The Accuracy—and Inaccuracy—of Perception

By now you can see how self-concept can distort perceptions of both our own motives and those of others. Research has uncovered several other perceptual errors we need to guard against.16

We Are Influenced by What Is Most 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 cause—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.

We Cling to First Impressions, Even If Wrong Labeling people according to our first impressions is an inevitable part of the perception process. These labels are a way of making interpretations. "She seems cheerful." "He seems sincere." "They sound awfully conceited."

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

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

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

We Tend to Assume Others Are Similar to Us In Chapter Two you read one example of this principle: that people with low self-esteem imagine others view them unfavorably, whereas people who like themselves imagine that
others like them, 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 is pretty funny. You might assume that it won't offend a somewhat straight friend. It does.

—You've been bothered by an instructor's tendency to get off the subject during lectures. If you were a professor, you'd want to know if anything you were doing was creating problems for your students, so you decide that your instructor will probably be grateful for some constructive criticism. Unfortunately, you're wrong.

—You lost your temper with a friend a week ago and said some things you regret. In fact, if someone said those things to you, you'd consider the relationship was finished. Imagining that your friend feels the same way, you avoid making contact. In fact, your friend feels that he was partly responsible and has avoided you because he thinks you're the one who wants to end things.

Examples like these show that others don't always think or feel the way we do and that assuming similarities exist can lead to problems. How can you find out the other person's real position? Sometimes by asking directly, sometimes by
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

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 everyone would react as you do.

We Tend to Favor Negative Impressions of Others Over Positive Ones  What do you think about Harvey? He's handsome, hardworking, intelligent, and honest. He's also very conceited.

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

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

Poet Ric Masten may have said it best: While you're waiting for a prince (or princess) to come along and change your life, you might as well realize that frogs can be fun, too!

We Blame Innocent Victims for Their Misfortunes  The blame we assign for misfortune depends on who the victim is. When others suffer, we often blame the problem on their personal qualities. On the other hand, when we're the victims, we find explanations outside ourselves. Consider a few examples:

—When they botch a job, we might think they weren't listening well or trying hard enough; when we make the mistake, the problem was unclear directions or not enough time.

—When he lashes out angrily, we say he's being moody or too sensitive; when we blow off steam, it's because of the pressure we've been under.

—When she gets caught speeding, we say she should have been more careful; when we get the ticket, we deny we were driving too fast or say, "Everybody does it."

There are at least two explanations for this kind of behavior. Since most of us have an idealized presenting image, we defend ourselves by finding explanations for our own problems that make us look good. Basically what we're doing here is saying, "It's not my fault." And since looking good is so often a personal goal, putting others down can be a cheap way to boost our own self-esteem, stating in effect, "I'm better than he is."

Don't misunderstand: We don't always commit the kind of perceptual errors described in this section. Sometimes, for instance, people are responsible for their misfortunes, and our problems are not our fault. Likewise, the most obvious
interpretation of a situation may be the correct one. Nonetheless, a large amount of research has proved again and again that our perceptions of others are often distorted in the ways listed here. The moral, then, is clear: Don't assume that your first judgment of a person is accurate.

Think about someone you've had a disagreement with lately or someone you dislike. See if any of your perceptions about that person might be mistaken in one of the ways you've just read about.

1. Were the person's actions motivated by some cause that isn't obvious?
2. Were your first impressions of the person mistaken?
3. Have you assumed that the person is thinking or acting the way you would?
4. Have you been placing too much emphasis on negative characteristics and downplaying positive ones?
5. Have you been unfairly blaming the person for his or her problems?

**Empathy: The Road to Understanding**

After reading the preceding list of perceptual errors, you can see that we do indeed select, organize, and interpret the behaviors of others in ways that are often inaccurate. What we clearly need to do, then, is improve our ability to understand others from their point of view as well as from our own. This ability to put ourselves into another person's shoes—view an experience from the other's perspective—is called **empathy**.

**Empathy Defined**  Empathy is the ability to project oneself into another person's point of view so as momentarily to think the same thoughts and feel the same emotions as the other person. The word **empathy** is derived from two Greek words (ἐμπάθεια) that mean "feeling in(side)." These words suggest that empathy involves more than just intellectually understanding another person: It requires you to **experience** the other's perception.*

Empathy is quite different from sympathy. The roots for sympathy (συμπάθεια) mean "feeling with." As this definition implies, when you feel sympathetic, you stand beside the other person, feeling compassion. But despite your concern, sympathy doesn't involve the degree of understanding that empathy does. When you sympathize, it is still the other's confusion, joy, or pain. When you empathize, the experience becomes your own, at least for the moment.

How important is empathy in interpersonal relationships? One simple experiment suggests the answer. In this study, college students were asked to list their impression of people either shown in a videotaped discussion or described in a short story. Half the students were instructed to empathize with the person as much as possible, and the other half were not given any instructions about empathizing. The results were impressive: The students who did not practice empathy were prone to explain the person's behavior in terms of personality characteristics. For example, they might have explained a cruel statement by

*Technically speaking, **empathy** is the ability to experience emotions similar to another person, whereas **decentering** or role taking is the ability to experience the other's thoughts as well. In practice, however, **empathy** is used as the global, all-purpose term.
saying the speaker was mean, or they might have attributed a divorce to the partners’ lack of understanding. The empathetic students, on the other hand, were more aware of possible elements in the situation that might have contributed to the reaction. For instance, they might have explained a person’s unkind behavior in terms of job pressures or personal difficulties. In other words, practicing empathy seems to make people more tolerant.

You might argue here, "Why should I be more tolerant? Maybe behavior I disapprove of is due to the other person’s personality defects and not just a result of outside factors. Maybe people are selfish, lazy, or stupid much of the time." Perhaps so, but research clearly shows that we are much more charitable when finding explanations for our own behavior.\(^\text{19}\) When explaining our actions, we are quick to suggest situational causes: "I was tired." "She started it." "The instructions weren’t clear." In other words, we often excuse ourselves by saying, "It wasn’t my fault!" As we’ve already said, we’re less forgiving when we judge others. Perhaps becoming more empathetic can help even the score a bit, enabling us to treat others at least as kindly as we treat ourselves.

**Requirements for Empathy** Empathy may be valuable, but it isn’t always easy. In fact, research shows that it’s hardest to empathize with people who are different from us radically: in age, sex, socioeconomic status, intelligence, and so forth.\(^\text{20}\) In order to make the kind of perceptual leaps we are talking about, you need to develop several skills and attitudes.

**Open-Mindedness** Perhaps the most important ingredient of empathy is the ability and disposition to be open-minded—to set aside for the moment his or her own beliefs, attitudes, and values and consider those of the other person. This is especially difficult when the other person’s position is radically different from your own. The temptation is to think (and sometimes say), "That’s crazy!" "How can you believe that?" or "I’d do it this way..." As you’ll read in Chapter Seven, attitudes like these often aren’t helpful even if your position is correct.

Being open-minded is often difficult because people confuse understanding another’s position with accepting it. These are quite different matters. To under-
stand why a friend might disagree with you, for example, doesn’t mean you have to give up your position and accept hers.

Imagination  Being open-minded often isn’t enough to allow empathy. You also need enough imagination to be able to picture another person’s background and thoughts. A happily married or single person needs imagination to empathize with the problems of a friend considering divorce. A young person needs it to empathize with a parent facing retirement. A teacher needs it to understand fully the problems facing students, just as those students can’t be empathetic without having enough imagination to understand how their instructor feels.

Commitment  Since empathizing is often difficult, a third necessary quality is the sincere desire to understand the other person. Listening to unfamiliar, often confusing information takes time and isn’t always fun. If you aim to be empathetic, it’s realistic to be willing to face the challenge.

Two Views

1. Choose a disagreement you presently have with another person or group. The disagreement might be a personal one—such as an argument about how to settle a financial problem or who is to blame for a present state of affairs—or it might be a dispute over a contemporary public issue, such as the right of women to obtain abortions on demand or the value of capital punishment.
2. In 300 words or so, describe your side of the issue. State why you believe as you do, just as if you were presenting your position to an impartial jury.
3. Now take 300 words or so to describe in the first-person singular how the other person sees the same issue. For instance, if you are a religious person, write this section as if you were an atheist. For a short while get in touch with how the other person feels and thinks.
4. Now show the description you wrote in step 3 to your “opponent,” the person whose beliefs are different from yours. Have that person read your account and correct any statements that don’t reflect his or her position accurately. Remember, you’re doing this so that you can more clearly understand how the issue looks to the other person.
5. Make any necessary corrections in the account you wrote in step 3, and again show it to your partner. When your partner agrees that you understand his or her position, have your partner sign your paper to indicate this.
6. Now record your conclusions to this experiment. Has this perceptual shift made any difference in how you view the issue or how you feel about your partner?

Developing the Ability to Empathize  Being open-minded, imaginative, and committed is often easier said than done. What we often need is a tool that will help us practice these attitudes. The following reading offers just such a tool. Paul Reps’s pillow method is paradoxical. Although on the one hand it seems too simple really to work, a few attempts will show that seeing other sides of an issue can be a difficult job. The results are worth the effort as you will see when you try it for yourself.