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# 2

## PERCEPTION

### Objectives

This chapter will help you to:

- Describe the nature of perception and sensation.
- Understand the process of perception.
- Explain errors in person perception.
- Identify the general sources of errors and remedies in social perception.
- Provide examples of how behaviour is affected by perceptions.

### 2.1 Perception defined

The way people perceive their environment influences their behaviour in the workplace. It directly affects how people interact with and react to their environment. **Perception** is an active, dynamic, cognitive process that helps individuals to make sense of the information that they receive from the world around them. Perception is an individual, subjective process and is influenced by factors such as attitudes, values, expectations and motives. It is therefore impossible to avoid bias. Each person's perception of reality shapes the way they think, feel and behave. We perceive the world around us in different ways.

The subjective nature of the perceptual process was commented on with great insight by the philosopher and psychologist William James (1842–1910) when he stated that:

part of what we perceive comes through our senses from the object before us, another part...always comes out of our own mind. (James, 1890)

Perception can be defined as:

**The psychological processes through which people receive, organise and interpret information from the environment** (Atkinson et al., 1993).

**A complex process by which people select, organise and interpret sensory stimulation into a meaningful picture of the world** (Markin, 1974).

The process of *sensation* is fundamental to perception. Sensation is the immediate and direct response of the sensory organs to simple stimuli (MacDonagh *et al.*, 2002). Sensation involves the relatively unprocessed result of stimulation of sensory receptors in the eyes, ears, nose, tongue and skin. A sensory experience is finite and creates an immediate response to stimuli. In contrast, perception involves constant interpretation of sensory information and related responses. Without the ability to organise and interpret sensations, the world would appear to be a meaningless jumble of colours, shapes and sounds. Without any perceptual ability, an individual would not be able to recognise faces or understand language.

In theory, the processes of sensation and perception are very distinct, yet complementary. In practice, the processes of sensation and perception are virtually impossible to separate as they are part of one continuous process.

## **2.2 Process of perception**

It is impossible to process all the information that is available to the senses. To prevent total bombardment of the senses, individuals constantly and actively select significant stimuli (such as people, objects and events) and filter out information that is not relevant. This is called **selective attention**. The process of perceptual selectivity results in behaviour that is not in accordance with reality but with how the world is perceived.

A boundary point has been identified between the sensory information that we can and cannot detect. The point between sensing and not sensing information is called the **perceptual threshold**. Once this point or threshold has been crossed we can, for example, hear, see and taste stimuli and therefore have a sensory experience. This threshold level varies among individuals and is affected by factors such as their physical condition, motivational state, training and experience.

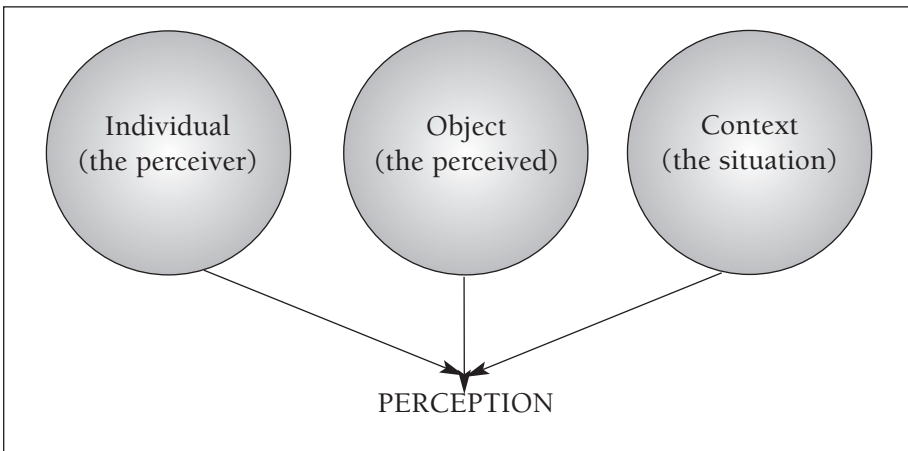
As we are all bombarded by information from the world around us on a daily basis, it is important to remember that each individual selectively attends to the people, objects and places that are of interest and importance to them. People rapidly adjust to their environment and select, organise and interpret information in a subjective way, which results in their particular understanding of reality.

We become accustomed to those stimuli that we are exposed to as a normal and routine part of our day-to-day lives, such as the tick of a watch, the background noise from a television or radio, the appearance of objects around our house. As stimuli become familiar we become used to the sensory experiences and they do not cross the perceptual threshold level. The fact that we become so used to some stimuli that we no longer notice them is

called **habituation**. This process ensures that people can deal with the familiar and accommodate new information. Individuals become habituated to sensory information that they are familiar with and perceive information that is new, different, unusual and exceptional, which facilitates the process of learning. To some degree, *perception occurs by exception* and our attention is focused on people, objects or situations that are in some way different from our previous level of adaptation or habituation.

### **Factors that influence perception**

A number of factors have been identified that influence the direction of our attention and therefore influence the process of perception. These factors relate to the individual, the object and the context.



**Figure 2.1** Factors that influence perception

- **Individual** – These factors relate to the individual, or the perceiver, and include interests, needs, motives and expectations. These internal factors contribute to the subjective nature of the process of perception. People select information that is relevant and meaningful to them.
- **Object** – This relates to the physical characteristics of the object that is perceived. These external characteristics cause people’s attention to be drawn to a particular stimulus. The external factors relate to what is perceived and include contrast, intensity, size, movement, repetition and position.
- **Context** – Situational processes impact on the perceptions and the judgements that people form. These include *physical factors*, such as whether the environment is formal or informal and as a result is governed

by many or few rules and regulations that affect perceptions and behaviour; *social factors*, including the type of people in the environment and the person's relationship to and/or past experience of them; and *organisational factors* that provide an understanding of the nature of the company, such as the size of the organisation, its culture and its purpose.

The process of perception includes the following:

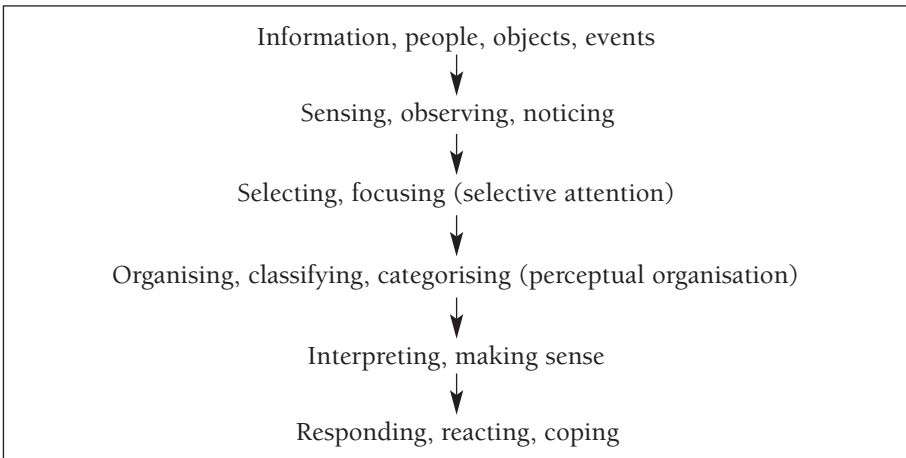


Figure 2.2 Stages in the perception process

## **2.3 Person perception and perceptual distortions**

According to Arnold *et al.* (2005), **person perception** concerns how we obtain, store and recall information about other people to make judgements about them. Accurate perceptions help us to understand and to relate well with others, to get the best from them and to manage social situations with skill. Social perceptions are influenced by our perception of self.

### ***Perceptual distortions/biases/errors***

The subjective nature of the process of perception causes a number of distortions or biases to occur. It is important to understand these errors in order to increase awareness of these mistakes and to become a more accurate judge of others. Some sources of perceptual errors are examined below.

#### ***Stereotypes***

A stereotype is a generalised belief about a person or group of people that may or may not accurately reflect reality. Stereotypes are developed when



individuals are unable or unwilling to gather all of the information needed to make a fair judgement about people or situations. In the absence of the whole picture, stereotypes often allow people to fill in the gaps in their knowledge and understanding.

Stereotyping is the tendency to categorise or label people so that they can be placed in the perceiver's mind and characteristics can be attributed to them. *Stereotypes are generalised beliefs about characteristics, attributes and behaviours of members of certain groups* (Hilton and Von Hippel, 1996).

Stereotypes may be positive or negative, they may be accurate or inaccurate about the average characteristics of a particular group and can lead to discriminatory behaviour. Stereotypes can also have positive and negative social consequences. From a positive perspective, stereotypes allow individuals to make better informed judgements of other people about whom they have little or no personal information. In some circumstances, stereotyping may enable individuals to arrive at more accurate conclusions. A negative aspect of stereotyping is that, over time, those who are stereotyped negatively may display *self-fulfilling prophecy* behaviour. This results in the assumption by the individual that the stereotype represents a normal and accurate reflection of themselves, and may cause them to act out or imitate the associated behaviours.

Other negative effects of stereotypes include forming inaccurate opinions of people, scapegoating, erroneous judgements and reduced empathy. Stereotypes vary in favourability and extremity. Stereotypes do not allow exceptions since they assume that all the members of a particular group have the same characteristics. They are not always valid and can lead to an overestimation of differences. For example, all men cannot cook and all women are too sensitive for business.

Stereotypes generalise and simplify complex situations and involve the use of limited information. They can lead to the creation of negative views of people in other groups. They are resistant to change and tend to be used when people are under time pressure to make judgements and at low points in people's circadian rhythm, that is when they are tired. Also, people use stereotypes when their self-esteem and feelings of security are threatened. Stereotypes tend to make people feel superior in some way to the person or group being stereotyped.

Common stereotypes are based on:

- Age
- Ethnicity
- Gender
- Nationality
- Disability
- Profession
- Sexual orientation
- Race
- Religious belief
- Size
- Physical appearance
- Social class.

Society often innocently creates and perpetuates stereotypes, but these stereotypes can lead to unfair discrimination and persecution when the stereotype is unfavourable. Television, books, comic strips and movies provide an abundant source of stereotyped characters.

### ***Projection***

Psychological projection or projection bias is a defence mechanism that causes a person to unconsciously reject attributes about themselves that they believe to be unacceptable and to ascribe them to other people or objects in the world around them. It involves the projection of uncomfortable thoughts and/or feelings onto other people that they need to repress. Projection reduces the stress and anxiety that is associated with these thoughts and emotions by providing a means of expression for them. Developed by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), this theory involves people attributing their own undesirable traits to others. For example, an employee might state that a colleague must be very jealous of the candidate chosen for promotion, but in reality they are expressing their feelings of jealousy. Projection facilitates the expression of unwanted, unconscious impulses or desires without permitting the conscious mind to acknowledge them.

In addition, projection may be used by individuals to obliterate attributes of other people that they are uncomfortable with. The individual assumes that the other person is like them and in so doing ignores the attributes they possess that make them feel uncomfortable. An example may involve a person making the assumption that because a person works on the same team as them that they must be working hard and that they are dedicated to the task at hand, as opposed to negatively regarding aspects of their performance.

Forms of projection include:

- **Neurotic projection** – This involves perceiving others as operating in ways that you unconsciously find objectionable in yourself.
- **Complementary projection** – This is based on the assumption that others do, think and feel in the same way as you.
- **Complimentary projection** – This relates to the belief that others can do things as well as you.

Finally, projection appears where people see their own traits in other people; this is called the *false consensus* effect. The result is that individuals sometimes see their friends as being more like them than they really are.

Projective techniques have been developed to assist the assessment of personality. Two examples are the Rorschach ink-blot and the Thematic Apperception Test.

### *The halo effect*

This occurs when a single characteristic is used to generate an overall positive impression and, on the basis of this characteristic, other similar and logical characteristics are attributed to the individual. When a person is considered to be good (or bad) in one category, similar evaluations are likely to be made in other categories. The **halo effect** has been known since Edward Thorndike first named it in 1920.

The first traits that are recognised in other people influence the interpretation and perception of later traits as a result of expectations. For example, attractive people are often evaluated as having a more desirable personality and more skills than someone of average appearance. Also, the halo effect can be seen in practice when celebrities are used to endorse products, some of which they have no expertise in evaluating. In the process of selection, the interviewer may be influenced by candidates' positive attributes and ignore their weaknesses.

The opposite of the halo effect is called the *rusty halo* or the *horns, trident* or *devil effect*. This occurs when an individual is judged to have a single undesirable trait and is subsequently evaluated to have many poor traits. In this way, a single negative trait or weak point influences the perception of the person in general.

### *Implicit personality theories*

Individuals have their own theories about which personality characteristics tend to go together, such as fat and jolly or hard-working and honest. People hold a particular belief about what a 'typical x' is like, and these expectations influence our perception of behaviour.

Implicit personality theories are general expectations that individuals construct about a person when they know something of their central traits. For example, happy people are believed to be friendly, intelligent people are assumed to be arrogant, aggressive people are stupid and quiet people are timid.

### *Attribution theory*

The social psychology theory of attribution was developed by Fritz Heider in 1958. He suggested that people logically attempt to uncover connections between causes and effects. Attribution theory analyses the processes by which people infer the intentions and dispositions of others and explain events in terms of being caused by themselves or others.

**Attribution theory** examines how individuals interpret events and how this influences their thinking and behaviour. The theory focuses on the ways in which people explain (or attribute) the causes of the behaviour of others,

or their own behaviour (self-attribution), by linking it to something else and explains how individuals 'attribute' causes to events.

According to Kelley (1967), people all act like naïve scientists in trying to understand the causes of behaviour. When judging the actions of others, the following three factors are examined:

- **Distinctiveness** – Does the person behave like this everywhere?
- **Consistency** – Does the person behave like this all the time?
- **Consensus** – Does the person behave like everyone else?

Through studying these factors, an attempt is made to establish a theory about the reasons for a person's behaviour and whether it is as a result of internal or external factors. *Internal*, or *dispositional*, *factors* relate to the person themselves and include intelligence, skill, ability and talent. *External*, or *situational*, *factors* relate to the environment and include chance, the situation and help from others.

Kelley observed that people tend to make a *fundamental attribution error*. When people are judging their own behaviour and a positive outcome results, they tend to attribute the causes to internal factors, but when the outcome is negative, they tend to attribute it to external factors. On the other hand, when judging others, it is the positive events that are attributed to external factors and the negative events to internal factors!

This error in perception suggests that feedback provided to employees in performance reviews may be predictably distorted by recipients depending on whether it is positive or negative.

### ***Physical appearance***

Judgements are quickly and often incorrectly made about individuals based on their physical appearance. Factors such as height, weight, age, facial symmetry, style of hair and dress, and level of perceived fitness influence judgements. Such physical qualities are used to attribute characteristics such as intelligence, honesty and health. These characteristics affect how we judge others, often without us being consciously aware of them.

### ***Verbal communication***

Information that people take into consideration includes an individual's accent, tone of voice and pitch. This provides an insight into geographical location, social background, educational level of achievement and even personality type.

### ***Non-verbal communication***

A lot of attention is paid to body language, including facial expressions, gestures and mannerisms. These provide a *sub-level of communication*. Non-verbal communication constitutes two-thirds of all communication (Hogan and Stubbs, 2003). It is more important in understanding human behaviour than words alone, as the non-verbal 'channels' appear to be more powerful than what people say. An incorrect message may be received if the body language used does not match the verbal message.

### ***Ascribed attributes***

These are beliefs that people hold about the type of attributes that are associated with those who have a particular status or are involved in a particular occupation. The higher the status of an individual, the greater the likelihood that they will be perceived to be self-assured and capable, such as the president of a country or the CEO of an organisation. Moreover, professionals such as doctors, lawyers and accountants may be deemed to be more important than others in the workplace. In both cases, people are not being judged on their own individual merits but as a result of the ascribed attributes.

### ***First impressions***

When people meet for the first time, it takes just a quick glance for a person to evaluate another individual. In this short time, one person forms an opinion about the other based on factors such as their appearance, body language and mannerisms.

The information that is initially received about another person has an enduring effect, as it triggers a person's *perceptual set*, which is an individual's predisposition to respond in a particular way, or a perceptual expectancy. Perceptual set has been shown to influence our evaluations of others in many social contexts. People who are told before they meet a person that this individual is 'warm' are more likely to perceive a variety of positive characteristics in them, as compared with when the word 'cold' is used in the description. It has been found that when an individual has a reputation for being funny, people are more likely to find them amusing. A person's perceptual set or perceptual expectancy reflects their personality traits. We often quickly identify our own traits in others. For example, people who are outgoing are quicker to identify traits of sociability in the behaviour of others.

Initial judgements are made that form the basis for the interpretation of subsequent behaviour. It is important for people both in their careers and social life to know how to make a good first impression.

### *Disposition and self-concept*

A **disposition** relates to a person's mood, temperament, state of readiness or tendency to act in a particular way. The *mood* that an individual is in when judging others affects the information that they receive; is the glass half empty or half full?

In addition, the better the understanding and acceptance that individuals have of themselves, the more effective their judgement of others will be. **Self-concept**, or **self-identity**, is the knowledge and understanding that people have about themselves. It is the picture that people have of themselves and is closely connected to how a person behaves. A positive self-view will lead to a high level of self-esteem. A negative self-view will lead to lower levels of self-esteem and cause feelings of insecurity and a lack of self-confidence. The components of the self-concept include psychological, physical and social attributes, all of which are influenced by the individual's attitudes, habits, beliefs and ideas. A person's self-concept gradually becomes apparent in the early months of life and is shaped and reshaped due to life experiences.

### *Cognitive structure*

Cognitive structures are patterns of physical or mental action that underlie particular acts of intelligence. Cognitive psychologists propose that a cognitive structure exists in each person's head. Cognitive structure may be understood as a large and delicately linked series of associations among words, concepts and whatever other mental entities exist. The more cognitively complex an individual is, the more accurate their understanding of others, as they are likely to perceive them based on multiple criteria.

## **2.4 General sources of errors and remedies in person perception**

- Not collecting enough information.
- Using irrelevant or insignificant information.
- Individuals seeing only what they want and expect to see.
- Allowing early information to affect our perception.
- Permitting one's own characteristics to affect our judgements of others.
- Accepting cultural stereotypes uncritically.
- Attempting to decode non-verbal behaviour out of context.
- Basing attributions on flimsy and possibly irrelevant evidence. (Buchanan and Huczynski, 2010)

***Methods to remedy errors in person perception***

- Take time; avoid making hasty judgements about people.
- Collect and consciously use more information about people.
- Develop an enhanced self-awareness and insight into personal biases and preferences and how they affect judgements of others.
- Check attributions that are made about the causes of behaviour.  
(Buchanan and Huczynski, 2010)

**2.5 Conclusion**

The process of perception allows us to make sense of our world. Each person's perception of reality shapes the way they think, feel and behave. We perceive the world around us in different ways. Our perceptions of the world are influenced by many factors, including our personality, attitudes, values, motives, past experiences and expectations. Understanding our own perceptions and the perceptions of others will help us to explain our behaviour and the behaviour of others. Individuals see the world from their own perspective and can at times find it difficult to understand the way other people are thinking, feeling and behaving. Getting an insight into the reasons why people behave the way they do is critical to understanding their perception of the situation. This involves gaining information about the person, the people they are with and the environment that they are in. Then we can see the situation from the other person's perspective and make sense of their behaviour.

Managers need to have an understanding of how they perceive the world and make judgements about co-workers, employees, shareholders, customers, suppliers, regulators and others. The process of perception plays a central part in the selection and appraisal of employees, the willingness of co-workers to co-operate and the effective operation of teamwork. People are constantly managing the impression that they make on others. It is important to remember that other people may not perceive us in the way that we perceive ourselves or would like to be perceived. The reactions that individuals make to perceptions in the workplace include their levels of motivation, job satisfaction, commitment, absenteeism and turnover. Managers should constantly attempt to understand how employees perceive the workplace and the impact that has on performance. Finally, perception is of significant importance in the cultivation and management of an organisation's corporate image.

## **Summary**

- Definition of perception.
- Process of perception.
- Biases in person perception.
- Methods to remedy errors in person perception.

## **Theory to real life**

1. How does an insight into the process of perception help you to understand the world around you?
2. What biases/distortions/errors are you now aware of in how you perceive others?
3. Consider the biases in other people's perceptions and the influence that they have on their behaviour.
4. What factors may affect an employee's perception of their manager/boss?
5. Describe how positive and negative perceptions may influence the performance of employees.
6. How do the errors in social perception impact on the processes of selection and performance appraisal?
7. What advice would you give to people about overcoming their errors in judging others in the workplace?

## **Exercises**

1. To demonstrate how people become used to the familiar and tend to pay most attention to new information, take out a blank page and, without looking, draw a picture of your watch face.
2. Discuss the stereotypes that you believe are held in society today and consider how these influence people's perception and behaviour.
3. Before making an important judgement or decision, take time to ask yourself a few key questions:
  - Am I motivated to see things a certain way?
  - What expectations do I have about the situation?
  - Would I see things differently without these motives and expectations?
  - Have I consulted with others who have the same motives and expectations?



By asking yourself these questions, you can start to examine many of the cognitive and motivational factors that cause bias in perception and influence decision-making.

4. Assumptions influence how we perceive and respond to people in our daily lives in the workplace. The purpose of this exercise is to help you to identify the assumptions that you have about other people. This task may be difficult as you are asked to identify and examine stereotypical assumptions that you may hold. It is important that you acknowledge and examine these beliefs as they affect how you think, feel and behave. An awareness of these assumptions can lead to changes in perceptions and behaviours.

Dimensions of diversity	Assumptions that might be made	Influence on behaviour in the workplace
Gender		
Educational background		
Work experience		
Appearance		
Physical ability		
Marital status		
Sexual orientation		
Religion		
Recreational habits		
Personal habits		

### **Essay questions**

1. Propose a definition of perception and describe the process of perception.
2. Investigate the main sources of social bias in perception.
3. Outline the general sources of errors in person perception and how they may be overcome.

## **Short questions**

1. Perception can be described as an active, dynamic, mental or \_\_\_\_\_ process.
2. Is it possible to avoid biases in perception?
3. Propose a definition of perception.
4. Each person has their own understanding of the world around them; therefore perception is a \_\_\_\_\_ process.
5. What process must occur before perception?
6. What is the name given to the boundary between sensing and not sensing?
7. What is the name given to the process by which we filter or screen out information that we do not need in order to prevent total bombardment of the senses?
8. Name the three overall factors that influence perception.
9. Identify three *internal* factors affecting perception.
10. Identify three *external* factors that cause us to notice environmental stimuli.
11. Name three characteristics of stereotypes.
12. When are we most likely to use stereotypes?
13. Provide two examples of workplace stereotypes.
14. What is projection?
15. When we use a single characteristic to generate an overall positive impression, this is called the \_\_\_\_\_ effect.
16. According to attribution theory, what are the three factors that we judge people on the basis of?
17. What do we attribute the causes of our success to, and to what do we attribute the causes of our failures?
18. Provide an example of one of your implicit personality theories.
19. Identify three sources of perceptual errors.
20. Name two remedies to perceptual errors.
21. Name two organisational applications of person perception.