

# Selective Perception and Selective Retention

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Perception refers to the process of categorizing and interpreting information that is attended to (→ Perception). *Selective perception* refers to the process of categorizing and interpreting information in a way that favors one category or interpretation over another. Thus, selective perception is generally considered to represent a bias in → information processing. More specifically, information tends to be selectively perceived in ways that are congruent with existing individual needs, goals, values, → attitudes, and beliefs. This process generally occurs automatically, outside the conscious awareness of the perceiver (→ Automaticity).

The process of selective perception can occur at various stages of perception, including the initial recognition and categorization of stimuli, attention to competing stimuli, and the interpretation of these stimuli. *Selective retention* (also known as selective memory) is a similar process by which some information is retained and stored in → memory (and is thus available for retrieving) and other information is not (and is thus forgotten). Like selective perception, selective retention is biased in terms of what information gets retained, with information that is more congruent with existing belief structures more likely to be retained in memory (and thus more likely to be recalled at a later time) than information that is less congruent with existing belief structures.

## DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT

One of the seminal demonstrations of selective perception in terms of recognition and categorization was provided by Bruner and colleagues. Postman et al. (1948) showed that the recognition and categorization of words are affected by internal constructs such as personal values. Participants in their studies were quicker to recognize values from the Allport–Vernon values list (Allport & Vernon 1931) when the values were ranked as more important than when they were ranked as less important. In a similar manner, Bruner (1951) showed that the categorization (interpretation) of an ambiguous figure (e.g., a man bending over) also varied as a function of the importance of the Allport–Vernon values. Participants who held strong economic values were more likely to describe the man as working compared to those who did not hold strong economic values, and those who held strong religious values were more likely to describe the man as praying than those who did not hold strong religious values.

These findings clearly indicate that internal dispositions of individuals affect how incoming information is perceived. Specifically, individuals tend to perceive information in ways that are congruent with their needs, goals, and values. In other words, individuals appear to regulate the information that gets “filtered in” in the perception process. Bruner and Postman (1947b) referred to this process as “perceptual vigilance.”

Along with regulating what and how information is used in the perceptual process, selective perception can also pertain to a filtering-out process. Bruner and Postman (1947a) provided evidence of this process by demonstrating that people also showed a *decreased* ability to recognize certain emotion-laden stimuli, and these were usually related to taboo words (e.g., bitch, death, penis; Bruner & Postman 1947a). This process was termed “perceptual defense.”

The processes just described pertain to ones that occur very early on in information processing. That is, these examples of selective perception involve the recognition and categorization of information that is attended to. In addition, selective perception can involve the selective assimilation of information into existing cognitive structures, and these have important implications for communication processes such as persuasion. This process was explicated by Sherif and → Hovland (1961) in their → social judgment theory. According to this theory, people’s own attitudes serve as anchors for perceiving information. Specifically, information that is similar to or congruent with one’s own attitude or belief is assimilated (facilitating → persuasion), and information that is incongruent with one’s own attitude or belief is contrasted (inhibiting persuasion).

### CLASSIC STUDIES IN SELECTIVE PERCEPTION

The selective perception process that occurs when information is either assimilated (for pro-attitudinal information) or contrasted (for counter-attitudinal processes) can be seen in what are generally thought to be the classic studies in selective perception. Three studies in particular are cited most often in the communication and psychology literature concerning selective perception. These are the studies by Hastorf & Cantril (1954), Cooper & Jahoda (1947), and Vidmar & Rokeach (1974).

Hastorf & Cantril (1954) investigated the perceptions of student spectators at a football game between Princeton and Dartmouth, which Princeton ultimately won (the spectators had either seen the game live or on television). The game was particularly rough, and a number of players from both teams were injured, including Princeton’s best player. Hastorf & Cantril interviewed spectators a week after the game and found that the spectators’ perceptions of the level of, responsibility for, and quantity of dirty play were strongly related to the spectators’ attitudinal predispositions. Although virtually all students categorized the game as rough, they differed in their perception of that roughness. Princeton students thought the Dartmouth team committed many more infractions than did the Dartmouth students, and also thought the Dartmouth team was dirtier and the game less fair than did the Dartmouth students. For example, 69 percent of the Princeton students but only 24 percent of the Dartmouth students characterized the game as “rough and dirty,” whereas 25 percent of the Dartmouth students but only 2 percent of the Princeton students characterized the game as “rough and fair.”

The results of the Hastorf & Cantril (1954) study can be interpreted in terms of both selective perception and selective retention. In fact, it is impossible to separate the two because we do not know whether participants in that study recalled their prior interpretation (selective perception) or recalled specific incidents from the game to construct their interpretation for the researchers (selective retention and memory). However, Hastorf & Cantril also conducted a second study in which they showed different Princeton and

Dartmouth students a film of the game one to two months later, and asked the students to code the number of infractions they witnessed in the game. The results showed that even though the students watched the exact same film, they perceived it differently. Princeton students cited over twice as many infractions for the Dartmouth team as for the Princeton team (9.8 vs 4.2, respectively), whereas Dartmouth students cited an equal number for both Dartmouth and Princeton (4.3 vs 4.4, respectively), clearly demonstrating a selectivity in perception of events.

Two other classic studies, Cooper & Jahoda (1947) and Vidmar & Rokeach (1974), investigated the effectiveness of the use of popular communications to change prejudiced attitudes. In the Cooper & Jahoda study, the authors investigated the effectiveness of a cartoon character called "Mr Biggott." Mr Biggott was portrayed in a buffoonish, clearly negative manner with exaggerated prejudiced attitudes. The intention was that prejudiced readers would recognize that Mr Biggott held beliefs similar to their own, but also that those attitudes were absurd (because Mr Biggott was absurd), and thus change their attitudes to become less prejudiced. What Cooper & Jahoda found, however, was that Mr Biggott was perceived differently by prejudiced and nonprejudiced readers. Whereas prejudiced readers did perceive the character for the most part as intended, prejudiced readers laughed at the cartoons and often misunderstood the point. Cooper & Jahoda concluded that prejudiced readers avoided psychological conflict by misunderstanding the underlying message.

Vidmar & Rokeach (1974) found results very similar to Cooper & Jahoda (1947) in their study of reactions to the television program *All in the Family*. In that study, the central character, Archie Bunker, is portrayed as a "lovable bigot" (Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974, 36). Vidmar & Rokeach found that high- and low-prejudiced viewers both liked the show equally well, but for different reasons. Low-prejudiced viewers perceived the program and main character as intended, that is, they categorized the program as a satire about bigotry and saw Archie Bunker as an object of ridicule. However, high-prejudiced viewers saw the program more as an honest depiction, and showed more admiration for Archie than did low-prejudiced viewers.

Although the Hastorf & Cantril (1954), Cooper & Jahoda (1947), and Vidmar & Rokeach (1974) studies are often considered as the classic ones, other studies have found similar results. For example, Vallone et al. (1985) conducted a study in which pro-Arab, pro-Israel, and neutral students are shown a videotape of television news coverage of the Beirut massacre, in which civilian refugees in Lebanon were killed. The results showed that prior attitudes influenced both interpretation and memory of the events, and both pro-Arab and pro-Israeli groups perceived that the coverage was biased against them, with neutral viewers falling in the middle. This effect of differing perceptions of biased media coverage against one's own group has been termed the "hostile media effect" (→ Hostile Media Phenomenon). Similar results were reported by Zanna et al. (1976) in a study that investigated the reactions of pro-student and pro-police participants to a television newscast that placed the blame for a police-student confrontation on either the police or students.

Across the studies just reviewed, the results provide strong evidence that individuals' perceptions are biased toward pre-existing attitudes and beliefs. Although the design of these studies did not allow for any assessment of the processes underlying the responses,

the results are consistent with the processes of perceptual vigilance and defense discussed earlier. When exposed to a complex social situation, people will likely interpret actions and events in terms of the constructs that are most accessible in memory. As Postman et al. (1948) so aptly demonstrated, important personal values are often the constructs that are most accessible. Thus, in all three of the selective perception studies just described, participants were most likely to interpret events in terms of their personal values (e.g., pro- or anti-Dartmouth or Princeton, prejudice), selecting for inclusion instances that fit with the existing values and filtering out those that did not. Moreover, as Bruner (1957) suggests, these processes most probably occur unconsciously.

SEE ALSO: ► Attitudes ► Automaticity ► Hostile Media Phenomenon ► Hovland, Carl I. ► Information Processing ► Memory ► Perception ► Persuasion ► Social Judgment Theory

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