Perception and Personal Identity

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**Perception** is how we make sense of the world and what happens in the world. It is how we ascribe meaning to every incident in our lives, every person we meet, and every feeling we experience. It is an active process of selecting, organizing, and interpreting everything around us. Perception is a critical component in understanding how communication works and our reactions to situations in our lives.

**Selection** is the first step in the perception process. Selection is all about choice – we chose to focus on what we perceive to be important. Daily, we are surrounded by a myriad of noises, pictures, images, name brands, tastes, and even touches.

Think about 9/11/2001. Where were you that day? What do you remember? I had just started teaching at IHCC and I remember distinctly that the head of the English Department came through my office on her way to the Arts and Sciences office – she was rushing and I stopped her to tell her how cute her outfit was. She’s a pretty classy dresser anyway but what I remember was that she looked at me and said "No, that doesn’t matter. Something’s happened." I remember thinking, "Boy, that’s a strange response to a compliment! How rude!" It was about 9:30 in the morning at that time and she said "A plane crashed into the World Trade Center." For the rest of the day, no matter what class I taught, where I went or who I talked to, the subject that was selected was the planes crashing. The televisions across campus were tuned to CNN coverage, the radio in the car was on 24/7 reporting of the event, and Tom Brokaw looked haggard by midnight. I vividly remember taking my kindergartener by the hand, having her look at the television, and explaining that she was seeing history happen right then. We actively select the images we focus upon, the people we see, the sounds we hear, and the things we chose to remember. I was helping her to understand that she needed to see this event and understand it (even in her 5-year old mind) because I knew that this was going to be life-changing.

Do I remember what the head of the English Department was wearing that day? No. Do I remember what I felt on 9/11? Yes. Do I have vivid images in my mind of the destruction, despair, and fear I saw on television and in the eyes of my students that day? I don’t think I’ll ever forget those images or discussions with my classes – the scheduled curriculum seemed irrelevant to the current event of the day. I’m sure you have your own selected images, feelings, sounds, etc. from that time. As you have made meaning out of 9/11 in your life, your understanding of the events on that day and in the days following has been impacted by what you have selected to perceive or pay attention to – the things that stood out to you.

**Organization** is the second step in the perception process. This is where we categorize or organize our perceptions to help us make sense out of the world around us. One way that we do this is through the use of constructivism which is where we develop a schemata to organize our perceptions. Think of constructivism as a method of breaking down our perceptions into categories or schemes so that we can understand what we are seeing in the world, feeling, tasting, etc. Constructivism is just a fancy theoretical term for "categorization" and it was first coined in 1955 by George Kelly.
There are **four common schemata** we utilize to help us organize our perceptions.

1. **A prototype** is what we think the ideal of anything might be. 9/11 was far from an "ideal" teaching day for me! An ideal day would be one where all my students were on task, I was completely engaged in the educational process, and everything went off without a hitch in the plan. We have "ideals" for everything: meals, smells, dates, movies, music, drinks, etc. We use our "ideal" image or our prototype to compare specific perceptions of the reality with as we go through our daily interactions.

2. **A personal construct** is when we place a perception on a bi-polar continuum to help us understand the event, person, place, food, music, etc. We all have an ideal which is at one end of our bi-polar continuum. On the opposite end of the continuum is our least perfect comparison – I like to think of this as the "worst possible scenario."

I told you what my ideal teaching day would be like in the prototype section and you might assume that 9/11 might have been one of my worst teaching days but that wasn’t the case. 9/11 was just a bad day in general but in terms of teaching it really wasn’t all that bad – not nearly as bad as the day I had to pull one of my students out of a pep assembly because her uncle had come to get her. What was terrible about this was that I knew something that was going to change her life forever. Her father was a professional parachutist and it was the day before homecoming back when I was teaching high school English. The high school has just built a brand new football stadium and her father's stunt parachute team was going to land on the 50 yard line the next night during the inauguration of the new stadium. During the pep assembly they were practicing the parachute jump and his chute didn’t open – he fell to his death in the middle of the new stadium.

That was without a doubt one the worst teaching day I’ve ever had – I’ve never felt so bad for a student and what I had to lead her out of the gym to face. A personal construct is when you place an event, person, place, etc. on the continuum between best/ideal and worst, or most and least. I gave you an example of my ideal and my worst, 9/11 falls somewhere in between on my continuum of teaching days.

3. **A stereotype** is a generalization about a group of people, a situation, place, experience, etc. Sometimes a stereotype is true but sometimes it may be based on inaccurate information. Usually there is some portion of truth to all stereotypes but they are never 100% accurate. We all stereotype. If you don’t agree with that statement, you’re lying to yourself. Stereotyping is really how we make sense of the world around us – even through most of us have been taught that stereotyping isn’t fair and we know that most people don’t fit the stereotype 100%. The reason we don’t like stereotyping is that most of us don’t like to think of ourselves being pigeonholed into particular groups because that means that we have been labeled. The reality is that stereotyping is perfectly normal human behavior that helps us understand or ascribe meaning to phenomenon in our lives. While it is normal, we do need to be cautious in blindly following stereotypes set out by other people or in how we use the stereotypes. The events of 9/11 are an extreme example of how a stereotype can lead to a hatred of a people which can then lead to a violent action (i.e., the Taliban has a stereotype of the American
4. **Scripts** are guides to action based on what we have experienced and observed. We follow scripted guidelines for almost all areas of our lives – for how we dress, for how we talk, for who we talk to, for how we do holidays, for how we do vacations or how we decorate our living spaces. Most of the guidelines have been passed down to us from one generation to another or they are based on something we’ve experienced/seen/witnessed. We model our behavior, actions, and talk around these scripts. Some scripts we might follow are simple like taking your shoes off by the door when you enter a home – others are more complex like interview protocol for a job which includes a resume, suit & tie, and a formal question/answer session with a prospective employer. We use our scripts to identify and judge the behavior of others, as well as a guideline to follow for our own behavior. On 9/11, do you remember the somberness of the expressions on people’s faces? Do you remember the American flags being flown in the days following 9/11? Those are all scripted behaviors which have been learned and passed down in American society.

**Interpretation** is third step in the perception process. Interpretation is the subjective process of explaining perceptions to assign meaning to them. One way we interpret phenomenon is by explaining why things happen and why people act the way they do. This process is called **attribution**. If we see a child crying in a grocery store, we may attribute this behavior to the child being tired or hungry, or to the parent’s not giving the child what he wants, or even that the child is just a spoiled rotten brat! What we may not know is that the child has a severe learning disability where too much visual stimulation causes his brain to "overload" and results in an emotional outburst. The point is, when we see the scene, we interpret it based on our own scripts, stereotypes, personal constructs, and prototype of how a child should behave in the grocery store. When the behavior doesn’t match the prototype we’ll naturally attribute it to something – whether or not that attribution is correct or not, we will attribute it to something to help us interpret it.

So, perception of the world around us is a complex process involving selection, organization, and interpretation of basically everything – and this is what happens to us all day long, everyday of our lives. When we add different lenses to our view of the world - lenses like personal identity, self-serving bias, physiology, culture, gender, economic class, religion, age, and sexual orientation – when we add these to our perceptions of the world, communication becomes extremely complex. In fact, it’s amazing that we can understand one another’s perceptions of reality at all! It is no wonder that one of the hottest sections of any bookstore is the self-help section where titles of books are primarily about communication issues (like *Men are from Mars/Women are from Venus*).