11.5: Psychological Factors Influencing Our Interpretation

Closure is the mind’s imperative to make sense out of its environment, even when only a limited amount of data is available. We don’t like confusion. If we lack information needed to create a reality, our mind fills in the blanks or missing data. This is not a conscious activity, but more of a psychological reflex reaction. We don’t voluntarily decide whether to engage in closure; rather, we are predisposed to do so. Closure allows us to understand and categorize what we are observing.

For example, a friend of yours was supposed to call you and didn’t. You begin to imagine what has happened to him. To avoid being confused, you begin to create an explanation with the limited data available to you. You might decide your friend is angry with you. This adding of information is closure.

Selective perception takes place when we narrow available cognitions to make an interpretation of the environment. We look at someone who is unshaven and dirty and, based just on those two cognitions, decide he is homeless. We may have ignored a multitude of additional cognitions. In selective perception, we use only as many cognitions as we feel are necessary to make a judgment about persons, events, and things in our life.

Patterning is the attempt to keep new or current perceptions in line with past ones. New perceptions, which contradict past perceptions, cause us to be knocked off our stasis, implying to us that our reality is wrong. We want our new perceptions to reinforce our existing reality. Patterning helps us avoid the discomfort of dealing with new or conflicting information by keeping such information within the bounds of an already defined stasis. This natural process greatly hinders our ability to be a critical thinker.

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In research we recently published in Psychological Science, we studied German-English bilinguals and monolinguals to find out how different language patterns affected how they reacted in experiments.
We showed German-English bilinguals video clips of events with a motion in them, such as a woman walking towards a car or a man cycling towards the supermarket and then asked them to describe the scenes.

When you give a scene like that to a monolingual German speaker they will tend to describe the action but also the goal of the action. So, they would tend to say “A woman walks towards her car” or “a man cycles towards the supermarket”. English monolingual speakers would simply describe those scenes as “A woman is walking” or “a man is cycling”, without mentioning the goal of the action. The worldview assumed by German speakers is a holistic one – they tend to look at the event as a whole – whereas English speakers tend to zoom in on the event and focus only on the action.

How many times have you “refused to believe” something? We naturally want to be comfortable.

**The conclusion of this perception process is our reality.** We create our reality from the process of perception of an environment. In the graphic, our environment was the accident, but while one person’s reality is “Crazy Driver” another person’s reality could be, “Biker’s Mistake.” The reality we reach is actually an illusion we create from the environment.

**The End Result:** Our arguments with others stem from the differences in our realities, not what is actually in our environment. And our reality is not real, it is an illusion we create. So in essence, we do not argue what is actually there in the environment, but our illusion of the environment.