

Lesson:-33

Perception and Person perception

Learning Objectives

Dear students after going through this chapter, you are expected to be able to understand and interpret the following:

- ✓ The Nature and Importance of Perception
- ✓ Perceptual process
- ✓ Factors affecting Perception
- ✓ Social perception
- ✓ Attribution theory

Perception refers to the way we try to understand the world around us. We gather information through our five sense organs, but perception adds meaning to these sensory inputs. The process of perception is essentially subjective in nature, as it is never an exact recording of the event or the situation.

Perception is the process by which we organize and interpret our sensory impressions in order to give meaning to the environment. As pointed out, a situation may be the same but the interpretation of that situation by two individuals may be immensely different.

Definition: Perception is the set of processes by which an individual becomes aware of and interprets information about the environment.

The perceptual process can be depicted simplistically in the following way :

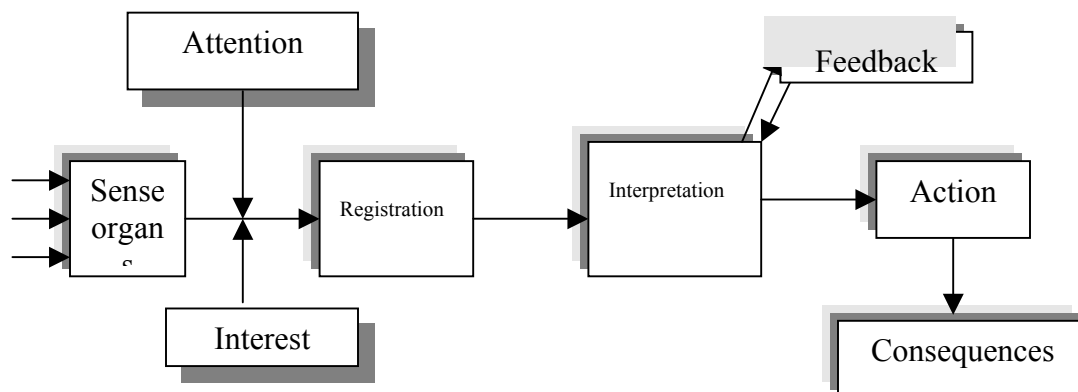


Figure 11.1 The Perceptual Process

The model of perception helps one to understand the basic processes involved in human perception in a rather simplistic way. At a point of time, we are flooded with a myriad of stimuli impinging on our sense organs, like now as you are reading this particular page in front of you, light rays from the page are reaching your eyes. But these are, by no means, all. Light rays from every possible direction are also impinging on your retina as well. At the same time you are also receiving a host of auditory stimuli --- the humming of the air conditioner, some body talking out aloud outside, the rustling of the papers on your table, etc. Similarly, every sense organs of your body are bombarded with a number of different stimuli simultaneously. But our brain and the nervous system are not capable of processing so many pieces of information all together. As it is now happening with you, you are, in all probability, hardly aware of all these sensory inputs reaching you. Thus what happens is that we only *selectively* choose from among a host of stimuli and process only those. If we examine the model above we will find that only those stimuli are given entry to the process of 'registration' which have got adequate attention or have aroused our interest.

Factors affecting perception

Internal Factors

- ✓ **Sensory Limits and Thresholds :** Our sensory organs have specialized nerves which respond differently to the various forms of energy they receive. For instance, our eyes receive and convert light waves into electrical energy which are transmitted to the visual cortex of the brain to create the sensation of vision and subsequently leading to perception. But each sense receptor requires a minimum level of energy to excite it before perception can take place. The minimum level is called the *absolute threshold* – a point below which we do not perceive energy. The *differential threshold* is the smallest amount by which two similar stimuli must be different in order to be perceived as different.
- ✓ **Psychological Factors :** Psychological factors such as personality, past experiences and learning and motives affect an individual's perceptual process to considerable extent. The internal *set* or the inclination to perceive certain stimuli in a particular way also influences one's perception. These largely determine why people select and attend to a particular stimulus or situation over other. Things compatible to one's learning, interest, attitude and personality are likely to get more attention than others. As you must have noticed, a person who is sitting aloof from your group in a far away corner, automatically turn to your direction the moment you utter his name. Similarly, if you happen to hear the word 'management' or 'organizational behaviour' while traveling in a public transport, your attention is surely going to the conversation. This happens because of one's strong association (with one's own name) or the current interest in the topics. Likewise, one's expectancy can affect and even distort one's perception. We hardly rely too much on pure sensory inputs and perceive the reality in our own subjective way. While hearing a droning sound high in the sky we point to a fleeting dot and say, 'Oh! See, that's an aero plane up there' where we virtually *see* nothing! But on the basis of our past experience, we correctly assume the dot for an

aero plane. Sometimes we commit errors in the process as well. Our past learning also affects the perceptual process and lends a typical orientation in what we perceive. The accountant often becomes unduly suspicious when he finds a large bill and tends to believe that as an inflated bill.

External Factors

- ✓ **The Target** : The characteristics of the target that is being observed can affect perception. We have earlier noted (refer to Figure 11.1 above) that a pre-requisite of perception is attention. It has been found that there is a tendency to give more attention to stimuli which are :

1. Large in size
2. Moving
3. Intense
4. Loud
5. Bright
6. Contrasted
7. Novel
8. Repeated
9. Stand out from the background.

- ✓ **The Situation** : The situation or the context in which we see objects or events is important to shape our perception. The presence of a policeman near the police station hardly draws any attention, but if one is found in your classroom will certainly be the topic of the day. The word ‘terminal’ can be perceived quite differently in the context of say, the ICU of a hospital, an airport or the computer lab.

Person Perception

Our perceptions of people differ from the perceptions of inanimate objects like tables, chairs, books, pencil, etc. mainly because we are prone to make inferences regarding the intentions of people and thus form judgment about them. The perceptions and judgments regarding a person’s actions are often significantly influenced by the assumptions we make about the person’s internal state. **Attribution theory** refers to the ways in which we judge people differently, depending on what meaning we attribute to a given behaviour. Whenever we observe the behaviour of an individual, we attempt to determine whether it was *internally* or *externally* caused. Internally caused behaviours are those that are believed to be under the personal control of the individual or have been done *deliberately* by him. Externally caused behaviour is seen as resulting from outside causes, that is the person is seen as having been *compelled* to behave in a particular way by the force of the situation, and *not* because of his *own* choice. When after repeated requests your friend failed to turn up at the special old school boys’ meet you might ascribe his absence as a deliberate move on his part, and you will feel hurt since it appeared that he is quite unconcerned and careless about your feeling. But if someone now points out about his

recent increased responsibilities in the business after his father's untimely death and acute time shortage, you tend to condone him as you are now ascribing his absence to the external factors.

The determination of internally or externally caused behaviour depends chiefly on the following three factors :

- ◆ **Distinctiveness** which refers to whether an individual displays different behaviour at different situations. If the behaviour (say being late in the class on a particular day) is unusual, we tend to give the behaviour an external attribution; and if it usual, the reverse.
- ◆ **Consensus** refers to the uniformity of the behaviour shown by all the concerned people. If every one reports late on a particular morning, it is easily assumed that there must be a severe traffic disruption in the city and thus the behaviour is externally attributed. But if the consensus is low, it is internally attributed.
- ◆ **Consistency** is the reverse of distinctiveness. Thus in judging the behaviour of an individual, the person looks at his past record. If the present behaviour is consistently found to occur in the past as well (that is being late at least three times a week), it is attributed as internally caused. In other words, the more consistent the behaviour, the more the observer is inclined to attribute it to external causes.

Figure 11.3 below depicts the attribution theory in short.

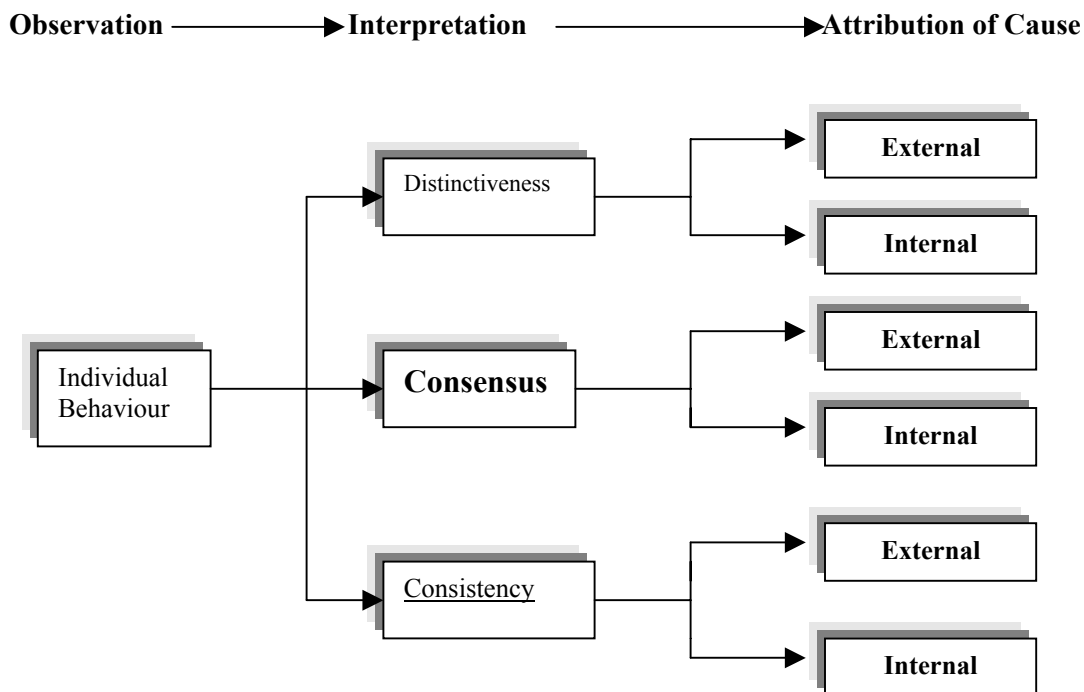


Figure 11.2 : Attribution Theory

There are often some errors or biases in our judgment about others. When we make judgment about other people's behaviour, we tend to underestimate the influence of external factors and overestimate the influence of internal or personal factors. This is called ***fundamental attribution error***. Another noticeable tendency, called ***self-serving bias***, refers to the inclination for individuals to attribute their own successes to internal factors while putting the blame for failures on external factors.

Self-fulfilling Prophecy or Pygmalion Effect : An interesting aspect of people perception is the fact that people's expectations are often found to determine the actual performance level. If a manager expects an excellent level of performance from his subordinates, chances are quite high that they will actually reach up to his expectation and will make *impossible* possible. Surely the contrary is also true. If you feel your subordinates are a worthless bunch of people, they will only prove the same.

Attributions are found to strongly affect various functions in an organization, e.g. the process of employee performance evaluations, nature of supervision or guidance or the general attitude towards the organization in general. As mentioned earlier, we also tend to make various types of errors while judging others. A few of the frequently committed mistakes are given below :

- ◆ **Selective Perception** : People have a tendency to selectively interpret what they see on the basis of their interests, background, experiences and attitudes. We hardly have either time or inclination to process all the relevant inputs and we automatically select a few. Naturally chances are there to miss some important cues in the process. ***Ex***
- ◆ **Halo Effect** : It refers to the tendency of forming a general impression about an individual on the basis of a single characteristic. The smartly dressed guy who is very fluent in English often tends to create a favourable impression on the interviewer even when the job is of an accountant or engineer, requiring little or no verbal fluency.
- ◆ **Contrast Effect** : It refers to the process of rating individuals in the light of other people's performance which are close in time frame. You might be rated excellent in your project presentation if your predecessor makes a mess in his presentation. The case would have been just the reverse if you were to present just after a superb presentation!
- ◆ **Stereotyping** : It is the process of judging someone on the basis of one's perception of the group to which that perception belongs to. Common examples include the debate regarding the effectiveness of a lady doctor or manager or MBA'S from prestigious B'schools.

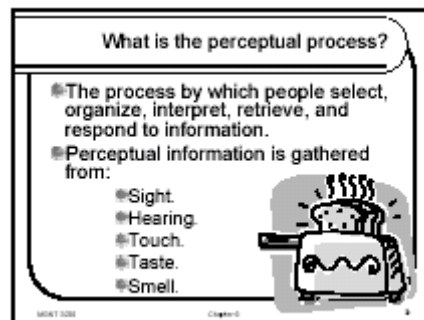
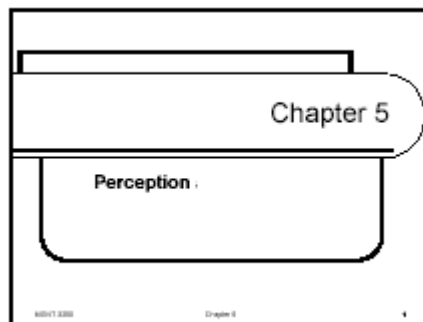
CASE STUDY:

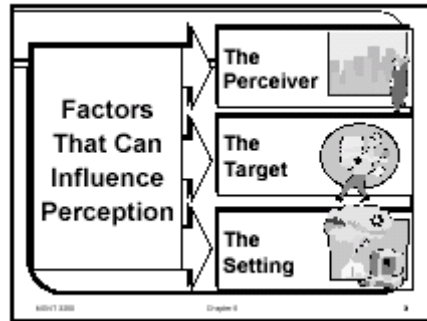
Sharma, assistant plant manager for Frame Manufacturing Company, is chairperson of the adhoc committee for space utilization. The committee is made up of the various department heads in the company. The plant manager of Frame has given Sharma the responsibility for seeing whether the various office, operations, and


warehouse facilities of the company are being optimally utilized. The company is beset by rising costs and the need for more space. However, before okaying an expensive addition to the plant, the plant manager wants to be sure that the currently available space is being utilized properly.

Sharma opened up the first committee meeting by reiterating the charge of the committee. Then Sharma asked the members if they had any initial observations to make. The first to speak was the office manager. He stated: “well, I know we are using every possible inch of room that we have available to us. But when I walk out into the plant, I see a lot open spaces. We have people piled on top of one another, but out in the plant there seems to be plenty of room.” The production manager quickly replied: “we do not have a lot of space. You office people have the luxury facilities. My supervisors don’t even have room for a desk and a file cabinet. I have repeatedly told the plant manager we need more space. After all, our operation determines whether this plant succeeds or fails, not you people in the front office pushing paper around.” Sharma interrupted at this point and said : “ obviously, we have different interpretations of the space utilization around here. Before further discussion I think it would be best if we have some objective facts to work with. I am going to ask the industrial engineer to provide us with some statistics on plant and office layouts before our next meeting. Today’s meeting is adjourned”.,

Q) Analyze this case on the basis of perceptual principles evident in the case.





- ### Common Perceptual Distortions
- Stereotypes or prototypes.
 - Halo effects.
 - Selective perception.
 - Projection.
 - Contrast effects.
 - Self-fulfilling prophecy.
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