11.3: The Perception Process

All disagreements between human beings occur as a result of differing realities generated from the same environment. The perception process is the method we use to create our reality from our environment. We all create our realities of people, events, and things in our environment internally using the three steps of perception: selecting, sorting and interpreting data from the external environment.

Perception is an individual act. There is no such thing as two people having identical life experiences; therefore, there are no two people who perceive a situation in exactly the same manner.

Each day we are bombarded by a wide variety of environmental messages. Some of the messages we pay attention to, while others simply go right past us. The perception process is the method by which we take these environmental messages, select certain ones, attach meanings to them, and finally create a picture of our environment. That picture is what we call our reality.

Although different sources explain the perception process using different numbers of stages, here we will describe three overall steps in the perception process. In this order:

- First, we select cognitions from our environment.
- Second, we sort and organize those cognitions.
- Third, we interpret our environment by attaching meaning to our cognitions.
All five of our senses (sight, smell, hearing, feeling, and taste) are like windows to the world through which information passes from the environment to us. At any moment in time we are exposed to more information than we can process. Are you aware of your breathing or the temperature in the room or if you are hungry or tired? Are you even aware of the existence of your feet? Before I mentioned your feet, your concentration was on reading this book. You blocked out other cognitions from your environment. That is, you had not selected the data about your breathing, your being hungry, or your feet to enter the perception process.

**Select**

Select is the first stage of perceptions and acts as a filtering mechanism. When we say select, we don’t mean just a conscious selection effort. Selection of cognitions is actually more of an awareness process. In the Process of Perception graphic, we come upon an accident and become flooded with cognitions. Most of the data we are exposed to is filtered out, while some is selected to pass on to our awareness. From all of the thousands of stimuli we are bombarded with at any one moment, we choose some to enter our awareness. Intense, repetitious, or changing stimuli attract our attention and shape what we notice, or select, and what we ignore.

If you have ever visited friends who live near a busy street or a railroad track, you’ll notice that they aren’t even aware of the noise. Their selecting filter has screened out that data, as it is now unimportant to them.

**Sort**

Sort is the second phase of perception, where we organize and prioritize our selected cognitions. We organize and prioritize the data so that certain cognitions stand out over other cognitions. This organization is based on our experiences which may not be shared by others. Each of us has our own unique method of organizing.

You will organize the cognitions you receive from the accident in the graphic differently than another person might. You might be a bicyclist and focus on the cognitions from the rider. You might know someone who works for a fire station and organize your cognitions from how they are performing. We all organize cognitions differently so that certain features which stand out for one person, may not be the ones the other person placed high in his or her sorting process.
Interpret

Interpret is the third phase of the perception process. Here is where we add meaning to the organized cognitions. That is, we attach a meaning to the data that has been selected and sorted. At this point in the perception process we have an ordered collection of cognitions, which makes no sense and has no meaning. In this phase, we search our memory and assign meaning to the data based on its similarity to our previous experiences.

Another way of looking at this is that you can never really encounter an environment completely objective. You eventually attach meaning to the data, using your experiences from past situations that you have stored in your memory. Communication scholars Hans Toch and Malcolm MacLean described this process when they stated,

“We can never encounter a stimulus before some meaning has been assigned to it by some perceiver. Therefore, each perception is the beneficiary of all previous perceptions; in turn, each new perception leaves its mark on the common pool. A perception is thus a link between the past which gives it its meaning and the future which it helps to interpret.”¹

This quotation begins to explain how our life experiences are drawn upon to interpret the current information that is being perceived. That interpretation, in turn, is used to explain other perceptions of a future environment. This process gives us an understanding of our environment, which we call our "reality."

Reference