

Perception

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Perception is an ambiguous term and is used in many different ways, at least in the field of communication. Perhaps this is understandable given that communication is a diverse field that draws on concepts from a number of disciplines. Thus, in reading communication literature, one might encounter terms such as precept, perceptual field, or perceptual fluency (terms basic to cognitive psychology), → social perception and selective perception (terms basic to social psychology; → Selective Perception and Selective Retention), and perception of social reality (a term almost unique to communication; → Media and Perceptions of Reality). In fact, each set can be thought of as representing particular stages of information processing, and each is fundamentally important to communication processes (Shrum 2006).

PERCEPTION AS CATEGORIZATION

Perception is essentially a process of categorization. In order to initially comprehend something, we take the surface features of the stimulus we encounter (e.g., color, shape, sound) and use them to place the stimulus into some semantic category. These categories can vary in their level of abstractness, from broader categories such as “plant” to more specific categories such as “fruit” or “apple.”

How a stimulus gets categorized is a function of a variety of factors, and psychology’s understanding of the factors that influence perception has changed dramatically over the last century. For many years, perception was considered a locus, or unitary event, that occurred prior to → comprehension and → memory storage (and retrieval). However, new formulations, inspired by the work of Jerome Bruner and his colleagues, dramatically changed the way scientists view perception. These formulations, often referred to as the “New Look” and “New Look 2” in perception research, now view perception as a “vast processing region” rather than a single point in information processing (Erdelyi 1974, 12). This new perspective on perception had profound effects on both cognitive and social psychology, as well as allied fields such as communication, laying the foundation for the information-processing and social cognition models that are currently dominating the respective fields.

THE “NEW LOOK” OF PERCEPTION

For many years, research on perception took a positivist perspective that held that there was an objective reality, or “pure precept,” that could be perceived, comprehended, and stored in memory. Moreover, these precepts by definition were thought to be influenced by external factors such as intensity or novelty, but for the most part uninfluenced by internal factors of the perceiver. In other words, the mind of the perceiver was considered

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to be a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate, that came to the perception situation with no preconceived notions.

The research by Bruner and colleagues (for reviews, see Bruner 1957; Erdelyi 1974) challenged these assumptions. In a series of experiments, Bruner and colleagues showed that perception could in fact be influenced by internal constructs such as the expectancies and motivations of the perceiver. These expectancies and motivations can affect “perceptual readiness” (Bruner 1957), that is, the readiness with which individuals are prepared to categorize things as they are encountered. Here is an example. Consider a picture of a man that is presented to you. This man has no particular identifying characteristics other than that he is bending over. What is the man doing? Clearly, there are a number of possible answers. In other words, the man’s actions can be categorized, or perceived, in a number of ways: He may be working, praying, playing, and so forth. Prior to the work of Bruner and colleagues, scientists generally thought that only external factors (e.g., the frequency with which a category word such as work, play, or pray occurs in language) could explain deviations from chance categorization. Bruner showed, however, that categorization differed from random chance in predictable ways (Bruner 1951). In particular, categorization depended in part on the personal values held by the perceiver. People who tended to hold strong religious values were more likely to categorize the man as praying than were those who did not hold strong religious values, and those who held strong economic values were more likely to describe the man as working than were those who did not hold strong economic values.

What Bruner’s research showed was that various internal constructs affect the readiness with which we can categorize objects. In any particular situation, many concepts may be used to categorize an object. Which one is used is a function of the accessibility (\rightarrow Attitude Accessibility) of that concept (i.e., the ease with which it comes to mind): the more easily that concept comes to mind, the more likely it is to be used to categorize an object. Hence, the concepts that we think about often (e.g., the personal values we hold in high regard) are more likely to be used to categorize an ambiguous stimulus than are those that we do not think about as often. This explains why the participants in Bruner’s experiment differed in their categorization of a man bending over as a function of their personal values. Indeed, Bruner and colleagues showed that the simple speed with which people could recognize words denoting particular concepts was similarly related to their personal values. When participants were presented with words from the Allport-Vernon values list (a list of values used to determine which ones are most important to a person), the participants were quicker to recognize values that were more important to them than they were values that were less important to them (Postman et al. 1948).

Values are not the only constructs that can influence perception. Past experience also plays a role. To demonstrate this, Bruner and Postman (1949) devised a clever experiment in which they presented participants with pictures of playing cards (i.e., the ace of diamonds, queen of spades, etc.). These cards were presented tachistoscopically (a procedure in which the picture of the playing card is shown on a screen but is masked or blurred; over a very short period of time, the masking is gradually removed and the word becomes more recognizable), and the speed with which participants could recognize or identify the card was recorded. However, the cards that were presented differed. Some were “normal”

cards (e.g., a red queen of diamonds) and others were “anomalous” cards (e.g., a black queen of diamonds). Bruner and Postman found that participants were much quicker to recognize the normal cards than the anomalous cards, presumably because of past experience (the queen of diamonds is always red). The researchers provided further support for this reasoning by showing that participants became faster at recognizing the anomalous cards the more they encountered them, but they never reached the recognition speeds of the normal cards.

What the research by Bruner and colleagues shows is that the probability of categorizing a concept is a function of how frequently certain categorization concepts are activated. When we frequently encounter certain things (e.g., playing cards of a certain color) or frequently think about certain things (the values we hold dear), we are more likely to think of them first (and thus more likely to use them first) when we attempt to categorize an ambiguous stimulus. As the experiment with the man bending over implies, this laboratory research translates very obviously to real-world perception. Thus, we might expect that people would categorize the reasons for a person of a certain race sitting on a park bench (lazy, tired) based on their → attitudes toward and → stereotypes of people of that race, even though there are many possible reasons for the very innocuous behavior (→ Information Processing: Stereotypes).

SOCIAL PERCEPTION

Perception as a categorization process occurs very early on in the information-processing stream. As such, it has important implications for downstream processes. One of these is the process of forming impressions of others. In the research just described, Bruner and colleagues showed that the accessibility of particular constructs in memory affected the recognition and categorization of various things (e.g., playing cards), and also affected the interpretations of ambiguous behaviors (e.g., man bending over). This general line of reasoning can also be extended to the construction of social perceptions, or attitudes and beliefs about others (→ Climate of Opinion; Pluralistic Ignorance, Third-Person Effects), and the implications are straightforward. A set of behaviors can often be interpreted in terms of quite a number of different trait concepts. For example, providing homework answers to a friend might be considered either dishonest or helpful; people who rarely change their minds may be considered either stubborn or persistent. Bruner and colleagues’ work suggest that the impressions we form of people based on such ambiguous information will be interpreted in terms of the concepts that come most readily to mind. Thus, the accessibility of certain concepts (which may occur for reasons unknown to the perceiver) may potentially affect the interpretations of behaviors, which in turn may affect attitudes toward the people performing them.

These possibilities were confirmed in a series of independent experiments by Higgins et al. (1977) and Srull and Wyer (1979, 1980). In those studies, certain trait concepts were made more accessible via priming methodologies (→ Priming Theory). For example, Higgins et al. primed either “stubborn” or “persistent” via a Stroop task, and Srull and Wyer primed either “kind” or “hostile” by having participants unscramble sentences, a majority of which had implications for one of the two trait concepts. Later, participants read a description of a situation or a list of behaviors that were ambiguous with respect to

the trait concepts they could imply. The results confirmed that the situationally induced accessibility of the trait concepts affected person perceptions. Participants in the studies interpreted the behaviors in terms of the trait concepts that were activated through the priming procedures, which in turn affected liking for the target person. Thus, attitudes were more favorable toward the target person when the trait concepts that were activated were positive (kind, persistent) than when they were negative (hostile, stubborn), even though participants were provided with the exact same information about the target person.

COMMUNICATION, ACCESSIBILITY, AND SOCIAL PERCEPTION

The research on the effects of construct accessibility on social perceptions has important implications for the influence of various types of communication on social perception. One in particular is the effect of mass media on construct accessibility, and its consequent influence on social perceptions. Construct accessibility has a number of determinants. In terms of media effects, two are particularly germane: frequency of activation and vividness. The more frequently a construct is activated, the more accessible it becomes, and the more vivid a construct, the greater its accessibility (Higgins 1996). Thus, for example, heavy television viewers are likely to have certain constructs more accessible than light viewers, because of both the frequency of viewing and the fact that television portrayals tend to be very vivid.

These possibilities were confirmed in a study by Busselle and Shrum (2003). Participants were asked to recall certain exemplars, some of which are frequently portrayed in television programs (e.g., murder, courtroom trial). The results showed that ease of recall was positively correlated with the frequency with which examples were portrayed in television programs (but only when direct experience with the examples was low). Other research has shown that not only does the frequency of television viewing affect construct accessibility, but, as in the studies reviewed earlier, this increase in construct accessibility has predictable consequences. In a series of studies by Shrum and colleagues, television viewing was shown to be positively related to the accessibility of certain constructs (e.g., violence, expensive products, marital discord), and this heightened accessibility was positively related to perceptions of the prevalence with which these constructs occur in everyday life. Thus, heavy viewers estimated a greater level of constructs such as societal violence, affluence, and marital discord than did light viewers, and this effect was mediated by the accessibility of these constructs (for a review, see Shrum 2006; → Attitudes, Values, and Beliefs, Media Effects on).

The examples just provided pertained to the frequency of television viewing and its affect on social perceptions. However, it should be clear that the effects should pertain to any media, particularly when their content tends to overrepresent particular constructs. For example, like → television, → newspapers and → magazines often focus on sensationalistic events (e.g., murders, rapes, kidnappings; → Media Logic; News Values). Frequent consumption of such content should increase the accessibility of these constructs, just as it has been shown to do for television. However, it is also worth noting that it is not only the frequency of portrayals that may affect accessibility, but also the consistency of the portrayals. Thus, for example, if certain personal characteristics (e.g., length of hair, color

of skin) are consistently paired with certain outcomes (e.g., drug use, violence), then the mere observance of these characteristics may activate the concepts with which they are consistently paired. In this way, the frequency and consistency of portrayals may lead to increased stereotyping, and as noted in the research reported earlier, these effects may occur outside of the perceiver's awareness.

SEE ALSO: ▶ Attitude Accessibility ▶ Attitudes ▶ Attitudes, Values, and Beliefs, Media Effects on ▶ Climate of Opinion ▶ Comprehension ▶ False Consensus ▶ False Uniqueness ▶ Information Processing ▶ Information Processing: Stereotypes ▶ Magazine ▶ Media Logic ▶ Media and Perceptions of Reality ▶ Memory ▶ News Values ▶ Newspaper ▶ Pluralistic Ignorance ▶ Priming Theory ▶ Selective Perception and Selective Retention ▶ Social Perception ▶ Stereotypes ▶ Television ▶ Third-Person Effects

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