Here are the topics discussed in this chapter:

✔ The Perception Process
  Selection
  Organization
  Interpretation
  Negotiation

✔ Influences on Perception
  Physiological Influences
  Cultural Differences
  Social Roles

✔ Common Tendencies in Perception
  We Judge Ourselves More Charitably than Others
  We Cling to First Impressions
  We Assume that Others Are Similar to Us
  We Are Influenced by the Obvious

✔ Perception Checking
  Elements of Perception Checking
  Perception Checking Considerations

✔ Empathy, Cognitive Complexity, and Communication
  Empathy
  Cognitive Complexity

✔ Making the Grade
  Summary
  Key Terms
  Online Resources
  Search Terms
  Film and Television

After studying the topics in this chapter, you should be able to:

1. Describe how the processes of selection, organization, interpretation, and negotiation shape communication in a given situation.
2. Explain how the influences on perception listed on pages 93–101 affect communication in a specific situation.
3. Analyze how the tendencies described on pages 101–103 have distorted your perceptions of another person, and hence your communication.
4. Demonstrate how you might use the skill of perception checking in a significant relationship.
5. Enhance your cognitive complexity by applying the "pillow method" in a significant disagreement. Explain how your expanded view of this situation might affect your communication with the other(s) involved.
Study M. C. Escher’s drawing *Relativity* on this page. It pictures a strange universe in which the inhabitants of each world exist at right angles, using the same staircase but oblivious to one another’s existence. Each has his or her own conception of up and down, right and left. If these characters were introduced to the residents of other worlds, they would find them odd, defying the rule of gravity.

This surreal vision provides a useful metaphor for challenges we encounter every day. Each of us experiences a different reality, and failing to understand other people’s point of view can lead to problems on both practical and relational levels. But perceptual differences can enhance as well as interfere with relationships. By seeing the world through others’ eyes, you can gain insights that are different—and often more valuable—than those arising out of your own experiences.

This chapter will help you deal with the challenge of communicating in the face of perceptual differences. We will begin by looking at some of the reasons why the world
appears different to each of us. In our survey we’ll explore several areas: how our psychological makeup, personal needs, interests, and biases shape our perceptions; the physiological factors that influence our view of the world; the social roles that affect our image of events; and the role that culture plays in creating our ideas of what behavior is proper. In doing so, we’ll cover many of the types of physiological and psychological noise you read about in Chapter 1. After examining the perceptual factors that can drive us apart, we will look at two useful skills for bridging the perceptual gap.

The Perception Process

We need to begin our discussion of perception by examining the gap between “what is” and what we know. At one time or another, you’ve probably seen photos of sights invisible to the unaided eye: perhaps an infrared photo of a familiar area or the vastly enlarged image of a minute object taken by an electron microscope. You’ve also noticed how certain animals are able to hear sounds and smell odors that are not apparent to humans. Experiences like these remind us that there is much more going on in the world than we are able to experience with our limited senses, that our idea of reality is in fact only a partial one.

Even within the realm of our senses, we’re aware of only a small part of what is going on around us. A simple walk in the park would probably be a different experience for companions with different interests. A botanist might notice the vegetation; a fashion designer might pay attention to the way people are dressed; and an artist might be aware of the colors and forms of the people and surroundings. On a personal level, we’ve all had the experience of failing to notice something unusual about a friend—perhaps a new hairstyle or a sad expression—until it’s called to our attention. Sometimes our failure to recognize some events while recognizing others comes from not paying attention to important information. But in other cases it’s simply impossible to be aware of everything, no matter how attentive we might be. There is just too much going on.

Psychologist William James said, “To the infant the world is just a big blooming, buzzing confusion.” One reason for this is the fact that infants are not yet able to sort out the myriad impressions with which we’re all bombarded. As we grow, we learn to manage all this data, and as we do so, we begin to make sense out of the world.

Because this ability to organize our perceptions in a useful way is such a critical factor in our ability to function, we need to begin our study of perception by taking a closer look at this process. We can do so by examining the four steps by which we attach meaning to our experiences: selection, organization, interpretation, and negotiation.

SELECTION

Because we’re exposed to more input than we can possibly manage, the first step in perception is the selection of which impressions we will attend to. Several factors cause us to notice some things and ignore others.
Stimuli that are intense often attract our attention. Something that is louder, larger, or brighter stands out. This explains why—other things being equal—we're more likely to remember extremely tall or short people, and why someone who laughs or talks loudly at a party attracts more attention (not always favorable) than do quiet guests.

Repetitious stimuli, repetitious stimuli, repetitious stimuli, repetitious stimuli, repetitious stimuli also attract attention. Just as a quiet but steadily dripping faucet can come to dominate our awareness, people to whom we're frequently exposed become noticeable.

Attention is also frequently related to contrast or change in stimulation. Put differently, unchanging people or things become less noticeable. This principle gives an explanation (excuse?) for why we take wonderful people for granted when we interact with them frequently. It’s only when they stop being so wonderful or go away that we appreciate them.

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; and 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.

Selection isn’t just a matter of attending to some stimuli: It also involves ignoring other cues. If, for example, you decide that someone is a terrific person, you may overlook his or her flaws. If you are focused on examples of unfair male bosses, you might not recognize unfair female bosses.

**Organization**

Along with selecting information from the environment, we must arrange it in some meaningful way. You can see how the principle of organization works by looking at Figure 3.1. You can view the picture either as one of a vase or as one of two twins, depending on whether you focus on the light or the dark areas. In instances such as this, we make sense of stimuli by noticing some data that stand out as a figure against a less striking ground. The “vase-face” drawing is interesting, because it allows us to choose between two sets of figure-ground relationships.

This principle of figure-ground organization operates in communication, too. Recall, for instance, how certain speech can suddenly stand out from a babble of voices. Sometimes the words are noticeable because they include your name, whereas at other times they might be spoken by a familiar voice.

The vase-face drawing suggests that there are only two ways to organize impressions. In fact, there are usually many more. Consider, for example, Figure 3.2. How many ways can you view the boxes? One? Two? Three? Keep looking. If you’re stumped, Figure 3.3 will help.
Just as you were inclined to view these boxes in one way, each of us can organize our impressions of other communicators using a number of schemes (called perceptual schema by social scientists). Sometimes we classify people according to their appearance: male or female, beautiful or ugly, heavy or thin, young or old, and so on. At other times we classify people according to their social roles: student, attorney, wife, and so on. Another way we classify people is by their interaction style: friendly, helpful, aloof, and sarcastic are examples. In other cases we classify people by their psychological traits: curious, nervous, insecure, and so on. Finally, we can use others’ membership, classifying them according to the group to which they belong: Democrat, immigrant, Christian, and so on.

The perceptual schemas we use shape the way we think about and communicate with others. If you’ve classified a professor, for example, as “friendly,” you’ll handle questions or problems one way; if you’ve classified a professor as “mean,” your behavior will probably be quite different. What constructs do you use to classify the people you encounter in your life? Consider how your relationship might change if you used different schemas.

INVITATION TO INSIGHT

Your Perceptual Filters

1. Identify the perceptual schema described in this section that you would use to classify people in each of the following contexts:
   a. Spending time with new acquaintances at a party
   b. Socializing with fellow workers on the job
   c. Choosing teammates for an important class project
   d. Offering help to a stranded motorist

   Describe both the general type of organizing scheme (e.g., “physical,” “membership”) and the specific category within each type (e.g., “attractive,” “roughly the same age as me”).

2. Consider:
   a. Other schema you might use in each context.
   b. The different consequences of using the schema you originally chose and the alternative you identified in the preceding step.
   c. How your relationships might change if you used different constructs.
STEREOTYPING  After we have chosen an organizing scheme to classify people, we use that scheme to make generalizations and predictions about members of the groups who fit the categories we use. For example, if you were especially aware of gender, you might be alert to the differences between the way men and women behave or the way they are treated. If religion played an important part in your life, you might think of members of your faith differently from others. If ethnicity was an important issue for you, you would probably tune in to the differences between members of various ethnic groups. There’s nothing wrong with generalizations as long as they are accurate. In fact, it would be impossible to get through life without them.

But when generalizations lose touch with reality, they lead to stereotyping—exaggerated generalizations associated with a categorizing system. Stereotypes may be based on a kernel of truth, but they go beyond the facts at hand and make claims that usually have no valid basis.

You can begin to get a sense of your tendency to make generalizations and to stereotype by completing the following sentences:

1. Women are ___________________
2. Men are ___________________
3. Republicans are ___________________
4. Vegetarians are ___________________
5. Muslims are ___________________
6. Older people are ___________________

It’s likely that you were able to complete each sentence without much hesitation. Does this mean you were stereotyping? You can answer this question by deciding whether your generalizations fit the three characteristics of stereotypes (we’ll use “older people” as an example):

- **You often categorize people on the basis of an easily recognized characteristic.** Age is relatively simple to identify, so if you see someone who appears to be in her eighties, you might quickly categorize her as “elderly.”

- **You ascribe a set of characteristics to most or all members of a category.** Based on your (limited) experiences with some elderly relatives, you conclude that older people have trouble hearing and are not mentally alert.

- **You apply the set of characteristics to any member of the group.** When you run into an elderly person at the store, you talk very loudly and slowly. Of course, that can be extremely annoying to energetic and sprightly older people who do not fit your stereotype.

Once we buy into stereotypes, we often seek out isolated behaviors that support our inaccurate beliefs. For example, men and women in conflict often remember only behaviors of the opposite sex that fit their gender stereotypes. They then point to these behaviors—which might not be representative of how the other person typically behaves—as “evidence” to suit their stereotypical and inaccurate claims: “Look! There you go criticizing me again. Typical for a woman!”

Stereotypes can plague interracial communication. Surveys of college student attitudes show...
that many blacks characterize whites as “demanding” and “manipulative,” whereas many whites characterize blacks as “loud” and “ostentatious.” Stereotypes like these can hamper professional relationships as well as personal ones. For example, doctor–patient communication in the United States—particularly between white physicians and minority patients—can suffer from stereotyping on both sides. Physicians may fail to provide important information because they think their patients won’t understand, and patients may not ask important questions because they believe their doctors don’t have time for them. These kinds of expectations lead to self-fulfilling spirals and poorer health care.5

Stereotyping doesn’t always arise from bad intentions. In some cases, careless generalizations can grow from good intentions, and even from a little bit of knowledge. For example, knowing that people raised in collectivistic cultures (see pages 54–56 in Chapter 2) tend to conform to group norms may lead you to mistakenly assume that anyone you meet from such a background is likely to be a selfless team player. But not all members of a group are equally collectivistic, or individualistic, for that matter. For example, a close look at Americans of European and Latin descent showed differences within each group.6 Some Latinos were more independent than some Euro Americans, and vice versa. Moreover, teens in Japan (a traditionally collectivist culture) say they often feel torn between individualism and collectivism, between time-honored traditions and contemporary trends.7 As our world’s “global village” becomes more connected by technology and media, generalizations about specific cultures are likely to become less accurate.

Stereotypes don’t always lead to communication problems. If the person with whom you are interacting happens to fit the pattern in your mind, there may be no difficulties. But if your mental image does not happen to match the characteristics of the other person, problems can arise. A fascinating series of experiments on perceptions of prejudice and gender bias illustrates this point.8 In one phase of the experiments, white and black students were presented with stories in which a prejudicial act might or might not have taken place. For example, a man who has been promised a hotel room over the phone is later denied the room when he shows up in person. Four race combinations were used for each story: white perpetrator/black victim, white perpetrator/white victim, black perpetrator/white victim, and black perpetrator/black victim. In almost all instances, participants were more likely to label white-on-black behavior (white perpetrator and black victim) as prejudice than any other combination.
In addition, females were more likely than males, and blacks were more likely than whites, to label an action as prejudiced. From these results, the researchers conclude that a prototypic or “model” stereotype exists regarding racism (whites oppress blacks, men oppress women, and not the reverse) and that “participants who belong to traditionally oppressed groups (blacks, women) may be more sensitive to potential prejudice.” In other words, we select, organize, and interpret behavior in ways that fit our existing notions about others’ motives.

(See the description of the movie \textit{Crash} on page 118 for an example of how stereotyping can lead to myriad personal and interpersonal problems.)

One way to avoid the kinds of communication problems that come from excessive stereotyping is to decategorize others, giving yourself a chance to treat them as individuals instead of assuming that they possess the same characteristics as every other member of the group to which you assign them.

\section*{INVITATION TO INSIGHT}

\subsection*{Exploring Your Biases}

You can explore your hidden biases toward race, gender, age, disability, and other issues by taking a series of self-tests online. You can find the link to these tests through your Premium Website for \textit{Looking Out/Looking In}.
The Magic Wand
Quick-change artist extraordinaire,
I whip out my folded cane and change from black man to blind man
with a flick of the wrist.
It is a profound metamorphosis
From God gifted wizard of roundball dominating backboards across
America,
To God-gifted idiot savant pounding out chart-busters on a cock-
eyed whim;
From sociopathic gangbanger with death for eyes
To all seeing soul with saintly spirit;
From rape deranged misogynist to poor motherless child;
From welfare-rich pimp to disability-rich gimp;
And from “white man’s burden” to every man’s burden.
It is always a profound metamorphosis.
Whether from cursed by man to cursed by God or from scripture
condemned to God ordained, my final form is never of my choosing.
I only wield the wand; you are the magician.
—Lynn Manning

PUNCTUATION The process of organizing goes beyond our generalized perceptions
of people. We also can organize our interactions with others in different ways, and
these differing organizational schemas can have a powerful effect on our relationships
with others. Communication theorists use the term punctuation to describe the
determination of causes and effects in a series of interactions. You can begin to under-
stand how punctuation operates by visualizing a running quarrel between a husband
and wife. The husband accuses the wife of being too critical, whereas she complains
that he is withdrawing from her. Notice that the order in which each partner punctu-
ates this cycle affects how the quarrel looks. The husband begins by blaming the wife:
“I withdraw because you’re so critical.” The wife organizes the situation differently,
starting with the husband: “I criticize because you withdraw.” After the cycle gets roll-
ing, it is impossible to say which accusation is accurate. The answer depends on how
the sentence is punctuated. Figure 3.4 illustrates how this process operates.

Punctuation #1
Nagging → Withdrawing → Nagging → Withdrawing

Punctuation #2
Withdrawing → Nagging → Withdrawing → Nagging

Figure 3.4
The Same Event Can Be Punctuated in More Than One
Way

Differing punctuations can lead to a variety of communication problems. Notice how
the following situations seem different depending on how they’re punctuated:
“I don’t like your friend because he never has anything to say.”
“He doesn’t talk to you because you act like you don’t like him.”
“I keep talking because you interrupt so much.”
“I interrupt because you don’t give me a chance to say what’s on my mind.”

The kind of finger-pointing that goes along with arguing over which punctuation scheme is correct will probably make matters worse. It’s far more productive to recognize that a dispute can look different to each party and then move on to the more important question of “What can we do to make things better?”

**SKILL BUILDER**

**Punctuation Practice**

You can appreciate how different punctuation patterns can influence attitudes and behavior by following these directions.

1. Use the format pictured in Figure 3.4 to diagram the following situations:
   a. A father and daughter are growing more and more distant. The daughter withdraws because she interprets her father’s coolness as rejection. The father views his daughter’s aloofness as a rebuff and withdraws further.
   b. The relationship between two friends is becoming strained. One jokes to lighten up the tension, and the other becomes more tense.
   c. A dating couple is on the verge of breaking up. One partner frequently asks the other to show more affection. The other withdraws physical contact.

2. Identify two punctuating schemes for each of the situations described in step 1. Consider how the differing schemes would affect the way the two people in each situation respond to one another.

Now identify a difficult communication issue in your own life. Punctuate it in two ways: how you would punctuate it and how the other person might punctuate it. Discuss how seeing the issue from the other person’s point of view might change the way you communicate as you discuss the issue.

**INTERPRETATION**

After we have selected and organized our perceptions, we interpret them in a way that makes some sort of sense. Interpretation plays a role in virtually every interpersonal act. Is the person who smiles at you across a crowded room interested in romance or simply being polite? Is a friend’s kidding a sign of affection or irritation? Should you take an invitation to “drop by any time” literally or not?

Several factors cause us to interpret an event in one way or another:

*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. 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 to be 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 those who didn’t expect any involvement with the speakers.
**Personal 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 you the refund of your cleaning deposit.

**Assumptions about human behavior.** “People generally do as little work as possible to get by.” “In spite of their mistakes, people are doing the best they can.” Beliefs like these will shape the way we interpret another’s actions.

**Attitudes.** The attitudes we hold shape the way we make sense of others’ behaviors. For example, what would you think if you overheard one man say “I love you” to another? In one study, people with a high degree of homophobia (the fear of or discrimination against homosexuals) were likely to interpret this comment as an indication that the speaker was gay. Those with lower levels of homophobia were more likely to regard the affectionate statement as platonic rather than romantic.12

**Expectations.** Anticipation shapes interpretations. Suppose you took a class and were told in advance that the instructor is terrific. Would this affect the way you perceive the teacher? Research shows that it almost certainly would. In one study, students who read positive comments about instructors on a website viewed those teachers as more credible and attractive than did students who were not exposed to the same comments.13 In situations like these and others, our expectations influence our perceptions.

**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 know that an instructor speaks sarcastically to all students, you won’t be as likely to take her remarks personally.

**Self-concept.** When you’re feeling insecure, the world is a very different place from the world you experience when you’re feeling secure. For example, the recipient’s self-concept has proven 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.14 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.

**Relational satisfaction.** The behavior that seems positive when you are happy with a partner might seem completely different when you are unhappy with a partner. For example, unsatisfied partners in a couple are more likely than satisfied partners to blame one another when things go wrong.15 They are also more likely to believe that their partners are selfish and have negative intentions. Unhappy spouses are more likely than happy ones to make negative interpretations of their mate’s behavior.

Although we have talked about selection, organization, and interpretation separately, the three phases of perception can occur in differing sequences. For example, a parent or babysitter’s past interpretations (such as “Jason is a troublemaker”) can influence future selections (his behavior becomes especially noticeable) and the organization of events (when there’s a fight, the assumption is that Jason started it). As with all communication, perception is an ongoing process in which it is difficult to pin down beginnings and endings.

*We don’t see things as they are. We see things as we are.*

—Anais Nin
NEGOTIATION

So far our discussion has focused on the components of perception—selection, organization, and interpretation—that take place in each individual’s mind. But perception isn’t just a solitary activity: A big part of sense-making occurs between and among people as they influence one another’s perceptions and try to achieve a shared perspective. This process is known as negotiation.

One way to understand how negotiation operates is to view interpersonal communication as an exchange of stories. Scholars call the stories we use to describe our personal worlds narratives. Virtually every interpersonal situation can be described by more than one narrative. These narratives often differ. Ask two quarreling children why they’re fighting, and they’ll each describe how the other person is responsible for launching the conflict. Likewise, courtrooms are filled with opponents who tell very different narratives about who is the “villain” and who is the “hero.” Even happy families have stories that place members in particular roles. (Think of the roles in some families you know: “scatterbrain,” “the smart one,” “athlete,” and so on.) In best-case scenarios, family storytelling can actually enhance perspective-taking and lead to family satisfaction and functioning.

When our narratives clash with those of others, we can either hang on to our own point of view and refuse to consider anyone else’s (usually not productive), or we can try to negotiate a narrative that creates at least some common ground. Shared narratives provide the best chance for smooth communication. For example, romantic partners who celebrate their successful struggles against relational obstacles are happier than those who don’t have this shared appreciation. Likewise, couples that agree about the important turning points in their relationships are more satisfied than those who have different views of what incidents were most important.

Shared narratives don’t have to be accurate to be powerful. Couples who report being happily married after fifty or more years seem to collude in a relational narrative that doesn’t jibe with the facts. They agree that they rarely have conflict, although objective analysis reveals that they have had their share of struggles. Without overtly agreeing to do so, they choose to blame outside forces or unusual circumstances for problems instead of blaming each other. They offer the most charitable interpretations of each other’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. Communication researcher Judy Pearson evaluates these findings:

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!
Influences on Perception

Now that we’ve explored the processes by which we perceive, it’s time to look at some of the influences that cause us to select, organize, interpret, and negotiate information.

PHYSIOLOGICAL INFLUENCES

The first set of influences we need to examine involves our physical makeup. Within the wide range of human similarities, each of us perceives the world in a unique way because of physiological factors. In other words, although the same events exist “out there,” each of us receives different images because of our unique perceptual hardware. Consider the long list of physiological factors that shapes our views of the world: the senses, age, health and fatigue, hunger, biological cycles, and psychological challenges.

THE SENSES The differences in how each of us sees, hears, tastes, touches, and smells stimuli can affect interpersonal relationships. Consider the following everyday situations:

“Turn down that radio! It’s going to make me go deaf.”
“It’s not too loud. If I turn it down, it will be impossible to hear it.”
“It’s freezing in here.”
“Are you kidding? We’ll suffocate if you turn up the heat!”
“Why don’t you pass that truck? The highway is clear for a mile.”
“I can’t see that far, and I’m not going to get us killed.”

These disputes aren’t just over matters of opinion. The sensory data we receive are different. Differences in vision and hearing are the easiest to recognize, but other differences exist as well. There is evidence that identical foods taste differently to different individuals. Scents that please some people repel others. Likewise, temperature
Simulating Age 85

What does it feel like to be old in America? At the Westminster Thurber Retirement Community here, Heather Ramirez summed it up in two words. “Painful,” she said. “Frustrating.” Mrs. Ramirez is only 33, but on a recent morning she was taking part in a three-hour training program called Xtreme Aging, designed to simulate the diminished abilities associated with old age.

Along with 15 colleagues and a reporter, Mrs. Ramirez, a social worker at the facility, put on distorting glasses to blur her vision; stuffed cotton balls in her ears to reduce her hearing, and in her nose to dampen her sense of smell; and put on latex gloves with adhesive bands around the knuckles to impede her manual dexterity. Everyone put kernels of corn in their shoes to approximate the aches that come from losing fatty tissue. They had become, in other words, virtual members of the 5.3 million Americans age 85 and older, the nation’s fastest-growing age group—the people the staff at the facility work with every day.

As the population in the developing world ages, simulation programs like Xtreme Aging have become a regular part of many nursing or medical school curriculums, and have crept into the corporate world, where knowing what it is like to be elderly increasingly means better understanding one’s customers or even employees—how to design signs or instrument panels, how to make devices more usable.

“I must say, you look lovely,” said Vicki Rosebrook, executive director of the Macklin Intergenerational Institute in Findlay, Ohio, which developed Xtreme Aging as a sensitivity training program for schools, churches, workplaces and other groups that have contact with the elderly.

Then Dr. Rosebrook put the group through a series of routine tasks, including buttoning a shirt, finding a number in a telephone book, dialing a cellphone and folding and unfolding a map. The result was a domestic obstacle course. Some tasks were difficult, some impossible. The type in the telephone book appeared microscopic, the buttons on the cellphone even smaller. And forget about refolding a map or handling coins from a zippered wallet.

Dr. Rosebrook told the group an anecdote about being in a department store behind a slow-moving older woman, when an impatient customer behind her called the woman a “Q-Tip head.”

“The next time you’re in line at the grocery store and you’re thinking, ‘You old geezer, hurry up,’ just think about how this felt,” she said.

John Leland

variations that leave some of us uncomfortable are inconsequential to others. Recognizing these differences won’t eliminate them, but it will make it easier to remember that the other person’s preferences aren’t crazy, just different.

AGE Older people often view the world differently from younger ones, because they have a greater scope and number of experiences. There are also developmental differences that shape perceptions. Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget described a series of stages that children pass through on their way to adulthood. According to Piaget, younger children are incapable of performing mental feats that are natural to the rest of us. Until they approach the age of seven, for example, they aren’t able to take another person’s point of view. This fact helps explain why children often seem
egocentric, selfish, and uncooperative. A parent’s exasperated plea, “Can’t you see I’m too tired to play?” just won’t make sense to a four-year-old who is full of energy and imagines that everyone else must feel the same way.

**HEALTH AND FATIGUE** Recall the last time you came down with a cold, flu, or some other ailment. Do you remember how different you felt? You probably had much less energy. It’s likely that you felt less sociable and that your thinking was slower than usual. These kinds of changes have a strong impact on how you relate to others. It’s good to realize that someone else may be behaving differently because of illness. In the same way, it’s important to let others know when you feel ill so that they can give you the understanding you need.

Just as being ill can affect your relationships, so can being overly tired. Again it’s important to recognize the fact that you or someone else may behave differently when fatigued. Trying to deal with important issues at such a time can get you into trouble.

**HUNGER** People often get grumpy when they haven’t eaten and get sleepy after stuffing themselves. Several physiological changes occur as we eat and become hungry again. Research confirms our own experience that being hungry (and getting grumpy) or having overeaten (and getting tired) affects how we interact with others. In one study, teenagers who reported that their family did not get enough food to eat were almost three times as likely to have been suspended from school, almost twice as likely to have difficulty getting along with others, and four times as likely to have no friends.24

**BIological CYCLES** Are you a “morning person” or a “night person”? Most of us can answer this question easily, and there’s a good physiological reason behind our answer. Each of us is in a daily cycle in which all sorts of changes constantly occur, including body temperature, sexual drive, alertness, tolerance to stress, and mood.25 Most of these changes are caused by hormonal cycles. For instance, adrenal hormones, which affect feelings of stress, are secreted at higher rates during some hours. In the same manner, the male and female sex hormones enter our systems at variable rates. We often aren’t conscious of these changes, but they surely influence the way we relate to one another. After we’re aware that our own daily cycles and those of others govern our feelings and behavior, it becomes possible to manage our lives so that we deal with important issues at the most effective times.

### INVITATION TO INSIGHT

**New Body, New Perspective**

You can get a clearer idea of how physiology influences perception by trying the following exercise.

1. Choose one of the following situations:
   a. An evening in a singles bar.
   b. A volleyball game.
   c. A doctor’s physical examination.

2. How would the event you chose seem different if:
   a. Your eyesight were much worse (or better).
   b. You had a hearing loss.
   c. You were eight inches taller (or shorter).
   d. You were coming down with a serious cold.
   e. You were a member of the other sex.
   f. You were ten years older (or younger).
   g. You had AD/HD.
PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGES Some differences in perception are rooted in neuroscience. For instance, people with AD/HD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder) are easily distracted from tasks and have difficulty delaying gratification. It’s easy to imagine how those with AD/HD might find a long lecture boring and tedious, while other audience members are fascinated by the same lecture. People with bipolar disorder experience significant mood swings in which their perceptions of events, friends, and even family members shift dramatically. The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that between five and seven million Americans are affected by these two disorders alone—and many other psychological conditions influence people’s perceptions. It’s important to remember that when others see and respond to the world differently than we do, there may be causes beyond what we immediately recognize.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

So far you have seen how physical factors can make the world a different place for each of us. But there’s another kind of perceptual gap that often blocks communication—the gap between people from different backgrounds. Every culture has its own worldview, its own way of looking at the world. Keeping in mind these differing cultural perspectives can be a good way of learning more about both ourselves and others, but at times it’s easy to forget that people everywhere don’t see things the way we do.

The power of culture to shape perceptions was demonstrated in studies more than fifty years ago exploring the domination of vision in one eye over the other. Researchers used a binocular-like device that projects different images to each eye. The subjects were twelve natives of the United States 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 focus on the image from their own background.

The range of cultural differences is wide. In Middle Eastern countries, personal scents play an important role in interpersonal relationships. Arabs consistently breathe on people when they talk. As anthropologist Edward Hall explains:

To smell one’s friend is not only nice, but desirable, for to deny him your breath is to act ashamed. Americans, on the other hand, trained as they are not to breathe in people’s faces, automatically communicate shame in trying to be polite. Who would expect that when our highest diplomats are putting on their best manners they are also communicating shame? Yet this is what occurs constantly, because diplomacy is not only “eyeball to eyeball” but breath to breath.

Even beliefs about the very value of talk differ from one culture to another. Western cultures view talk as desirable and use it for social purposes as well as for task performance. Silence has a negative value in these cultures. 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.

On the other hand, Asian cultures perceive talk differently. For thousands of years, Asian cultures have discouraged 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 does not speak.” Unlike most North Americans,
who are uncomfortable with silence, Japanese and Chinese believe that remaining quiet is the proper state when there is nothing to be said. In Asian cultures, a talkative person is often considered a show-off or insincere.

It’s 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 American and the silent Asian are behaving in ways they believe are proper, yet each views the other with disapproval and mistrust. This may require them to recognize and deal with their **ethnocentrism**—the attitude that one’s own culture is superior to others. An ethnocentric person thinks—either privately or openly—that anyone who does not belong to his or her in-group is somehow strange, wrong, or even inferior. Travel writer Rick Steves describes how an ethnocentric point of view can interfere with respect for other cultural practices:

... we [Americans] consider ourselves very clean and commonly criticize other cultures as dirty. In the bathtub we soak, clean, and rinse, all in the same water. (We would never wash our dishes that way.) A Japanese visitor, who uses clean water for each step, might find our way of bathing strange or even disgusting. Many cultures spit in public and blow their nose right onto the street. They couldn’t imagine doing that into a small cloth, called a hanky, and storing that in their pocket to be used again and again. Too often we think of the world in terms of a pyramid of “civilized” (us) on the top and “primitive” groups on the bottom. If we measured things differently (maybe according to stress, loneliness, heart attacks, hours spent in traffic jams, or family togetherness) things stack up differently.\(^3\)

The way we communicate with strangers can reflect ethnocentric thinking. Author Anne Fadiman explains why Hmong immigrants from the mountains of Laos prefer their traditional shamanistic healers, called **txiv neeb**, to American doctors. Notice that both perspectives make sense, and that neither the American physicians nor the Hmong immigrants were able to get beyond their familiar set of perceptions to see the encounter from the other culture’s point of view:

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.\(^3\)

It isn’t necessary to travel overseas to encounter differing cultural perspectives. Within this country there are many subcultures, and the members of each one have backgrounds that cause them to see things in different ways. Failure to recognize these differences can lead to unfortunate and unnecessary misunderstandings. For example, an uninformed Anglo teacher or police officer might interpret the downcast expression of a Latina 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.

Along with ethnicity, geography also can influence perception. A fascinating series of studies revealed that climate and geographic latitude are remarkably accurate predictors of communication predispositions. 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.

It’s encouraging to know that open-minded communicators can overcome preexisting stereotypes and learn to appreciate people from different backgrounds as individuals. In one study, college students who were introduced to strangers from different cultural backgrounds developed attitudes about their new conversational partners based more on their personal behavior than on preexisting expectations about how people from those backgrounds might behave.

SOCIAL ROLES

So far you have seen how physiological and cultural differences can affect communication. Along with these differences, another set of perceptual factors can lead to communication difficulties. From almost the time we’re born, each of us is indirectly taught a whole set of roles that we’ll be expected to play. In one sense this set of prescribed parts is necessary, because it enables a society to function smoothly and provides the security that comes from knowing what’s expected of you. But in another sense, having roles defined in advance can lead to wide gaps in understanding. When roles become unquestioned and rigid, people tend to see the world from their own viewpoint, having no experiences that show them how other people see it. Naturally, in such a situation communication suffers.

GENDER ROLES

Although people use the terms sex and gender as if they were identical, there is an important difference. Sex refers to biological characteristics of a male or female, whereas gender refers to the social and psychological dimensions of masculine and feminine behavior. A large body of research shows that males and females do perceive the world differently, for reasons ranging from genes to neurology to hormones. However, even cognitive researchers who focus on biological differences between males and females acknowledge that societal gender roles and stereotypes affect perception dramatically.

Gender roles are socially approved ways that men and women are expected to behave. Children learn the importance of gender roles by watching other people and by being exposed to media, as well as by receiving reinforcement. After members of a society learn these customary roles, they tend to regard violations as unusual—or even undesirable.

Some theorists have suggested that stereotypical masculine and feminine behaviors are not opposite poles of a single continuum, but rather two separate sets of behavior. With this view, an individual can act in a masculine manner or a feminine manner or exhibit both types of characteristics. The male–female dichotomy, then, is
replaced with four psychological sex types: masculine, feminine, androgynous (combining masculine and feminine traits), and undifferentiated (neither masculine nor feminine). Combining the four psychological sex types with the traditional physiological sex types produces the eight categories listed in Table 3.1.

Each of these eight psychological sex types perceives interpersonal relationships differently. For example, masculine males may be likely to see their interpersonal relationships as opportunities for competitive interaction, as opportunities to win something. Feminine females probably see their interpersonal relationships as opportunities to be nurturing, to express their feelings and emotions. Androgynous males and females, on the other hand, differ little in their perceptions of their interpersonal relationships.

Androgynous individuals tend to see their relationships as opportunities to behave in a variety of ways, depending on the nature of the relationships themselves, the context in which a particular relationship takes place, and the myriad other variables affecting what might constitute appropriate behavior. These variables are usually ignored by the sex-typed masculine males and feminine females, who have a smaller repertoire of behaviors.

**OCCUPATIONAL ROLES** The kind of work we do often influences our view of the world. Imagine five people taking a walk through the park. One, a botanist, is fascinated by the variety of trees and other plants. Another, a zoologist, is looking for interesting

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<tr>
<th>Gender Roles</th>
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<th>Female</th>
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<td>Masculine</td>
<td>Masculine males</td>
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<td>Feminine</td>
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<td>Androgynous</td>
<td>Androgynous males</td>
<td>Androgynous females</td>
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<td>Undifferentiated</td>
<td>Undifferentiated males</td>
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**INVITATION TO INSIGHT**

**Role Reversal**

Walk a mile in another person’s shoes. Find a group that is foreign to you, and try to become a member of it for a while.

1. If you’re down on the police, see if your local department has a ride-along program where you can spend several hours on patrol with one or two officers.

2. If you think the present state of education is a mess, become a teacher yourself. Maybe an instructor will give you the chance to plan one or more classes.

3. If you’re a political conservative, try getting involved in a progressive organization; if you’re a progressive, check out the conservatives.

Whatever group you join, try to become part of it as best you can. Don’t just observe. Get into the philosophy of your new role and see how it feels. You may find that all those weird people aren’t so weird after all.
animals. The third, a meteorologist, keeps an eye on the sky, noticing changes in the weather. The fourth companion, a psychologist, is totally unaware of nature, instead concentrating on the interaction among the people in the park. The fifth person, being a pickpocket, quickly takes advantage of the others’ absorption to make some money.

There are two lessons in this little scenario. The first, of course, is to watch your wallet carefully. The second is that our occupational roles shape our perceptions. Even within the same occupational setting, the different roles that participants have can affect their perceptions. Consider a typical college classroom, for example. The experiences of the instructor and students often are dissimilar. Having dedicated a large part of their lives to their work, most instructors see their subject matter—whether French literature, physics, or communication—as vitally important. Students who are taking the course to satisfy a general education requirement may view the subject differently: maybe as one of many obstacles that stand between them and a degree, maybe as a chance to meet new people. Another difference centers on the amount of knowledge possessed by the parties. To an instructor who has taught the course many times, the material probably seems extremely simple, but to students encountering it for the first time, it may seem strange and confusing. We don’t need to spell out the interpersonal strains and stresses that come from such differing percep-

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**ON THE JOB**

**Changing Roles, Changing Perceptions**

An old adage says, “When you’re a fence painter, all you see are fences.” That saying reflects a truth verified by social science: Occupational roles can alter the way we view others, sometimes in harmful ways.

Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of how jobs can shape perception occurred in a classic study by Stanford psychologist Philip Zimbardo. He recruited a group of middle-class, well-educated young men, randomly assigning half of them to serve as “guards” in a mock prison. He issued the guards uniforms, handcuffs, whistles, and billy clubs. The remaining subjects became “prisoners” and were placed in rooms with metal bars, bucket toilets, and cots.

Zimbardo let the guards establish their own regulations for the inmates. The rules were tough: No talking during meals, rest periods, or after lights-out. Head counts at 2:30 A.M. Troublemakers received short rations.

Within a short time the experiment had become reality for both prisoners and guards. Several inmates developed stomach cramps and lapsed into uncontrollable weeping. Others suffered from headaches, and one broke out in a head-to-toe rash after his request for early “parole” was denied by the guards.

The experiment was scheduled to go on for two weeks, but after six days Zimbardo realized that the simulation had become too intense. “I knew by then that they were thinking like prisoners and not like people,” he said. “If we were able to demonstrate that pathological behavior could be produced in so short a time, think of what damage is being done in ‘real’ prisons...”

Rhetorician Kenneth Burke and others have called the tendency to view the world through the lens of one’s job an “occupational psychosis.” Most role-based perceptions are less dramatic than the prison experiment, but they still create problems. Workers who deal with the public every day can grow cynical and unsympathetic, viewing their clientele as unreasonable and demanding. Bosses who see the big picture may come to regard employees as lazy and self-centered, and workers who haven’t been managers may regard supervisors as unappreciative and power hungry.

The best antidote to occupational psychosis is to step outside one’s role and regard others as you would independent of your job—or try the role-reversal exercise described in the Invitation to Insight on page 99.
tions (see the On The Job box on page 100 for other examples of stresses and strains arising from occupational roles).

**RELATIONAL ROLES** Think back to the “Who am I?” list you made in Chapter 2 (page 40). It’s likely your list included roles you play in relation to others: daughter, roommate, husband, friend, and so on. Roles like these don’t just define who you are—they also affect your perception.

Take, for example, the role of parent. As most new mothers and fathers will attest, having a child alters the way they see the world. They might perceive their crying baby as a helpless soul in need of comfort, while nearby strangers have a less charitable appraisal. As the child grows, parents often pay more attention to the messages in the child’s environment. One father we know said he never noticed how much football fans curse and swear until he took his six-year-old to a game with him. In other words, his role as father affected what he heard and how he interpreted it.

The roles involved in romantic love can also dramatically affect perception. These roles have many labels: partner, spouse, boyfriend/girlfriend, sweetheart, and so on. There are times when your affinity biases the way you perceive the object of your affection. You may see your sweetheart as more attractive than other people do, and perhaps you overlook some faults that others notice. Your romantic role can also change the way you view others. One study found that when people are in love, they view other romantic candidates as less attractive than they normally would.

Perhaps the most telltale sign of the effect of “love goggles” is when they come off. Many people have experienced breaking up with a romantic partner and wondering later, “What did I ever see in that person?” The answer—at least in part—is that you saw what your relational role led you to see.

**Common Tendencies in Perception**

By now it’s obvious that many factors affect the way we interpret the world. Social scientists use the term *attribution* to describe the process of attaching meaning to behavior. We attribute meaning both to our own actions and to the actions of others, but we often use different yardsticks. Research has uncovered several perceptual tendencies that can lead to attribution errors.

**WE JUDGE OURSELVES MORE CHARITABLY THAN 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*. On the one hand, when others suffer, we often blame the problem on their personal qualities. On the other hand, when we suffer, we blame the problem on forces 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 lash out angrily, 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 speeding, we deny that we were driving too fast or we say, “Everybody does it.” When she uses profanity, it’s because of a flaw in her character; when we swear, it’s because the situation called for it. 

WE CLING TO FIRST IMPRESSIONS

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 such first impressions are accurate, they 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; after we form an opinion of someone, we tend to hang on to it and make any conflicting information fit our opinion.

Social scientists have coined the term **halo effect** to describe the tendency to form an overall positive impression of a person on the basis of one positive characteristic. Most typically, the positive impression comes from physical attractiveness, which can lead people to attribute all sorts of other virtues to the good-looking person. For example, employment interviewers rate mediocre but attractive job applicants higher than their less attractive candidates. And once employers form positive impressions, they often ask questions that confirm their image of the applicant. For example, when an interviewer forms a positive impression, she might ask leading questions aimed at supporting her positive views (“What lessons did you learn from that setback?”), interpret answers in a positive light (“Ah, taking time away from school to travel was a good idea!”), encourage the applicant (“Good point!”), and sell the company’s virtues (“I think you would like working here”). Likewise, applicants who create a negative first impression are operating under a cloud that may be impossible to dispel—a phenomenon sometimes referred to as “the devil effect.”

The power of first impressions is also important in personal relationships. A study of college roommates found that those who had positive initial impressions of each other were likely to have positive subsequent interactions, manage their conflicts constructively, and continue living together. The converse was also true: Roommates who got off to a bad start tended to spiral negatively. This reinforces the wisdom and importance of the old adage, “You never get a second chance to make a first impression.”

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

WE ASSUME THAT OTHERS ARE SIMILAR TO US

In Chapter 2 you read one example of this principle: that people with low self-esteem imagine that others view them unfavorably, whereas people with high self-esteem imagine that others view them favorably, too. The frequently mistaken assumption that others’ views are similar to our own applies in a wide range of situations:
• You’ve heard a slightly raunchy joke that you think is pretty funny. You assume that it won’t offend a somewhat straitlaced friend. It does.

• You’ve been bothered by an instructor’s tendency to get off the subject during lectures. If you were an instructor, 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’d consider the relationship finished. Imagining that your friend feels the same way, you avoid making contact. In fact, your friend has avoided you because she 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.\(^{48}\) 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 as you do.

WE ARE INFLUENCED BY THE OBVIOUS

The error of being influenced by what is most obvious is understandable. As you read at the beginning of this chapter, we select stimuli from our environment that are noticeable: intense, repetitious, unusual, or otherwise attention-grabbing. The problem is that the most obvious factor is not necessarily the only one—or the most significant one for an event. 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, teasing or refusing to cooperate.

• You might complain about an acquaintance whose malicious gossiping or arguing has become a bother, forgetting that by putting up with such behavior in the past 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.

Perception Checking

Serious problems can arise when people treat interpretations as if they were matters of fact. Like most people, you probably resent others jumping to conclusions about the reasons for your behavior.

“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 10, 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.\(^{49}\)
I’m Not Who You Think I Am

Being confused for every other Asian woman used to be maddening—until I fell into the same trap.

I’m tired of being confused with people who really, objectively, don’t look like me. I am short, and have been mistaken for people who are quite tall. I tend to wear jeans and loose sweaters; I have been mistaken for people who wear fur and tulle. I don’t wear makeup—well, I could go on and on. Given the vast array of those I’ve been told I look exactly like who have neither my facial structure nor my body shape nor my demeanor, I have always felt justified in assuming that people who make these mistakes are, at some level, racist. Meaning that when they see me, their normal powers of observation switch off so that the only information their brains receive is: Asian. These people see a type, not a person.

But then.

My husband and I host an annual barbecue for the associates at his law firm. This group changes every few years, so it never seems worthwhile to really get to know them, and I must confess that they are virtually indistinguishable to me except that each year’s batch seems younger than the one before. Once a year, though, I make an effort to be pleasant. I know they work hard, and I appreciate what they do.

Among those who were to attend last time were a young couple who stood out in my mind because they had brought their infant to the prior year’s party, and also because the wife was Korean-American, like me. I remembered having had a conversation with her, and that she was very nice.

When the guests started to arrive, I shook hands with and smiled at a half-dozen or so people, and then I noticed the Korean-American woman. I was somewhat relieved to see someone I had met before, so I approached her in a friendly way and said, “Hello! So you’re taking a little holiday from the baby today?”

She sort of nodded but did not say anything, and that instant was all it took for me to realize she was a different Asian-American woman. One who did not have a baby. I also realized that she looked nothing like the woman I had mistaken her for. I believe I muttered something under my breath, so that maybe she would think I was just crazy, as bosses’ wives often are. Or drunk, perhaps. Mostly I thought: thank God I’m Asian. Whatever else she may think of me, at least she can’t accuse me of being racist.

A few months after that I was with my 10-year-old daughter at a horse show. Her hair, like all the other young riders’ hair, was in two braids, as dictated by horse-show convention. We were waiting in a very slow line to buy soft drinks. Bored, I left the line to pick up a magazine from a nearby table. I leafed through it and walked back, looking down at a picture I had found. I nudged my daughter to show her the picture. She didn’t respond, so I nudged her again, and that was when I saw it was not my daughter I was nudging, but a different Asian child.

Even though I knew that this could not mean I was a racist—racist toward my own daughter?—I was mortified nonetheless.

“Oh, I’m sorry! You all look the same from the top!” I said.

By which I meant, all little girls with dark pigtails look similar to a taller person who is not really paying attention. The girl’s mother smiled pleasantly enough. To further complicate the matter, at least in my roiling brain, the mother was Caucasian. I wondered, confusedly, whether this changed the situation. If she and I were not from the same ethnic group, did this mean I really was a racist?

A plea, then, for all of us to take the time to look more carefully. For those who see the race and not the individual: look harder. And for those who, like me, may be hypersensitive after years of not being properly seen, keep in mind that while there are people who are racist, many others are merely distracted, overeager, careless, tired, old. We, the thin-skinned, also need to avoid applying the easy label.

Carol Paik
ELEMENTS OF PERCEPTION CHECKING

A complete perception check has three parts:

1. A description of the behavior you noticed
2. At least two possible interpretations of the behavior
3. 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) “It makes me 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) “On the other hand, 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 you understand others accurately instead of assuming that your 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.”

PERCEPTION CHECKING CONSIDERATIONS

Like every communication skill outlined in Looking Out/Looking In, perception checking isn’t a mechanical formula that will work in every situation. As you develop the ability to check your perceptions, consider the following factors in deciding when and how to use this approach.

COMPLETENESS 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)

Sometimes even the most skimpy perception check—a simple question like “What’s going on?”—will do the job. You might also rely on other people to help you make sense
Nonverbal Congruency  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.

Cultural Rules  The straightforward approach of perception checking has the best chance of working in what Chapter 5 identifies as low-context cultures: ones in which members use language as directly as possible. The dominant cultures of North America and Western Europe fit into this category, and members of these groups are most likely to appreciate the kind of straight talking that perception checking embodies. Members of high-context cultures are more likely to appreciate the “looking in” approach when checking for meanings in the absence of explicit verbalization. In any case, when you are unsure of how to respond to a confusing behavior, ask a perception check question: “Rachelle has been awfully quiet lately. Do you know what’s up?”
web for sites and getting the advice of people we know who have gone to places we want to visit.

We decided it would be simpler for one of us to handle all the reservations, and that’s been my job. I really don’t mind doing this, except my friend started to interrogate me about every detail. “Did you lock in the airfare?” “Did you remember to get the Eurail passes?” “What about a hotel in Rome?” “What about phone cards so we can call home?”

I kept my growing irritation inside, but finally it got to be more than I could handle. Fortunately, I used a perception check instead of attacking my friend: “Look, you’ve been asking me about every detail of our plan, even though I told you I would take care of everything. Do you think I’m going to mess up the planning? Do you want to take over the planning? What’s going on?”

When I confronted her, my friend was embarrassed. She said she trusts me completely, but she is so excited that she has a hard time controlling herself. She told me that having the reservations made will leave her feeling like the trip is more of a reality and less of a dream. Since we’ve talked, my friend still asks me how the plans are coming. But now that I know why she is so insistent, I find it more amusing than annoying.

**My Dad’s Affection**

My father and I have a great relationship. A while back I picked him up at the airport after a week-long business trip and a long cross-country flight. On the way home, he was quiet—not his usual self. He said he was exhausted, which I understood. When we got home, he brightened up and started joking and playing with my younger brother. This left me feeling unhappy. I thought to myself, “Why is he so happy to see my brother when he hardly said a word to me?” I didn’t say anything at the time. The next day I found myself feeling resentful toward my dad, and it showed. He said, “What’s up with you?” But I was too embarrassed to say anything.

After learning this approach in class, I tried a perception check. I said, “Dad—when you were quiet on the way home after your business trip and then you perked up when you got home and saw Jaime, I wasn’t sure what was up. I thought maybe you were happier to see him than me, or that maybe I’m imagining things. How come you said you were tired with me and then you perked up with Jaime?”

My dad felt awful. He said he was tired in the car, but once he got back to the house he was glad to be home and felt like a new man. I was too wrapped up in my mind to consider this alternative. Because I didn’t use a perception check, I was unhappy and I started an unnecessary fight.

**Using your Premium Website for Looking Out/ Looking In, access “In Real Life Communication Scenarios” and then select “Perception Checking in Everyday Life” to watch and analyze video examples of perception checking.**

of high-context cultures (more common in Latin America and Asia), however, value social harmony over directness. High-context communicators are more likely to regard candid approaches like perception checking as potentially embarrassing, preferring instead less-direct ways of understanding one another. Thus, a “let’s get this straight” perception check that might work well with a Euro American manager who was raised to value directness could be a serious mistake with a Mexican American or Asian American boss who has spent most of his or her life in a high-context culture.

**FACE SAVING**  Along with clarifying meaning, perception checking can sometimes be a face-saving way to raise an issue without directly threatening or attacking the other person. Consider these examples:

“Are you planning on doing those dishes later, or did you forget that it’s your turn?”

“Am I boring you, or do you have something else on your mind?”

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In the first case, you might have been quite confident that the other person had no intention of doing the dishes, and in the second that the other person was bored. Even so, a perception check is a less threatening way of pointing out their behavior than direct confrontation. Remember: One element of competent communication is the ability to choose the best option from a large repertoire, and perception checking can be a useful strategy at times.

**SKILL BUILDER**

**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 behavior when around you: The formerly casual hugs and kisses have become longer and stronger, and the occasions where you “accidentally” brush up against each other have become more frequent.

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**Empathy, Cognitive Complexity, and Communication**

Perception checking is a valuable tool for clarifying ambiguous messages, but ambiguity isn’t the only cause of perceptual problems. Sometimes we understand what people mean without understanding why they believe as they do. At times like this, we are short on the vital ability to empathize.

**EMPATHY**

**Empathy** is the ability to re-create another person’s perspective, to experience the world from the other’s point of view. It may be impossible to ever experience another person’s perspective completely, but with enough effort we can certainly gain a better idea of how the world appears to him or her. As we’ll use the term here, empathy involves three dimensions. In one dimension, empathy involves *perspective taking*—an attempt to take on the viewpoint of another person. This requires a suspension of judgment so that for the moment you set aside your own opinions and try to understand the other person. Empathy also has an *emotional* dimension that helps us get closer to experiencing others’ feelings: to gain a sense of their fear, joy, sadness, and so on. 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.
Scores of recent studies show that humans are hardwired to empathize with others—it’s built into our brains. Best-selling author Daniel Goleman believes that cultivating this natural tendency toward empathy is the essence of “social intelligence.” The ability to empathize seems to exist in a rudimentary form in even the youngest children. Research sponsored by the National Institute of Mental Health revealed what many parents know from experience: Virtually from birth, infants become visibly upset when they hear another baby crying, and children who are a few months old cry when they observe another child in tears. Young children have trouble distinguishing others’ distress from their own. If, for example, one child hurts its finger, another baby might put its own finger into her mouth as if she were feeling pain. Researchers report cases in which children who see their parents in tears wipe their own eyes, even though they are not crying.

Although children 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 seems to vary 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 when parents simply label such behavior as inappropriate (“That was a mean thing to do!”). Studies also show that allowing children to experience and manage frustrating events can help increase their empathic concern for others later in life.

Culture plays an important role in our ability to understand the perspectives of others. Research shows that people raised in individualist cultures (which value independence) are often less adept at perspective-taking than those from collectivist cultures (which value interdependence). In one study, Chinese and American players were paired together in a communication game that required the participants to take on the perspective of their partners. In all measures, the collectivist Chinese had greater success in perspective-taking than did their American counterparts. This isn’t to suggest that one cultural orientation is better than the other; it only shows that culture shapes the way we perceive, understand, and empathize with others.

It is easy to confuse empathy with sympathy, but the concepts are different. With sympathy, you view the other person’s situation from your point of view. With empathy, you view it from the other person’s perspective. Consider the difference between sympathizing and empathizing with an unwed mother or a homeless person. When you sympathize, it is the other person’s confusion, joy, or pain. When you empathize, the experience becomes your own, at least for the moment. It’s one thing to feel bad (or good) for someone; it’s more profound to feel bad (or good) with someone. Nonetheless, empathy doesn’t require you to agree with the other person. You can empathize with a difficult relative or a rude stranger.

“How would you feel if the mouse did that to you?”
without endorsing their behavior. Ultimately, all of us can profit from putting ourselves in others’ shoes to better understand their worlds, as the reading on page 94 illustrates.

**COGNITIVE COMPLEXITY**

By now you can probably appreciate the value of empathy in boosting understanding and enhancing relationships. But how can we become more empathic? To answer that question, let’s return to a feature of communication competence: cognitive complexity.

**COGNITIVE COMPLEXITY AND COMMUNICATION** As noted in Chapter 1 (page 29), cognitive complexity is the ability to construct a variety of frameworks for viewing an issue. Researchers have found that cognitive complexity increases the chances of satisfying communication in a variety of contexts, including marriage, helping others who are feeling distressed, being persuasive, and career advancement.

Not surprisingly, studies show a connection between cognitive complexity and empathy. The relationship makes sense: The more ways you have to understand others and interpret their behaviors, the greater is the likelihood that you can see the world from their perspective. Cognitive complexity can also help people describe situations more thoroughly and less simplistically. Interestingly, one study showed that cognitive complex people are better able to identify and understand when others are using sarcasm—an abstract form of communication that is sometimes lost on those with less mental acumen. The good news is that cognitive complexity can be enhanced through training. With that in mind, let’s look at a skill that can help you achieve that goal.

**INCREASING YOUR COGNITIVE COMPLEXITY: THE PILLOW METHOD** The skill of perception checking discussed earlier in this chapter (pages 103–108) is a relatively quick, easy tool for clarifying potential misunderstandings, but some issues are too complex and serious to be handled with this approach. Writer Paul Reps describes a tool for boosting empathy when finding merit in another’s position seems impossible.

Developed by a group of Japanese schoolchildren, the **pillow method** gets its name from the fact that a problem has four sides and a middle, just like a pillow (Figure 3.5). As the examples on pages 114–115 show, viewing the issue from each of these positions can help you understand the perspectives of others.
perspectives almost always leads to valuable insights—and in so doing enhances cognitive complexity.

**Position 1: I’m Right, You’re Wrong** This is the perspective that we usually take when viewing an issue. We immediately see the virtues in our position and find fault with anyone who happens to disagree with us. Detailing this position takes little effort and provides little new information.

**Position 2: You’re Right, I’m Wrong** At this point you switch perspectives and build the strongest possible arguments to explain how another person can view the issue differently from you. Besides identifying the strengths in the other’s position, this is the time to play the devil’s advocate and find flaws in your position. Finding flaws in your position and trying to support the other’s position requires discipline and a certain amount of courage, even though this is only an exercise, and you will

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**ETHICAL CHALLENGE**

**Empathy and the Golden Rule**

Virtually everyone is familiar with the Golden Rule, which most of us learned in the form “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” By obliging us to treat others as well as we would treat ourselves, this maxim seems to offer the foundation for a civil society in which everyone would behave with consideration.

Some ethicists have pointed out that the Golden Rule doesn’t work well in situations where others don’t want to be treated the same way you would. You may like to blast hip-hop music at top volume at 3 A.M., but appeals to the Golden Rule probably won’t placate your neighbors who don’t share your musical tastes or late-night hours. Likewise, just because you enjoy teasing banter, you aren’t entitled to banter with others who might find this type of humor offensive or hurtful.

The Golden Rule presents special problems in cases of intercultural contacts, where norms for what is desirable vary dramatically. For example, most speakers from low-context cultures where English is the first language value honesty and explicit communication, but this level of candor would be offensive in the high-context cultures of Asia or the Middle East. A naive communicator following the Golden Rule might justify social blunders by claiming, “I was just communicating the way I’d like to be treated.” This sort of ethnocentrism is a recipe for unsuccessful communication and perhaps for very unpleasant consequences.

In response to the challenge of differing wants, Milton Bennett proposed a “Platinum Rule”: “Do unto others as they themselves would have done unto them.” Unlike the Golden Rule, this rule requires us to understand how others think and what they want before we can determine how to act ethically. Put differently, the Platinum Rule implies that empathy is a prerequisite for moral sensitivity.

Despite its initial appeal, the Platinum Rule poses its own problems. There are certainly cases where doing unto others what they want might compromise our own needs or even our ethical principles. It is easy to imagine cases in which the Platinum Rule would obligue us to cheat, steal, or lie on others’ behalf.

Even if acting on the Platinum Rule is problematic, the benefit of thinking about it seems clear. An essential requirement for benign behavior is the ability to empathize, helping us recognize that what others want may be different than what we would want under the same circumstances.

Describe how applying the Golden Rule and the Platinum Rule would affect one of your important interpersonal relationships.

1. What communication is necessary before you could put each rule into practice?
2. Which rule seems to be preferable?

soon be able to retreat to position 1 if you choose. But most people learn that switching perspectives reveals there is some merit to the other person’s perspective.

There are some issues where it seems impossible to call the other position “right.” Criminal behavior, deceit, and disloyalty often seem beyond justification. At times like these, it is possible to arrive at position 2 by realizing that the other person’s behavior is understandable. For example, without approving, you may be able to understand how someone would resort to violence, tell lies, or cheat. Whatever the particulars, the goal of position 2 is to find some way of comprehending how anyone could behave in a way that you originally found impossible to defend.

**Position 3: Both Right, Both Wrong** From this position, you acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses of each person’s arguments. If you have done a good job with position 2, it should be clear that there is some merit in both points of view, and that each side has its demerits. Taking a more evenhanded look at the issue can lead you to be less critical and more understanding of another’s point of view.

Position 3 can also help you find the commonalities between your position and the other’s. Perhaps you’ve both been right to care so much about the issue, but both wrong to fail to recognize the other person’s concerns. Perhaps there are underlying values that you both share and similar mistakes that you’ve both made. In any case, the perspective of position

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**The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.**

—F. Scott Fitzgerald

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**SKILL BUILDER**

**Pillow Talk**

Try using the pillow method in your life. It isn’t easy, but after you begin to understand it, the payoff in increased understanding is great.

1. Choose a person or viewpoint with whom or which you strongly disagree. If you’ve chosen a person, it’s best to have him or her there with you, but if that’s not possible, you can do it alone.

2. What disagreement should you choose? No doubt there are many in your life:
   - Parent–child
   - Friend–friend
   - Teacher–student
   - Nation–nation
   - Employer–employee
   - Republican–Democrat
   - Brother–sister

3. For each disagreement you choose, really place yourself in each position on the pillow as you encounter it:
   a. Your position is correct, and your opponent’s is wrong.
   b. Your opponent’s position is correct, and yours is wrong.
   c. Both your positions are correct, and both are wrong.
   d. It isn’t important which position is right or wrong.
   e. Finally, affirm the fact that there is truth in all four positions.

4. The more important the disagreement is to you, the harder it will be to accept positions 2 through 5 as valid, but the exercise will work only if you can suspend your present position and imagine how it would feel to hold the other ones.

5. How can you tell if you’ve been successful with the pillow method? The answer is simple: If, after going over all the steps, you can understand—not necessarily accept, but just understand—the other person’s position, you’ve done it. After you’ve reached this understanding, do you notice any change in how you feel about the other person?
It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the elephant
Though all of them were blind
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.
The first approached the elephant
And, happening to fall
Against the broad and sturdy side,
At once began to bawl:
"Why, bless me! But the elephant
Is very much like a wall!"
The second, feeling of the tusk,
Cried: "Ho! What have we here
So very round and smooth and sharp?
To me, 'tis very clear,
This wonder of an elephant
Is very like a spear!"
The third approached the animal,
And, happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands
Thus boldly up he spake:
"I see," quoth he, "the elephant
Is very like a snake!"
The fourth reached out his eager hand
And felt about the knee:
"What most this wondrous beast is like
Is very plain," quoth he:
"'Tis clear enough the elephant
Is very like a tree!"
The fifth who chanced to touch the ear
Said: "E'en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most—
Deny the fact who can:
This marvel of an elephant
Is very like a fan!"
The sixth no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope
Than, seizing on the swinging tail
That fell within his scope,
"I see," quoth he, "the elephant
Is very like a rope!"
And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong;
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong.
—John G. Saxe

3 should help you see that the issue isn’t as much a matter of complete right and wrong as it first appeared to be.

**Position 4: The Issue Isn’t as Important as It Seems** This perspective will help you realize that the issue isn’t as important as you thought. Although it is difficult to think of some issues as unimportant, a little thought will show that most aren’t as important as we make them out to be. The impact of even the most traumatic events—the death of a loved one or the breakup of a relationship, for example—usually lessens over time. The effects may not disappear, but we learn to accept them and get on with
The Pillow Method in Action

My Mother and Facebook

Background
My mother recently opened a Facebook account and sent me an invitation to become her friend. I ignored her request for a couple of weeks until she finally asked why I hadn’t responded. The talk turned into an argument. She couldn’t understand why I didn’t want her as a Facebook friend. I couldn’t understand why she wanted to butt into my personal life.

Position 1: I’m Right, She’s Wrong
Facebook was created for college students, not middle-aged parents. The fact that my mom wants access to my personal world feels like an invasion of privacy—like reading my diary or rummaging through my belongings. If she wants to keep up with her friends on Facebook, that’s her business—but leave me out of it.

Position 2: She’s Right, I’m Wrong
When I objected to my mom snooping, she said she would stop looking at my page if it makes her uncomfortable. So she’s right in saying that I don’t need to worry about her judgments. When I told her I’d be embarrassed to have her commenting on my life, she promised not to write on my Wall, tag embarrassing pictures of me, or do anything else visible.

Position 3: Both of Us Are Right, and Both Are Wrong
I’m justified to be concerned about my mom being freaked out by some things on my Facebook page. She’s justified in wanting to know more about my life and how my generation communicates. I’m probably overreacting when I worry about her reactions or demand that she keep her nose out of my business. She’s wrong not to appreciate my desire for privacy.

Position 4: The Issue Isn’t Important
I don’t think anything I or my friends post on my Facebook page would change my relationship with my mom. Turning this into a major issue is probably not worth the hurt feelings that have resulted from this mini-crisis.

Position 5: There Is Truth In All Perspectives
Viewing this issue from several angles calmed me down and made it easier for my mother and me to have a good talk. We decided that I would friend her for a trial period. If I decide her looking at my page becomes a problem, she agreed to willingly remove herself from my friends list.

Planning a Wedding

Background
Who would have thought that planning a wedding would be such a nightmare? My fiancé and I are struggling to decide whether we should have a large, festive wedding or a small, intimate one. I’m in favor of having a big, expensive ceremony and party. He wants a smaller, more affordable one.

Position 1: I’m Right, He’s Wrong
I have a big family, and I would feel guilty not inviting everyone. Also, we have lots of friends who would really miss not being present to celebrate our special day. If we invite one friend or relative, I say we have to invite them all to avoid hurting anybody’s feelings. Otherwise, where do you draw the line? As far as money goes, I say that you get married only once, and this is no time to scrimp. My parents are willing to help pay the expenses, because they want our entire family to be there at the wedding.

Position 2: He’s Right, I’m Wrong
My fiancé is right to say that we really don’t have the funds to spend on a fancy wedding. Every dollar we spend on a lavish event will be one less dollar we have to buy a house, which we hope to do soon. My fiancé is right to say that a big wedding could postpone our house purchase for a year or two—maybe even longer, if real estate prices go up before we can buy. Even if my parents help pay for the event, our portion would still be more than we can afford. He’s also right to say that no matter how many people we invite, someone is always going to be left out. It’s just a case of where we draw the line. Finally, he’s right to say that planning a big wedding will be a very stressful process.

Position 3: Both of Us Are Right, and Both Are Wrong
Both of us are right, and both are wrong. I’m right to want to include our extended families and friends on this joyous day, and I’m right to say that a special
job doesn’t intrude into her life away from work. When we lived together, she had some arguments with her boyfriend about a strange man who would send her gifts at the club where she dances. This was really affecting their relationship. Also, sometimes she comes home at 4 A.M. after eight hours of dancing. I don’t see how she can go on like this.

Position 2: She’s Right, I’m Wrong
She is right to say that there is no other job where she can make this much money in so little time, at her age, and with her credentials. No one else provides financial support for my friend. She earns enough money to cover rent, food, and pay off some of her loans. She is still physically okay. She is a straight-A student, so it’s true that the job isn’t affecting her school work. The club where she works is clean and safe.

Position 3: Both of Us Are Right, and Both Are Wrong
I’m right to worry about her and encourage her to think about other options besides exotic dancing. She’s right when she says there’s no other job that pays so well. She’s also right to say that her family doesn’t support her in any way, which puts additional pressure on her that I can’t imagine.

Position 4: The Issue Isn’t Important
After thinking about it, I’ve realized that getting married is different from being married. The decision about what kind of ceremony to have is important, but ultimately it won’t affect the kind of marriage we have. How we behave after we’re married will be much more important. And we are going to face a lot of decisions together—about children and jobs, for example—that will have much bigger consequences than this ceremony.

Position 5: There Is Truth In All Perspectives
Before using the pillow method to think through all sides of this issue, I was focused on getting my way. This attitude was creating some feelings between my fiancé and me that were not what we should be having as we faced this most important event. I’ve realized that if one or the other of us “wins” but the result is injured feelings, it won’t be much of a victory. I don’t know what kind of ceremony we will finally decide to have, but I’m determined to keep my focus on the really important goal of keeping our relationship positive and respectful.

Example 3: Exotic Dancing

Background
My best friend is an exotic dancer. I have tried to persuade her to find a less degrading way to earn a living, but she doesn’t see the need to stop yet. She knows I don’t agree with her decision to dance for money, but she tells me it’s the only way she can make a decent income at this point in her life.

Position 1: I’m Right, She’s Wrong
My friend is exaggerating when she says this job is the only way she can get the money to put herself through school. She could get a job that doesn’t pay as well and make it through until she graduates. It wouldn’t be perfect, but other people manage this way, and so can she. My friend is wrong to say this job doesn’t intrude into her life away from work. When we lived together, she had some arguments with her boyfriend about a strange man who would send her gifts at the club where she dances. This was really affecting their relationship. Also, sometimes she comes home at 4 A.M. after eight hours of dancing. I don’t see how she can go on like this.

Position 2: She’s Right, I’m Wrong
She is right to say that there is no other job where she can make this much money in so little time, at her age, and with her credentials. No one else provides financial support for my friend. She earns enough money to cover rent, food, and pay off some of her loans. She is still physically okay. She is a straight-A student, so it’s true that the job isn’t affecting her school work. The club where she works is clean and safe.

Position 3: Both of Us Are Right, and Both Are Wrong
I’m right to worry about her and encourage her to think about other options besides exotic dancing. She’s right when she says there’s no other job that pays so well. She’s also right to say that her family doesn’t support her in any way, which puts additional pressure on her that I can’t imagine.

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After thinking about it, I’ve realized that getting married is different from being married. The decision about what kind of ceremony to have is important, but ultimately it won’t affect the kind of marriage we have. How we behave after we’re married will be much more important. And we are going to face a lot of decisions together—about children and jobs, for example—that will have much bigger consequences than this ceremony.

Position 5: There Is Truth In All Perspectives
Before using the pillow method to think through all sides of this issue, I was focused on getting my way. This attitude was creating some feelings between my fiancé and me that were not what we should be having as we faced this most important event. I’ve realized that if one or the other of us “wins” but the result is injured feelings, it won’t be much of a victory. I don’t know what kind of ceremony we will finally decide to have, but I’m determined to keep my focus on the really important goal of keeping our relationship positive and respectful.

Using your Premium Website for Looking Out/Looking In, access “In Real Life Communication Scenarios” and then select either “Pillow Method: Wedding” or “Pillow Method: Dancing” to watch and analyze video examples of the pillow method.
life. The importance of a dispute can also fade when you realize that you’ve let it overshadow other equally important parts of your relationship. It’s easy to become so wrapped up in a dispute about one subject that you forget about the other ways in which you are close to the other person.

**Position 5: There Is Truth in All Four Perspectives** After completing the first four positions, a final step is to recognize that each of them has some merit. Although logic might suggest that it’s impossible for a position to be both right and wrong, both important and unimportant, your own experience will show that there is some truth in each of the positions you have explored. This fifth is very different from the “I’m right and you’re wrong” attitude that most people bring to an issue. After you have looked at an issue from these five perspectives, it is almost certain that you will gain new insights. These insights may not cause you to change your mind or even solve the problem at hand. Nonetheless, they can increase your tolerance for the other person’s position and thus improve the communication climate.

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**Making the Grade**

**Summary**

There is more to the world “out there” than any person is capable of understanding. We make sense of our environment by the four-step process of selecting certain stimuli from the environment, organizing them into meaningful patterns, interpreting them in a manner that is shaped by a variety of factors, and negotiating them through narratives we share with others.

Many factors affect the way we select, organize, interpret, and negotiate information. Physiological factors such as our senses, age, and health play an important role. Cultural background also influences the way we view the world, as do social roles. In addition to these factors, some common tendencies affect the way we assign meaning to others’ behavior.

Perception checking can be a useful tool for verifying interpretations of others’ behavior, instead of assuming that the first hunch is correct. A complete perception check includes a description of the other’s behavior, at least two plausible interpretations of its meaning, and a request for clarification about what the behavior does mean.

Empathy is the ability to experience another person’s point of view. Empathy differs from sympathy, because it involves seeing the situation from the other person’s...
perspective rather than your own. Cognitive complexity is the ability to construct a variety of frameworks for understanding an issue. One means for boosting both empathy and cognitive complexity is the pillow method, which involves viewing an issue from five different perspectives.

### Key Terms

- androgynous (99)
- attribution (101)
- empathy (108)
- ethnocentrism (97)
- gender role (98)
- halo effect (102)
- interpretation (90)
- narrative (92)
- negotiation (92)
- organization (84)
- perception checking (103)
- pillow method (110)
- punctuation (89)
- selection (83)
- self-serving bias (101)
- stereotyping (86)
- sympathy (109)

### Online Resources

Now that you have read this chapter, use your Premium Website for *Looking Out/ Looking In* for quick access to the electronic resources that accompany this text. Your Premium Website gives you access to:

- **Study tools** that will help you assess your learning and prepare for exams (*digital glossary, key term flash cards, review quizzes*).

- **Activities and assignments** that will help you hone your knowledge, understand how theory and research applies to your own life (*Invitation to Insight*), consider ethical challenges in interpersonal communication (*Ethical Challenge*), and build your interpersonal communication skills throughout the course (*Skill Builder*). If requested, you can submit your answers to your instructor.

- **Media resources** that will allow you to watch and critique news video and videos of interpersonal communication situations (*In Real Life, interpersonal video simulations*) and download a chapter review so you can study when and where you’d like (*Audio Study Tools*).

This chapter’s key terms and search terms for additional reading are featured in this end-of-chapter section, and you can find this chapter’s Invitation to Insight, Ethical Challenge, Skill Builder, and In Real Life activities in the body of the chapter.

### Search Terms

When searching online databases to research topics in this chapter, use the following terms (along with this chapter’s key terms) to maximize the chances of finding useful information:

- attribution error
- cognition
- cognitive complexity
- emotional intelligence
- intercultural communication
- sense-making
- social perception
Film and Television

You can see the communication principles described in this chapter portrayed in the following films and television programs:

**STEREOTYPING**


Over the course of thirty-six hours in Los Angeles, the lives of several strangers collide. Because they come from such different backgrounds, this diverse group of people relies on stereotypes—usually relating to race—to form snap judgments of each other. Unfortunately, their judgments are almost always wrong.

Again and again, the characters’ assumptions keep them from understanding the human beings they are encountering. Matt Dillon plays an angry cop who goes out of his way to humiliate a black citizen. An upper-class housewife (Sandra Bullock) believes a Mexican American locksmith (Michael Peña) is a gangbanger who plans to burgle her home, even though he is actually a gentle man struggling to build a safe life for his family. An Iranian businessman (Shaun Toub) keeps being misidentified as an Arab. Two clean-cut young black men (Larenz Tate and Ludacris) bemoan the fact that they are regarded with fear by whites in an upscale neighborhood.

Since childhood, most of us have been reminded not to judge a book by its cover. *Crash* provides a dramatic example of the problems that can result from ignoring this maxim.


This television series chronicles the mostly desperate lives of survivors of a plane crash that left forty-eight passengers stranded on a remote island in the South Pacific. The survivors include a doctor, a former prisoner, a rock semi-star, an Iraqi military vet, a mysterious man named Locke, and plenty of others.

The show’s first few seasons offer numerous illustrations of the problems of jumping to quick conclusions about strangers. Just about the time the characters—and the viewers—are ready to vilify one of the survivors, a backstory helps explain the character’s motives and provides a measure of empathy for that person. Conversely, some survivors who are initially seen as heroic become less so after their life stories are told. To paraphrase an old adage, *Lost* illustrates that people are typically more than their worst moments, and often less than their best ones.
NARRATIVES


Lars (Ryan Gosling) is a kind and decent but painfully shy 27-year-old. By choice, he lives alone in a garage and avoids conversation and contact with others as much as possible. Everyone in his small, close-knit town is stunned when Lars introduces his new girlfriend, Bianca—an anatomically correct silicone mannequin. Understandably worried about Lars’s mental health, his brother and sister-in-law seek the help of their family doctor, who advises them to play along with his delusion and see what happens. Soon the entire town buys into the shared narrative that Bianca and Lars are a real couple. Bianca volunteers at the local hospital, “reads” stories to schoolchildren, and even wins a seat on the school board.

While this plot might seem far-fetched, critics and moviegoers have agreed that this tender drama-comedy showcases the power of a community to support one of its own. The obvious fiction they conspire to construct takes on its own reality, illustrating how communication can be a powerful tool for creating shared narratives.

BUILDING EMPATHY

_The Doctor_ (1991) Rated PG-13

Jack McKee (William Hurt) is an ace surgeon and a first-class egotist. He treats his patients with a breezy self-assurance, brushing aside their concerns with jokes and indifference. It’s not that McKee is mean-spirited: He just views his patients as objects upon which he can practice his skill and not as human beings with feelings.

McKee receives a major attitude adjustment when his nagging cough is diagnosed as throat cancer, and his surgeon treats him with the same mechanical indifference that he had bestowed on his patients. As McKee suffers the indignities of a hospital patient and confronts his mortality, his attitude toward the human side of medical care predictably changes. The film should become a part of the medical school curriculum, but it also shows other viewers how walking a mile in another person’s shoes can lead to greater tolerance and understanding.
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ENDNOTES

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CHAPTER TWO


70. The following discussion is based on material in D. E. Hamachek (1992). Encounters with the Self, 3rd ed. (pp. 24–26). Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt.


83. O’Sullivan, op. cit.

CHAPTER THREE


26. For descriptions of various psychological disorders and their treatments, visit the National Institute of Mental Health website at http://www.nimh.nih.gov/.


41. For a review of these perceptual biases, see Hamachek, Encounters with the Self. See also Bradbury & Fincham, op. cit. For an example of the self-serving bias in action, see R. Buttny (1997). “Reported Speech in Talking Race on Campus.” Human Communication Research, 23, 477–506.


49. See, for example, A. Sillars, W. Shellen, A. McIntosh, & M. Pomegranate (1997). “Relational Characteristics of Copyright 2010 Cengage Learning, Inc. All Rights Reserved. May not be copied, scanned, or duplicated, in whole or in part.
Language: Elaboration and Differentiation in Marital Conversations.” *Western Journal of Communication, 61*, 403–422.


52. Goleman, op cit.


**CHAPTER FOUR**


16. Shaver et al., op. cit.


28. Ibid., p. 176. See also Gallois, op. cit.


40. Ibid.
53. Goleman, Social Intelligence, op. cit., p. 115.


CHAPTER FIVE


50. Clark, op. cit.


56. C. J. Zahn, op. cit.


Endnotes


59. Ibid., p. 150.


52. 142, 393–396.


50. 19, 286–311; and D. Buller & R. K. Aune

49. 10, 181–198.

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90. For a summary, see Knapp & Hall, op. cit., pp. 93–132.


CHAPTER SEVEN


13. Burgoon et al., op. cit.


54. Miczo & Burgoon, op. cit.


56. Clark & Delia, op. cit.


CHAPTER EIGHT


34. Johnson et al., op. cit.


48. Johnson et al., op. cit.


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**CHAPTER NINE**


13. See, for example, K. Floyd, op. cit.


CHAPTER TEN


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24. Ibid., p. 36.


34. Adapted from M. Smith (1975), When I Say No, I Feel Guilty (pp. 93–110). New York: Dial Press.


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57. The following research is summarized in Tannen, op. cit., p. 160.
58. Collier, op. cit.
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CHAPTER TWO, ON THE JOB

CHAPTER THREE, ON THE JOB

CHAPTER FOUR, ON THE JOB

CHAPTER FIVE, ON THE JOB

CHAPTER FIVE, “ON NAMING BABY”

CHAPTER FIVE, “COMPUTER PROGRAM DETECTS AUTHOR GENDER”

CHAPTER SIX, ON THE JOB
Chapter Seven, on the Job


Chapter Eight, on the Job


Chapter Nine, “Friends With Benefits, And Stress Too”


Chapter Nine, on the Job


Chapter Ten, on the Job


Chapter Ten, “Types of Defensive Reactions”


Chapter Eleven, on the Job


