is that something you still consider yourself to be good at?

Self-Esteem

Self-concept and self-esteem are two different but related components of self-perception. Whereas self-concept is our perception of our competencies and personality traits, self-esteem is the positive or negative evaluation we attach to them. So self-esteem is not just our perception of how well or poorly we do things (self-concept), but also the importance we place on what we do well or poorly (Argyle, 2008). For instance, Mitchell believes he is an excellent piano player, a faithful friend, and good with kids. But if he doesn't value these competencies

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and traits, then he will have low self-esteem. It takes both the perception of having a competency or trait and a belief that it is valuable to produce high self-esteem.

As is the case with self-concept, self-esteem depends not only on what each individual views as worthwhile but also on the ideas, morals, and values of the family and cultural group(s) to which the individual belongs. So if Mitchell comes from a family where athletic success is valued but artistic talents are not, if he hangs out with friends who don't appreciate his piano playing, and if he lives in a society where rock guitarists (not piano players) are the superstars, then his piano-playing ability may not raise his self-esteem.

We've already noted that families are critically important to developing one's self-concept, but they are even more central to developing positive self-esteem. For example, when Jeff's dad pointed out that Jeff's room is always tidy, he also said he was proud of Jeff, which raised Jeff's self-esteem about being organized. And when Carla's brother said she did a great job on her science project, he reinforced the value their family places on being smart, which raised her self-esteem about that attribute of her self-concept. Unfortunately, in some families, negative messages repeatedly sent can create an inaccurate self-concept and damage self-esteem. Communicating blame, name-calling, and constantly pointing out shortcomings are particularly damaging to self-esteem and some people never fully overcome the damage done to them by members of their families.

Our self-esteem can affect the types of relationships we form and with whom. Individuals with high self-esteem tend to form relationships with others who reinforce their positive self-perception, and similarly, individuals with low self-esteem tend to form relationships with those who reinforce their negative self-perception (Fiore, 2011). This phenomenon plays out in unfortunate ways when a person (very often a woman) perpetually goes from one abusive relationship to another (Engel, 2005).

Bullying also damages self-esteem. Children who are just forming their self-concepts and self-esteem, and adolescents whose self-concepts and self-esteem are in transition are particularly sensitive to bullying messages. Unfortunately, **cyberbullying**—the use of technology and particularly social media to harass others in a deliberate, repeated, and hostile manner—is becoming increasingly common especially among teenagers (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, www.stopbullying.gov/cyberbullying /what-is-it/). Cyberbullying is extremely devastating to self-esteem. The effects of bullying can have long-lasting effects on self-esteem. In fact, many years after bullying incidents that occurred during childhood, people may still have inaccurate self-perceptions (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

cyberbullying
the use of technology and social media to harass others in a deliberate, repeated, and hostile manner

APPLY IT

Have you or a friend or family member experienced bullying or cyberbullying? If so, how did it affect your (or their) self-esteem?

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independent self-perceptions
based on the belief that traits and abilities are internal to the person and are universally applicable to all situations

Cultural Norms and Self-Perceptions

Cultural norms play a critical role in shaping both self-concept and self-esteem (Becker, et al., 2014). Two important ways they do so are in terms of independence/interdependence and masculinity/femininity.

In some cultures, such as the dominant American culture in the United States, people form and value independent self-perceptions. In other cultures, like the collectivist cultures of Japan and China, people form and value interdependent self-perceptions (Becker et al., 2014). **Independent self-perceptions** are based on the belief that traits and abilities are internal to the person and are universally applicable to all situations. The goal for someone with an independent self-perception is to demonstrate their abilities, competencies, characteristics, and personalities during interactions with others.

For example, if you have an independent self-concept and believe that one of your competencies is your ability to persuade others, you gain self-esteem by demonstrating your skill, convincing others, and having others praise you for it.

Interdependent self-perceptions are based on the belief that traits and abilities are specific to a particular context or relationship. The goal of people with interdependent self-perceptions is to maintain or enhance the relationship by demonstrating the appropriate abilities and personality characteristics for the situation. People with interdependent self-perceptions don't think, "I'm really persuasive," but rather, "When I am with my friends I am able to convince them to do what is good for all of us. When I am with my father I do what he believes is best for the good of our family." High self-esteem comes from knowing when to be persuasive and when to be compliant.

interdependent self-perceptions
based on the belief that traits and abilities are specific to a particular context or relationship

Cultural norms also play a role in shaping self-perception around masculinity and femininity. In the dominant culture of the United States, for instance, many people continue to expect boys to behave in "masculine" ways and girls to behave in "feminine" ways (Wood, 2007). In the past, boys in the United States were taught to base their self-esteem on their achievements, status, and income, and girls learned that their culture valued their appearance and their relationship skills. So boys and girls developed high or low self-esteem based on how well they met these criteria (Wood, 2007).

Today these cultural norms about "appropriate" characteristics and behaviors for males and females are becoming less rigid, but they do still exist and are promoted incessantly in popular culture and entertainment media. Consider just about any television sitcom. Most of them continue to portray women as the "natural" caregivers for the family, and when men attempt to perform a caregiver behavior, they often make a mess of the situation (Photo 2.3). Think about your family experiences growing up. How do they compare? Similarly, in terms of appearance, you only need to flip through the pages of any popular magazine to see the narrowly defined perceptions of what is valued as "ideal" for women and men.

incongruence
a gap between self-perception and reality

Photo 2.3 Can you think of television programs that depict men, rather than women, as competent caregivers for a family?

Some people are intimately involved in more than one cultural group. If one of the cultures encourages interdependent and/or gendered self-perceptions and the other encourages independent and/or gender neutral self-perceptions, these people may develop both types of self-perception and actually switch between them based on the cultural group they are interacting within at a given time. They are more likely to do this well when they see themselves as part of and appreciate the strengths of both cultures (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005).

Accuracy and Distortion of Self-Perceptions

The accuracy of our self-concept and self-esteem depends on the accuracy of our perceptions of our own experiences and observations, as well as how we interpret others' reactions and responses to us. All of us experience successes and failures, and all of us hear praise and criticism. Since our perceptions are more likely than our true abilities to influence our behavior, accurate self-perception is critical to competent communication. Self-perception may suffer from **incongruence** when there is a

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Photo 2.4 Who have you known that seems to have an over-inflated self-perception? Did you or do you enjoy interacting with him or her? Why or why not?

self-fulfilling prophecy
an inaccurate perception of a skill, characteristic, or situation that leads to behaviors that perpetuate that false perception as true

Photo 2.5 Have you known someone who seems to have a deflated perception of self? Did you or do you enjoy interacting with him or her? Why or why not?

gap between self-perception and reality. For example, Sean may actually possess all of the competencies and personality traits needed for effective leadership, but if he doesn't perceive himself to have these skills and characteristics, he won't step forward when leadership is needed. Likewise, Yuri is ashamed to be too assertive at work. So she doesn't voice her opinion even when the problem is in her area of expertise and could help solve a serious problem. Unfortunately, individuals tend to reinforce these incongruent self-perceptions by behaving in ways that conform to them rather than attempting to break free from them.

If we are overly attentive to successful experiences and positive responses, our self-perception may become inflated (Photo 2.4). We tend to describe such individuals as "arrogant," "pompous," "haughty," or "snobbish." On the other hand, if we dwell on our failures and not our successes, remember only the criticism we receive, or focus on how we don't measure up to our ideal self-concept, we may have a deflated self-perception (Photo 2.5). Winnie the Pooh's friend Eeyore, the donkey who is always "having a bad day," is an example of someone with a deflated sense of self. We tend to describe such individuals as "depressed," "despondent," "sullen," or "gloomy." Neither the person with the inflated or deflated perception of self accurately reflects who they are. These incongruent and distorted self-perceptions are magnified through self-fulfilling prophecies, filtering messages, and media images.

Self-fulfilling prophecies A **self-fulfilling prophecy** is an inaccurate perception of a skill, characteristic, or situation that leads to behaviors that perpetuate that false perception as true (Merton, 1968). Self-fulfilling prophesies may be self-created or other-imposed.

Self-created prophecies are predictions we make about ourselves. We often talk ourselves into success or failure. For example, when people expect rejection, they are more likely to behave in ways that lead others to reject them (Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 2004). So Aaron, who sees himself as unskilled in establishing new relationships, says to himself, "I doubt I'll know anyone at the party—I'm going to have a miserable time." Because he believes he'll have trouble interacting with others, he doesn't introduce himself to anyone, and just as he predicted, spends much of his time standing around alone thinking about when he can leave. In contrast, Stefan sees himself as quite social and able to get to know people easily. As a result, he looks forward to the party, and just as he predicted, makes several new acquaintances and enjoys himself.

Sometimes a self-fulfilling prophecy is other-imposed and based on what others say about us. When teachers act as if their students are bright, students buy into this expectation and learn more as a result. Likewise, when teachers act as if students are not bright, students may "live down" to these imposed prophecies and fail to achieve. A good example takes place in the popular book *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. A prophecy was made that suggested Harry Potter would vanquish the Dark Lord (Voldemort). So the Dark Lord sets out to kill Harry Potter. Dumbledore explains to Harry that the prophecy is only true because the Dark Lord believes it. Still, because the Dark Lord will not rest until he kills Harry, it becomes inevitable that Harry will, in fact, have to kill Voldemort (or vice versa).

Filtering messages Our self-perceptions can also become distorted through the way we filter what others say to us. We tend to pay attention to messages that reinforce our self-perception, and downplay or ignore messages that contradict this image. For example, suppose you prepare an agenda for your study group. Someone comments that you're a good organizer. If you spent your childhood hearing how disorganized you were, you may downplay or even ignore this comment. If, however, you think you are good at organizing, you will pay attention to the compliment and may even reinforce it by responding, "Thanks, I AM a pretty organized person. I learned it from my mom."

Helen Sloan/HBO/Everett Collection

Photo 2.6 How might media portrayals of "ideal" male and female figures distort self-perception?

Media images Another way self-perception can become distorted is through our interpretation of what we see on television, in the movies, and in popular magazines (Photo 2.6). Social cognitive learning theory suggests that we strive to copy the characteristics and behaviors of the characters portrayed as perfect examples or "ideal types" (Bandura, 1977). Persistent media messages of violence, promiscuity, use of profanity, bulked-up males, and pencil-thin females have all been linked to distorted self-perceptions among viewers. One particularly disturbing study found that before TV was widely introduced on the Pacific island of Fiji, only 3 percent of girls reported vomiting to lose weight or being unhappy with their body image. Three years after the introduction of TV, that percentage had risen to 15 percent, and an alarming 74 percent reported being too big or too fat (Becker, 2004). Unfortunately, distorted body image perceptions lead to low self-esteem and, sometimes, to self-destructive behaviors such as anorexia and bulimia.

APPLY IT

Identify an actor and an actress that society portrays as beautiful. Why? How might that influence the self-perception of viewers that don't "measure up" to this ideal?

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Communication and Self-Perception

Self-perception influences how we talk to ourselves, how we talk about ourselves with others, how we talk about others to ourselves, the self we present to others, and our ability to communicate with others. Knowing how it does so may provide us with strategies for changing negative self-perceptions into positive ones.

Self-talk (a.k.a. intrapersonal communication) is the internal conversations we have with ourselves in our thoughts. People who have a positive self-perception are more likely to engage in positive self-talk, such as "I know I can do it" or "I did a really good job." People who have a negative self-perception are more likely to engage in negative self-talk, such as "There's no way I can do that" or "I really blew it." Not surprisingly, a high level of speech anxiety (the fear of public speaking) is often rooted in negative self-talk.

Self-perception also influences how we talk about ourselves with others. If we have a positive self-perception, we are likely to convey a positive attitude and take credit for our successes. If we have a negative self-perception, we are likely to convey a negative attitude and downplay our accomplishments. Why do some people put themselves down regardless of what they have done? Perhaps people with a negative self-perception find it less painful to put themselves down than to hear criticism from others. Thus, to preempt the possibility that others will comment on their unworthiness, they often do it first.

self-talk
the internal conversations we have with ourselves in our thoughts