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Perception

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Perception is an elusive concept. In my readings and conversations in preparation of this chapter, I've seldom heard a consistent definition. Perhaps that is understandable, given that the usage of the term and its cognates differs across fields. Precept, perceptual field, and perceptual fluency (cognitive psychology), person perception, social perception, and selective perception (social psychology), perceived reality and perceptions of social reality (communications), are just a few examples of different usages. The progression of terms, from precept through perceptions of social reality, actually suggests a progression through stages of information processing, from the categorization and encoding of basic stimuli to the formation of trait (person) inferences to the construction of more elaborate inferences and judgments about complex social stimuli such as groups, society, and events.

Regardless of which of the fields, terms, or stages best captures the consensus of what perception entails, each is clearly fundamental to communication in general, and the processing of entertainment in particular. Moreover, as will (hopefully) be clear throughout the chapter, these processes are dynamic and reciprocal: Person and situation factors influence the perception of people and events, and the frequent processing of people and events influences which person and situation factors are employed in subsequent perceptions and judgments.

In the next section, I provide a general overview of cognitive psychology's view of perception. The purpose is to begin laying the groundwork for understanding how the processes that comprise perception influence communication processes and how communication processes also influence perceptual processes. These dynamic and reciprocal relations between perception and communication form the basis for how media in general, and entertainment media in particular, are perceived and for how the consumption of entertainment media influences perceptions.

A COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE ON PERCEPTION

One might think that focusing on a particular field's conceptualization of perception would alleviate ambiguity, particularly when that field (cognitive psychology) is the one with which perception is most closely associated. One would be wrong. Although there is considerable agreement on certain aspects of the definition, that consensus breaks down at the boundaries between perception and other processes, such as when perception becomes memory (Erdelyi, 1992). However, as with the ambiguity across fields mentioned earlier, this ambiguity is also understandable. The current view of perception is not one of a "locus," or unitary event, but of a "vast processing region" comprised of multiple stages (Erdelyi, 1974, p. 14). This focus on stages of processing and the dynamic nature of information processing in general was initially fostered by what has become known as the "New Look" in perception (Bruner, 1957), and the reformulations of this early research into information processing models have become known as the "New Look 2" (cf. Erdelyi, 1974; Greenwald, 1992). It is difficult to overestimate the impact of this seminal research on both the cognitive and social psychology fields of today, because it laid the foundation for the information processing revolution in psychology.

The "New Look" in Perception

Perception at its most basic level is a process of categorization (Bruner, 1957). When stimulus information is received as a sensory input, the perceptual process attempts to make sense out of this information by placing it into a category of things (e.g., fruit, animal, woman, etc.). Note that these inputs could come from various senses (visual, aural, etc.), and for the former, could take the form of pictures or words. The process of perceiving involves taking the surface features of the stimulus (e.g., colors, tones, shapes, letters) and placing them into a semantic category.

Prior to the New Look movement, perception research embodied the positivist perspective that there was an objective reality (a "pure precept," Bruner, 1992, p. 780) that was processed by the senses in a relatively passive manner and was generally affected only by external factors (e.g., intensity, novelty). The New Look took a more constructivist perspective. It suggested that perception was an adaptive process, and, as such, was influenced by internal constructs such as expectancies and motivations. In a series of studies, Bruner, Postman, and colleagues demonstrated that these internal constructs affected "perceptual readiness," or the ease with which stimuli could be categorized (for a review, see Bruner, 1957; Erdelyi, 1974). For example, Postman, Bruner, and McGinnies (1948) showed that the speed with which participants in their study recognized words corresponding to the Allport-Vernon values list (Allport & Vernon, 1931) was a function of the place of those values within each individual's value hierarchy. Values ranked as more important by an individual tended to be recognized faster than those ranked as less important. Bruner (1951) later showed that categorization (interpretation) of an ambiguous picture (e.g., a man bending over) varied as a function of the importance of the Allport-Vernon values. Thus, participants who held strong religious values tended to describe the man as praying and those with strong economic values tended to describe the man as working.

Other internal constructs unrelated to values, motivations, or needs have produced results similar to Postman et al. (1948). Bruner and Postman (1949) showed that past experience can result in expectancies, which in turn influence the perceptual process of categorization. Playing cards were presented to participants tachistoscopically; some of the cards were normal (e.g., a red eight of hearts) and others were not (e.g., a black three of diamonds). Recognition thresholds were substantially longer for the anomalous cards than for the normal cards. However, once the

anomalous cards had been initially presented, recognition thresholds for all other anomalous cards were lowered, but still not to the levels of the ordinary cards. Bruner (1958) framed these results in terms of an expectancy, or hypothesis, theory of perception. Over time, people learn "what goes with what." The strength of the hypothesis also increases with consistent results over time, which in turn influences the perceptual process embodied by the recognition thresholds in Bruner and Postman (1949). Moreover, once confidence was reduced by showing participants anomalous cards, participants showed less of an effect of expectancies.

The enhanced ability of people to perceive (categorize) stimuli as a function of their internal states was referred to as "perceptual vigilance" (Bruner & Postman, 1947b). However, there was another set of findings that was equally novel: People also showed a *decreased* ability to recognize certain emotional stimuli (termed "perceptual defense"), and these were invariably related to "taboo" words (e.g., bitch, penis, death; Bruner & Postman, 1947a).

Both of these concepts (vigilance and defense) had a profound influence on psychology, from cognitive, to social, to clinical. First, the notion of defense mechanisms provided a clear link between the clinical nature of Freudian psychology and the more scientifically inclined experimental work in cognitive psychology. That is, the clinical findings on such mechanisms as repression that had heretofore been subjected to criticisms of lack of scientific rigor and falsifiability now had just the evidence for which critics had called. Moreover, the selectivity of perception under conditions in which participants were not aware of any selective processes clearly suggested the operation of an active subconscious. Indeed, as Bruner (1992) noted, it was not long before the psychoanalytical aspects of the debate began to dominate, and links between Freudian and cognitive psychology became more formalized (cf. Lazarus, Erikson, & Fonda, 1951; Erdelyi, 1974, 1983). Second, the notion of perceptual vigilance, or readiness, provided the impetus for the explosion of research on construct accessibility (for reviews, see Higgins, 1996; Wyer & Srull, 1989). Specifically, people are always ready to perceive (categorize), and they may do so by choosing among a number of categorization possibilities. Which category is chosen is a function of the accessibility of that category, and category accessibility can be a function of internal (e.g., motivation, needs, attitudes) or external (e.g., environmental, situational) factors. Thus, a Rorschach inkblot might be more likely to be interpreted in terms of food-related objects for those who are hungrier, or an ambiguous behavior (sitting on a park bench) might be interpreted negatively because of a recent exposure to a racial or gender stereotype.

The "New Look 2"

The findings of Bruner, Postman, and colleagues posed significant problems for the then-current view of cognitive processes. According to the extant theory of that time, the perceptual system was posited to operate between the stimulus and response systems, with a clear sequential progression from stimulus to perception to response, at which point information could be stored in long-term memory. Yet Bruner and colleagues clearly showed that at some point, long-term memory must be exerting an influence on the perceptual process. That is, perceptual readiness was enhanced by past experience with covariation. Perceptual defense was enhanced by past experience with unpleasant stimuli.

This conundrum was addressed by Erdelyi (1974), who conceptualized perception as a multistage process that is under cognitive control (via long-term memory) but occurs outside of awareness. Thus, individuals are generally (but not always) unaware of why particular categories or constructs are activated in the process of perception/categorization of stimuli and they are also generally unaware of any perceptual defense mechanisms that might not let particular stimuli be perceived and thus brought into awareness. In other words, people are not typically aware of why particular categories get "selected in" (perceptual vigilance) or why

they get "selected out" (perceptual defense), even though long-term memory is monitoring the sensory inputs in order to perform these selection tasks in the most adaptive manner.

The general notion of perceptual selectivity provides the foundation for the transition to a social psychological perspective on perception. As noted earlier, the work of Bruner and colleagues was instrumental to the development of theories of social perception, particularly as they relate to construct accessibility. In addition, although to my knowledge it has not been directly applied in this manner, both perceptual selectivity and construct accessibility have some relation to selective perception as it has been traditionally addressed in both psychology and communication research. Each of these constructs is discussed in the next section.

A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON PERCEPTION

Social Perception and Construct Accessibility

For the purposes of this discussion, social perception refers to the process of forming impressions of other people or groups. Construct accessibility refers to the ease with which particular constructs, in this case trait concepts, are activated. Bruner and colleagues' work (for a review, see Bruner, 1957) on perception of simple objects (e.g., apple, orange) was applied to perceptions of persons. Bruner (1957) states "given a sensory input with equally good fit to two nonoverlapping categories, the more accessible of the two categories would 'capture' the input" (p. 132). The extrapolation to trait judgments is straightforward. In almost any social situation, a set of circumscribed behaviors can be interpreted in terms of a number of trait concepts. In other words, given only a small amount of information, the motivations for performing a particular behavior are ambiguous. For example, a person sitting on a park bench may be doing so because they have nothing else to do (lazy) or because they just finished work (hardworking). A person who skydives may be considered reckless or adventurous. In both of these cases, lacking any additional diagnostic information, perceptions of the same behavior could be categorized along multiple trait dimensions. According to Bruner, the relative accessibility of applicable trait constructs determines how the behavior is perceived and encoded into an impression of that person. The accessibility of trait concepts in turn may be influenced by external (e.g., communication) and internal (e.g., needs, motivations, attitudes) factors.

Externally Induced Accessibility.   The predictions of situational accessibility effects implied by Bruner (1957) were confirmed in a series of studies by Higgins, Rholes, and Jones (1977) and Srull and Wyer (1979, 1980). In both studies, trait concepts were activated, and thus made more accessible, via a priming procedure. The priming procedures varied across the studies. In the Higgins et al. studies, participants were exposed to one of two trait concepts, stubborn or persistent, via an ostensibly unrelated Stroop task. In the Srull and Wyer studies, participants completed a scrambled sentence task to activate either the trait concept of hostile or kind. Later, for both studies, participants read either a description of a situation or list of behaviors that were ambiguous with respect to the trait they might imply. For example, making up ones mind and rarely changing it could be perceived as either stubborn or persistent. Crossing the Atlantic in a sailboat could be perceived as either reckless or adventurous.

The results across all of the studies converged on the same conclusion. When particular trait concepts were made more accessible via priming procedures, participants tended to judge the behaviors of the target person in terms of those primed concepts. Thus, participants in Higgins et al. (1977) had more favorable impressions of a target person when persistent was primed than when stubborn was primed, even though all participants read the exact same trait

descriptions. Similar results were found for Srull and Wyer (1979, 1980). Moreover, Srull and Wyer showed that, although these accessibility effects tended to be reduced over time (e.g., 5 min., 1 hr., 24 hrs.), when priming frequency was high, the accessibility effects from priming were observable 24 hours later.

It is important to note the effect of awareness on construct activation, or more specifically, the lack of it, in producing the effects in the priming studies. Situational factors make certain trait concepts more accessible and thus more likely to be used in social perception, but people are usually unaware of this relation. In the Higgins et al. and Srull and Wyer studies, participants were consciously aware of the prime, but they were not aware of its possible influence. This reasoning was confirmed by Bargh and Pietromonaco (1982), who subliminally primed participants with trait concepts prior to an impression formation task. Thus, participants were clearly unaware of the relation between the priming event and the judgment task because they were unaware that the priming event even took place. In addition, Martin (1986) showed that when participants *are* aware that the trait concepts that come to mind may have been influenced by external factors, they may avoid using the trait concepts to form their judgments (see also Lombardi, Higgins, & Bargh, 1987).

One final aspect of the priming studies is important. In both the Higgins et al. and Srull and Wyer studies, the priming of trait categories had an effect only when those trait categories were applicable to the behavior. Thus, in Higgins et al. (1977), the priming of applicable trait concepts (reckless, adventurous) affected interpretations of behaviors such as skydiving (the target person was liked better when the trait concept was more positive than negative) but the priming of inapplicable concepts (neat, disrespectful) had no effect, even though the concepts differ in valence. In the Srull and Wyer studies (1979, 1980), priming of a trait such as hostile affected evaluations of a target person along dimensions applicable to hostility (e.g., unfriendly) but not along trait dimensions unrelated to hostility (e.g., boring). What these findings suggest is that, as Bruner (1957) noted, it is not simply the accessibility per se that guides perception, but also the relative fit between the accessible construct and the stimulus features. Thus, accessible constructs are not necessarily used willy-nilly in the perception of stimuli, but only when the relative fit makes it logical to do so.[1]

Internally Induced Accessibility.   The accessibility of constructs can also result from factors unique to the person. As noted earlier, various temporary or situational need states (e.g., hunger, thirst) may influence how stimulus inputs are categorized. However, individuals may also differ on the extent to which the heightened accessibility of particular constructs persists over time and situations. These individual differences may be the result of internal factors such as personality or from external factors such as frequency of activation as a result of occupations, hobbies, social roles, and so forth. In the latter cases, although the activation of concepts is externally induced, it is internalized over time. When certain constructs exhibit such persistent accessibility, they are said to be "chronically accessible" (Higgins, 1996).

A number of studies have provided evidence of chronic accessibility effects. Higgins, King, and Mavin (1982) first determined participants' level of chronicity for various traits by observing what types of trait concepts they listed first in response to various inquiries. One week later, participants read individually tailored essays (based on their chronicity) that contained trait descriptions, for some of which they were chronic and for some of which they were not chronic. The results showed that both spontaneous impressions of a target person and recall for the behavioral descriptions were more related to the trait concepts for which participants were chronic than for which they were nonchronic. Bargh, Bond, Lombardi, and Tota (1986)

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[1]However, there is some evidence that very a high degree of accessibility can compensate for a low degree of applicability (Higgins & Brendl, 1995).

extended these findings by looking at the possible additive effects of chronic and experimentally primed accessibility. They determined participants' chronic accessibility from a previous experiment, and then subliminally primed these same participants with traits for which they were found to be chronic. Bargh et al. found that both chronic and primed accessibility had independent, additive effects on impressions of a target person.

It is also worth noting that the effects of chronic accessibility generally persist over time. Higgins et al. (1982) found that the chronic accessibility effects they noted on impression and memory were still detectable two weeks after exposure to the target information. In a different context, Lau (1989) found that chronically accessible constructs can be stable over years and influence the processing of information about a wide variety of politically related people and events (see Higgins, 1996).

Stereotyping.   The research just reviewed provides compelling evidence that social perception is a function of the accessibility of applicable trait concepts from memory that are stimulated by the features of a target person. In this research, the primed constructs were traits, and the features of the person were often behaviors or behavioral descriptions. However, it is also possible that other features of a target person other than behavior—for example, length of hair, color of skin, gender—may also activate particular concepts. In fact, this process perfectly describes the nature of stereotyping. Certain concepts, in this case the stereotype itself, may be activated upon mere exposure to the person. Once activated, this stereotype has associated with it a variety of trait concepts that likewise become activated, making those trait concepts more likely to be used in forming an impression of a target person.

Consider the example described earlier of the man sitting on a park bench. Would the consideration of the motive for the behavior (no job vs. just off work), and consequently impressions of the man (lazy, hardworking) differ if the man's skin color was black or white? If the man's hair were long or short? The research on priming suggests that skin color would be likely to activate stereotypical traits associated with race and these traits would be used to form a judgment of the person. Likewise, length of hair (pony tail, shaved head) might also activate stereotypes that would influence judgments of the person.

There is quite a bit of research that validates this reasoning. The prevailing view of stereotype activation is that stereotypes are activated preconsciously as part of the perceptual process. If the stereotype of a person or group is available in memory, it will be activated upon mere exposure to the target person or group (Devine, 1989; Lepore & Brown, 1997; for a review, see Bodenhausen & Macrae, 1998). Because this activation occurs preconsciously, the individual is unaware of both its activation and its use, and this process is often referred to as *implicit stereotyping* (Banaji & Greenwald, 1994). However, this does not mean that stereotyping is necessarily inevitable if the stereotype exists in memory. If people are aware of the stereotype, they may actively resist its application. Devine (1989) showed that even though activation of the stereotype is automatic, low-prejudiced individuals tended to suppress its use to a greater degree than high-prejudiced individuals. In more recent research, Moskowitz, Salomon, and Taylor (2000) provided some qualifications to these findings. They found that some individuals (e.g., those with chronic egalitarian goals) can suppress automatic activation of stereotypes, and this suppression itself occurs automatically, outside of awareness.

Attitude Accessibility.   Trait concepts are not the only accessible constructs that can influence perception. Recall from Bruner (1957) that many psychological factors such as expectancies, goals, motivations, values, and attitudes can influence perception. Bruner and colleagues showed that the most important values were not only the most easily recognized, but also tended to be used to interpret ambiguous behaviors (Bruner, 1951; Postman et al., 1948). Attitudes are no different. One of the major findings of attitude research is that attitudes

provide an organizing and structuring function for dealing with an ambiguous environment (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Gordon Allport (1935, p. 306) presaged the selective perception research to come when he noted that "attitudes determine for each individual what he will see and hear, what he will think and what he will do." Functional theories of attitudes (Katz, 1960; Smith, Bruner, & White, 1956) posited that attitudes simplify an individual's interaction with the world, particularly through their object appraisal function. The attitude provides a useful function in orienting the individual to the attitude object (Fazio, 1989; Roskos-Ewoldsen & Fazio, 1992).

Schemas and Scripts. Schemas and scripts may also be used in the perceptual process (see also Wicks, this volume). Schemas are knowledge structures that represent a set of associations regarding objects or events. They are "organized prior knowledge, abstracted from experience with specific instances" (Fiske & Linville, 1980, p. 543). Scripts are specific types of schemas that refer to procedural knowledge about sequences of events (Abelson, 1976; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Schemas and scripts are thus categorization aids that allow perceivers to interpret incoming information in the context of past experience. As such, once activated, they guide expectations with respect to what should and should not happen. Like all constructs, schemas and scripts can vary in their level of accessibility, and thus vary in the probability that they will be activated in any particular situation.

Selective Perception

The previous discussion on construct accessibility, attitudes, and perception provides a useful segue into a subject central to both social psychology and communication, that of selective perception. There are three particular studies that are cited most often in the communication literature concerning selective perception. These are the studies by Cooper and Jahoda (1947), Hastorf and Cantril (1954), and Vidmar and Rokeach (1974). Although these studies are seldom discussed in terms of Bruner's (1957) theory and research (but see Bruner, 1994; Fazio, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Powell, 1994; Fazio & Towles-Schwen, 1999), as the following discussion suggests, they are very consistent with it.

Hastorf and Cantril's (1954) classic study, "They Saw a Game," investigated the perceptions of spectators at a particularly rough football game between Princeton and Dartmouth, which Princeton ultimately won. Hastorf and Cantril found that spectators' perceptions of the level of, responsibility for, and quantity of dirty play was strongly related to the spectators' attitudinal predispositions. 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.

Both the Cooper and Jahoda (1947) and Vidmar and Rokeach (1974) studies looked at attempts to use popular communications to change prejudiced attitudes. Cooper and Jahoda found that a cartoon strip that portrayed a prejudiced character ("Mr. Biggott") in a particularly negative light was perceived differently by prejudiced and non-prejudiced readers. They concluded that prejudiced readers avoided psychological conflict by misunderstanding the underlying message. Vidmar and Rokeach found a similar pattern of reactions to the television program *All in the Family*, in which the central character, Archie Bunker, is presented as a "lovable bigot" (p. 36). They found that high- and low-prejudiced viewers liked the show equally well, but for different reasons. Low-prejudiced viewers considered the program a satire about bigotry and saw Archie Bunker as being ridiculed, whereas high-prejudiced saw the program more as an honest depiction and tended to admire Archie more than did low-prejudiced viewers.

Across the three studies, the findings converge on the conclusion that individuals' perceptions are biased toward pre-existing attitudes and beliefs. Although the survey nature of these

studies does not allow for any assessment of process (which Cooper and Jahoda themselves noted), the results are consistent with the processes of perceptual vigilance and defense. 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) demonstrated, important personal values are often the constructs that are most accessible. Thus, in all three of the selective perception studies just described, participants likely interpreted events in terms of their personal values (e.g., Dartmouth good/Princeton bad, values related to racial prejudice), selecting for inclusion instances that fit with those existing values and selecting out those that did not. Moreover, as both Bruner (1957) and Erdelyi (1974) suggest, these processes most likely occur unconsciously. Although Hastorf and Cantril (1954) do not use the cognitive process language of Bruner and Erdelyi, their account of their results falls nicely within that scope:

> Hence the particular occurrences that different people experienced in the football game were a limited series of events from the total matrix of events *potentially* available to them. People experienced those occurrences that reactivated significances they brought to the occasion; they failed to experience those occurrences which did not reactivate past significances (p. 132, emphasis in original).

PERCEPTION AND ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA

The previous discussion of perception and its underlying processes provides the basis for understanding the relation between perception and entertainment media. There are two particular processes that are important in this regard. The first is how individuals perceive entertainment media. Part of this process is represented by what is commonly referred to as the "perceived reality" of the media. For example, as people watch a television program, they receive sensory inputs that must be organized within existing knowledge structures, whether these be simple attitudes and trait concepts, or more elaborate schemas, scripts, and stereotypes. The types of constructs that are activated during the perception process clearly influence both cognitive and affective reactions to the media information, interpretations of the information received, and the integration of the information (and its implications) into existing belief structures.

The second process in the relation between perception and entertainment media that is important is how frequent consumption of entertainment media influences the constructs that play a part in perception. In other words, consumption of entertainment media may influence the internal factors (e.g., attitude accessibility, stereotypes, schemas, and scripts) that play such an important role in the perceptual process. This process falls into the category of media effects, and is exemplified in research on so-called "perceptions of social reality."

Perceiving Entertainment Media

Viewers have certain expectations when they watch an entertainment program. These expectations might be called narrative or story schemas at the general level, or might be specific to the type of program viewed (film, news, sitcom, soap opera, etc.). Interestingly, Bruner himself noted the importance of narratives as an organizing aid to perceptual processing:

> One of the most powerful means we have for making meaning is our narrative capacity: our power to create and to use stories as means for bringing order and sense into experience. Stories are not 'after the fact': we *perceive* stories in progress—we *see*

or *hear* people as heroes, recognize situations as dangerous or benign in terms of an encompassing plot (Bruner, 1994, p. 283, emphasis in original).

Part of what influences our perception and categorization of situations as dangerous, mean-spirited, violent, and so forth are schemas related to program genres. All narratives have shared structures (e.g., plot, event, problem resolution) but certain differences also exist between types of television programs. There are obvious differences between serials (continuing plot and problems from episode to episode) and situation comedies (usually a resolution of a problem in one episode). In addition, we also have schemas for the messages portrayed in different types of programs. Thus, the same act, for instance, pushing or hitting another person in an argument, may be perceived differently given that one knows, for example, that in the situation comedy this act is likely to be related to humor rather than malice, or at the very least, will be resolved happily in the end.

Another interesting aspect of entertainment media, particularly *fictional* entertainment media, is the extent to which viewers let (or do not let) the fictional aspect "get in the way" of narrative processing, and, by extension, let it get in the way of the influence of the narrative processing on the creation and maintenance of beliefs (Green, Garst, & Brock, 2004). I have argued elsewhere that one of the ways in which viewers do not allow the fictional aspect of entertainment media to get in the way is through what Coleridge (1967) called "a willing suspension of disbelief" (cf. Shrum, forthcoming; Shrum, Burroughs, & Rindfleisch, 2004). Although viewers clearly know that a program is fictional, it is simply more enjoyable, more "transporting" (Green & Brock, 2000) to process it as if it is real. What then in turn influences the ease in suspending disbelief is the degree of *perceived reality* of the fictional entertainment program.

Perceived Reality of Entertainment Media[2]

Quite a bit of research has focused on issues related to perceived reality (see Busselle & Greenberg, 2000). Most of this research was concerned with the extent to which perceived reality moderates the effect of media portrayals on attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Early research on the relation between media and aggression manipulated perceived reality with techniques such as telling participants the event was real or staged or by telling them the video segment they were to view was from either a movie or a newsreel of an actual event (cf. Feshbach, 1972; Berkowitz & Alioto, 1973; for a review, see Berkowitz, 1984). The general finding was that media portrayals of violence had their greatest effects on violent behavior when the portrayals were considered real. Some studies further suggested that these perceptions of reality have both psychological and physiological effects. Violence perceived as real was more arousing, as evidenced by galvanic skin response (Geen, 1975; Geen & Rakosky, 1973). Violence perceived as fictional appears to allow viewers to distance themselves from the event and it thus may have less of an impact on them (Berkowitz, 1984).

Other research on perceived reality and its relation to media effects has measured the extent to which television is perceived as real by viewers and consequent effects on social perceptions. In particular, perceived reality has been investigated as a potential moderator of cultivation effects. However, this research has not yielded any consistent pattern of results with respect to

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[2]The main focus of the discussion is on the extent to which fictional portrayals are judged to be real. Nonfiction programming such as news, documentaries, and sports are considered to be judged as real by viewers because viewers know the scenes are either occurring in real time, were recorded, or are based on real events. It should be noted, however, that any of these programs might be perceived as less real if they contain features atypical of conventional news, documentary, or sports programming.

the role of perceived reality (Shrum, forthcoming). Part of the problem may simply be issues of measurement. As Busselle and Greenberg (2000) noted, there has been a lack of clarity and consistency in the way in which the perceived reality has been measured. In addition, given that certain types of programming differ dramatically from others (e.g., news vs. situation comedy),[3] it is unclear what it would mean to measure perceived reality of television in general (Wilson & Busselle, 2004). Just as Bruner (1957) noted that people, events, and situations are interpreted in terms of the most accessible constructs, it is likely that judgments of perceived reality of television in general would be based on the program categories that most readily come to mind (see Busselle, 2004 for evidence of this possibility).

Until recently, little research had focused on the underlying perceptual processes of "perceiving reality" while viewing. That is, how do people make judgments of perceived reality, and what makes one program, scene, or person seem more real than others? Shapiro and his colleagues (Shapiro & Chock, 2003; Shapiro & Fox, 2002) have attempted to address these questions. Their research suggests that *typicality* plays a big role in reality perception. Typicality refers to the extent to which a portrayed event occurs as it would in real life, and, as such, is a function of both plausibility and probability. Shapiro and Chock (2003) found that texts of atypical events were judged as less realistic than texts containing typical events, and Shapiro and Fox (2002) found that atypical events were more easily recalled than typical events. The latter finding suggests that atypical events undergo deeper processing, which improves recall (Craik & Lockhart, 1972). Hall (2003) found six dimensions of perceived reality. In addition to typicality and plausibility, she also identified factuality, emotional involvement, narrative consistency, and perceptual persuasiveness.

Effects of Perceived Reality and Their Underlying Processes. So what effects might perceived reality have? For one, as alluded to earlier, it seems likely that perceived reality would be related to the concept of transportation (Gerrig, 1993; Green & Brock, 2000). Transportation refers to the extent to which viewers are absorbed into the narrative they are processing. Transportation is exemplified by greater attentional focus, imagery development, and emotion. If a program is perceived as atypical, and thus less real (Shapiro & Chock, 1993), it should draw more focus to the atypical events, leaving less resources for focusing on the narrative itself. If so, then it is likely that the narrative would have less persuasive impact.

There is a growing body of evidence supporting both the notion that perceived reality is related to transportation and that transportation is related to persuasion. Wilson and Busselle (2004) found that perceived reality was positively correlated with transportation. Thought-listing data indicated the perceived reality of a program was lowest when participant thoughts were directed away from the program narrative and when they were evaluatively negative. Green and Brock (2000) provided evidence that participants who were more transported while reading a narrative passage found fewer errors in the narrative and had more favorable impressions of the protagonists than did less transported participants.

Green et al. (2004) suggest that these effects are due to processing style. When people perceive a narrative to be fictional, they use this information as a cue to become less critical and more transported. Prentice and Gerrig (1999) suggested that the processing of fact and fiction follow different routes, with fiction being processed less systematically. They also suggested that fiction has the most influence when it is responded to in an experiential rather than rational manner. Zwaan (1994) provided some evidence that this reasoning is related to the processing of factual versus fictional television programming. He found that merely indicating

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[3]As a tribute to the late Neil Postman, author of *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, it should be noted that the similarities between the news and situation comedies, indeed the similarities between news and *any* other entertainment program category, are increasing rapidly.

that a text passage came from the news or a novel affected how participants interacted with the text and what they got from it. Those who were told the passage was fictional took longer to read the text and remembered more surface features such as verbatims, whereas those who were told the passage was factual recalled more situational information and tended to process at a deeper, rather than surface level.

Entertainment Media Consumption and Social Perception

The previous section addressed how viewers perceive entertainment media and how these perceptions may influence all subsequent stages of information processing. In addition, the previous section discussed how internal qualities that people bring to the viewing situation (e.g., accessible constructs, prior beliefs) guide perceptions and their effects. This section completes the circle. Media consumption, particularly very frequent consumption, can itself influence construct accessibility, which in turn will not only influence perceptions of the media, but also the perception of people and events in everyday life.

Entertainment Media Consumption and Construct Accessibility. The notion that media consumption influences construct accessibility is straightforward. There are a number of factors that can increase construct accessibility. Two internal factors—expectations and motivations—were discussed in earlier sections. However, there are also external factors that can influence accessibility (for reviews, see Higgins & King, 1981; Roskos-Ewoldsen, 1996). Of particular relevance to this discussion are frequency of activation, recency of activation, and vividness of the information. The information can be in the form of simple exemplars or more complex beliefs, attitudes, and values.

Information that has been frequently activated from memory is easily recalled. This is most easily seen in rehearsal effects. In attempting to memorize names, a list of events, or answers to a test, rehearsal is useful in increasing the likelihood that we will be able to recall the information at a later time. The same is true for recency: Information recently activated (and re-stored in memory) is also easily recalled. Finally, the vividness of stored information influences accessibility. More vivid exemplars tend to be more easily recalled that less vivid exemplars. Presumably, the vividness of attributes influences depth of processing, which in turn facilitates recall.

Given these findings, we would expect particular outcomes as a result of entertainment media consumption. Consider television viewing. Television provides a steady stream of formulaic and consistent portrayals of people and events (for a discussion, see Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002). At the very least, frequent viewing should make these examples more accessible from memory. In addition, frequent activation of evaluative concepts related to the portrayals (i.e., attitudes and values) should also make them more accessible. Moreover, the exemplars portrayed and the evaluative concepts activated during viewing are often vivid or emotional, which in turn also increases construct accessibility.

Increasing the accessibility of constructs activated during television viewing would not be particularly problematic if, in fact, what is portrayed on television reflects reality. However, content analyses make it clear that it is not. The overarching goal of all networks in developing television programs is to induce as many people as possible to tune in. To develop mass appeal, the programs employ some consistent features. For example, in order to entertain and stimulate, they emphasize drama and suspense. One consequence is the frequent use of crime and violence that is over ten times the rate of its real world incidence (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986). Television programs also must tell its stories quickly and efficiently: Television

time is expensive and viewers' attention spans are short. One technique for telling a story quickly is through the use of stereotypes. A stereotype is a convenient data reduction technique or heuristic (Bodenhausen, Macrae, & Sherman, 1999). As long as viewers are familiar with a stereotype, an abundance of information about a character or situation can be conveyed without resorting to lengthy dialogue. However, as with many stereotypes, characterizations are seldom neutral. Some are positive (hero) and some are negative (criminal). More disturbing are the problems that arise when the pairing of particular stereotypes (e.g., criminal, hero, successful, powerless) and particular attributes (e.g., race, gender, class, age) becomes systematic (e.g., Oliver, 1994).

There is a growing body of evidence that television viewing is positively related to the accessibility of constructs portrayed often on television. Busselle and Shrum (2003) measured the ease of recall of certain exemplars, some of which were frequently portrayed on television (e.g., murder, courtroom trial, highway accident). They found that media examples were more easily recalled for events frequently shown on television but infrequently experienced personally (e.g., trial, murder). Events experienced personally were more easily recalled when the events were encountered often in real life, even when those events were also frequently portrayed on television (e.g., highway accidents, dates). Moreover, the ease of retrieving media examples was related to hours of TV viewing, but only for viewing of television programs in which the events were frequently portrayed and when the direct experience with the events was likely to be low.

Indirect evidence suggesting that television viewing increases accessibility was obtained in studies that measured the speed with which participants constructed their social reality judgments. Greater accessibility was expected to result in faster judgments, and thus heavy viewers were expected to respond faster than light viewers. These expectations were confirmed in a series of studies that varied the type of dependent variables, operationalization of viewing, and control variables (cf. O'Guinn & Shrum, 1997; Shrum, 1996; Shrum & O'Guinn, 1993; Shrum, O'Guinn, Semenik, & Faber, 1991).

In the studies just described, the accessible constructs were exemplars, or some example of a category (e.g., a doctor, a crime). However, external factors such as frequency and recency of activation also influence the accessibility of attitudes (Roskos-Ewoldsen, 1996). Thus, frequent (and recent) viewing should be positively related to the extent to which attitudes related to the messages portrayed on television are activated. Shrum (1999) provided evidence that supports this reasoning in a study of heavy and light soap opera viewers. Study participants were classified as heavy or light soap opera viewers on the basis of a pretest and were recruited for a study two months later (they were unaware of the selection criterion). A content analysis of current soap operas was conducted to identify salient themes, which were determined to be materialism, marital discord, and distrust. Based on this content analysis, participants indicated their attitudes toward owning expensive products, their beliefs that their spouse will cheat on them, and their distrust of people in general and lawyers in particular. Attitude accessibility was operationalized as the speed with which participants indicated their attitudes (measured via computer input). The results showed that even after controlling for attitude extremity, heavy viewers responded faster, and thus indicated more accessible attitudes and beliefs, than light viewers.

Effects of Media-Induced Accessibility on Perceptions. The question now becomes to what extent this heightened accessibility due to exposure to entertainment media influences perceptions about others? By now, the predictions should be clear. More accessible constructs are more likely to be activated in social or decision-making contexts, and are thus more likely to be used as a basis for judgment than less accessible constructs. A number of studies have confirmed this prediction, mostly within the context of testing cultivation theory. Shrum and

colleagues (for a review, see Shrum, 2006) have shown that television viewing influences both the magnitude of societal perceptions (% of people involved in a violent crime, % of work force that is lawyers, etc.) and the accessibility of exemplars. More important, this accessibility *mediates* the effect of viewing on societal perceptions. Thus, television viewing influences construct accessibility, which in turn influences the magnitude of societal perceptions.

Attitude accessibility can also have an effect on later stages of information processing. Attitudes that are more accessible from memory are generally stronger, held more confidently, are more persistent and resistant to change, and are more likely to influence behavior than less accessible attitudes (for a review, see Petty & Krosnick, 1995). Thus, even when attitude extremity is the same for two groups, they may differ in attitude accessibility, and hence the probability that they will act on those attitudes. Consider the results from Shrum (1999). In that study, frequency of viewing did not reliably predict attitudes regarding owning expensive products, but it did reliably predict attitude accessibility. Thus, even though the reported attitudes between heavy and light soap opera viewers did not differ, heavy viewers may be more likely to act on those attitudes (e.g., through purchase, judging others in terms of their possessions, etc.) than light viewers.

CONCLUSION

As noted in the introductory paragraph, the exact notion of what perception entails is difficult to grasp. It resembles what Erdelyi calls a "pretheoretic" concept: one that is generally understood in lay language [but] is not a scientific concept that has been formalized (Erdelyi, 1992, 2004). However, even though the precise definition of perception may be elusive, it is nevertheless a fundamental concept in terms of how entertainment media are perceived and how entertainment media shape perceptions. Communication research is just now beginning to take advantage of seminal work in cognitive and social psychology by investigating the interrelations of how media are perceived and how these perceptions influence judgments. Likewise, communication research is also taking advantage of the latest work in construct accessibility to understand how media-induced accessibility frames perceptions of social stimuli. Although it is difficult to predict the future, it seems certain that these perspectives will shed new light on important research questions.

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