
UNIT 6 PERCEPTION AND ATTRIBUTION

Objectives

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- understand the meaning and nature of perception
- identify various factors influencing perception
- explain different characteristics of perceiver and facets of impression management.

Structure

- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 Definition and Nature of Perception
- 6.3 Basic Elements in Perceptual Process
- 6.4 Factors Influencing Perception
- 6.5 Perceptual Organisation
- 6.6 Social Perception
- 6.7 Impression Management
- 6.8 Attribution
- 6.9 Perception: Errors and Remedies
- 6.10 Perception and its Application in Organisations
- 6.11 Summary
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6.1 INTRODUCTION

We humans seem to attach meanings, interpretations, values and aims to our actions. What we do in the world depends on how we understand our place in it, depends on how we perceive ourselves and our social and physical environment, depends on how we perceive our circumstances. We explain behavior with terms like 'reasons', 'motive', 'intention', 'purpose', 'desire' and so on.

Therefore, the issue is- each one of us perceives the world around us in different ways. It is our personal perception of that reality which shapes and directs our behavior, and some 'objective' understanding of external reality. For example, if one person on a hillside perceives that it is cold, he will reach for his sweater. On the other hand, if the person standing next to him perceives that it is warm, he will remove his sweater. These contrasting behaviours can be witnessed happening at the same time, regardless of the actual ambient temperature as measured by a thermometer. Another example would be the universal assumption made by managers that subordinates always want promotion when,

in fact, many subordinates really psychologically forced to accept a promotion. Managers seldom attempt to find out and some times themselves do not know, whether promotion should be offered. In other words, the perceptual world of the manager is quite different from the perceptual world of the subordinates and both may be different from reality. Thus, it is clear that human behavior is a function of the way in which we perceive the world around us, and how we perceive other people and events in that world.

We often find ourselves unable to understand other people's behaviour. To understand each other's behaviour, we need to be able to understand each other's perceptions. First of all, we need to be able to understand why we perceive things differently.

Perception is the selection and organisation of environmental stimuli to provide meaningful experiences for the perceiver. It is the process through which the information from outside environment is selected, received, organised and interpreted to make it meaningful. It is an important input in individual behaviour. The receiver, the received, and the situation influences one's perception. It is an important variable affecting several areas of an organisation. The differences between the perceptual worlds of the employees and managers and the reality of the organisation will provide the basic inputs into the understanding of organisational behaviour.

In this unit, we try to understand the individual differences in terms of the various factors affecting perception, the perception process, and the working of perceptual organisation. Attribution theory also forms a part of this unit.

6.2 DEFINITION AND NATURE OF PERCEPTION

Perception includes all those processes by which an individual receives information about his environment – seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting and smelling. In simple terms, perception is understood as the act of seeing what is there to be seen. “The study of perception is concerned with identifying the processes through which we interpret and organise sensory information to produce our conscious experience of objects and object relationship.” It is the process of receiving information about and making sense of the world around us.

Perception implicates the search for obtaining and processing of the information in the mind. It can also be referred to as a psychological process where people obtain (or take) information from the environment and make sense of their worlds.

Very often two people who have seen the same thing end up interpreting it differently. The reason for such occurrence is because of the involvement of an extremely complex cognitive process mentioned above. Each person has a unique perception resulting in individual differences in processing information which is received. Perception plays a very important role in shaping the personality of an individual. Through the process of perception individuals organise and interpret their sensory impressions, so as to provide meaning to their environment. It is possible that what is perceived by the individual may be quite different from actual reality.

Nature of Perception

It is to be noted that perception is a unique interpretation of the situation by the individual and that it is not an identical recording of it. Thus, we have to remember:

- Perception is a complex cognition process, giving a unique interpretation (or picture) of the world, which may be very much different from reality at times.
- There is a lot of difference between the perceptual world and the real world.
- Many of the problems occurring in organisations (related to organisational behaviour) are often found to be the problems of perception.

Activity 1

Choose a film that you have seen recently and which you enjoy particularly. Now, find a friend or colleague who has also seen the same film but disliked it. Share your views of that film. What factors (age, sex, background, education, interests, values and beliefs, social views, past experience, and so on) can you identify that explain the differences in perception between you and your friend or college?

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6.3 BASIC ELEMENTS IN PERCEPTUAL PROCESS

We process and interpret the incoming raw data in the light of our experiences, in terms of our current needs and interest, in terms of our knowledge, expectations, beliefs and motives. Perception may be defined as the dynamic psychological process elements in the perceptual process are illustrated in Figure 1.

From a psychological point of view, the process of sensation, on the one hand, and perception, on the other, work together through what are termed respectively ‘bottom-up’ and ‘top-down’ processing.

The bottom-up phase concerns the way in which we process the raw data received by our sensory apparatus. One of the key characteristics of bottom-up processing concerns the need for selectivity. We are simply not able to process all of the sensory information available to us at any given time. Bottom-up processing screens or filters out redundant and less relevant information so that we can focus on what is important.

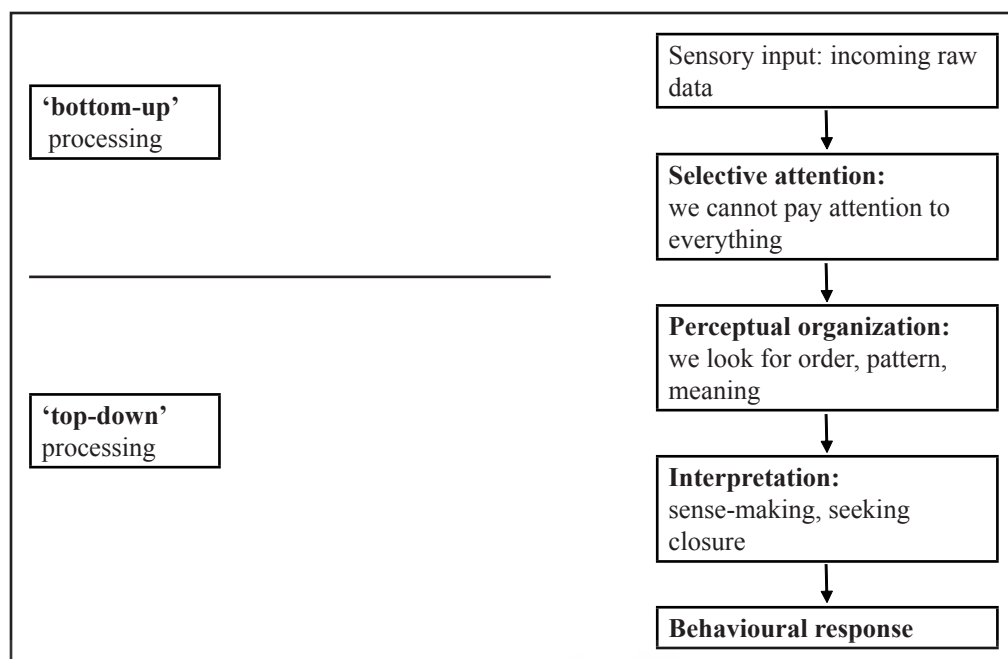


Figure 1: The Process of Perception

On the other hand, ‘top-down’ phase concerns the mental processing that allows us to order, interpret and make sense of the world around us. One of the key characteristics of top-down processing concerns our need to make sense of our environment and our search for meaning.

This distinction between sensation (bottom-up) and perception (top-down) can be illustrated in our ability to make sense of incomplete or even incorrect sensory information. For example, the missing letter or comma, or the incorrectly spelled term, does not normally interfere with the comprehension of the human reader:

This sentence is incorrect, but you will still be able to understand it

In the above example, our top-down conceptual processing ability means that we are able to fill in the gaps and correct the mistakes and thus make sense of ‘imperfect’ incoming raw data.

All of us have a similar nervous system and share more or less common sensory equipment. However, we have different social and physical backgrounds which give us different values, interests and expectations and therefore different perceptions. We do not behave in, and in response to, the world ‘as it really is’. This idea of the ‘real world’ is somewhat arbitrary. In fact, we have, and in response to, the world as we perceive it. We each live in our own perceptual world.

Perception is a dynamic process because it involves ordering and attaching meaning to raw sensory data. Our sensory apparatus is bombarded with vast amounts of information. We are not ‘passive recorders’ of this sensory data. We are constantly sifting and sorting this stream of information, making sense of it and interpreting it. Therefore, it can be said that perception is an information-processing activity. This information processing concerns the phenomena of selective attention (perceptual selectivity) and perceptual organisation.

Intrapersonal Processes

Selective attention is the ability, often exercised unconsciously, to choose from the stream of sensory data to concentrate on particular elements and to ignore others. The internal and external factors which affect selective attention are illustrated in Figure 2.

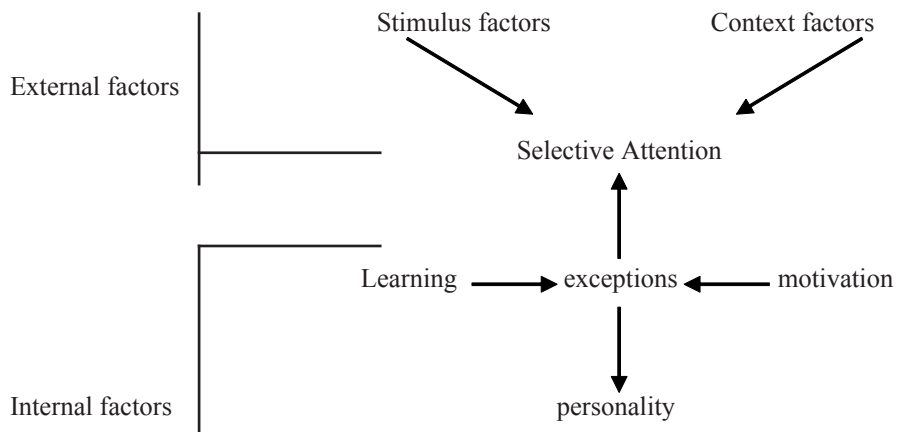


Figure 2: External and Internal Factors Influencing Selective Attention

The external factors affecting selective attention concern stimulus factors and context factors. With respect to the stimulus factors, for example, our attention is drawn more readily to stimuli which are described in Table 1.

Table 1

large		small
bright		dull
loud	rather than	quiet
strong		weak
unfamiliar		familiar
moving		stationery

However, it may be noted that we do not merely respond to single feature rather we respond to the pattern of stimuli available to us.

Activity 2

Identify examples of the ways in which advertisements creatively use stimulus factors to attract or attention in newspapers and magazines and on billboards and television.

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Our attention is also influenced by context factors. For example, the naval commander on the ship’s bridge and the cook in the kitchen may both have occasion to shout “fire”, but these identical utterances will mean quite different things to those within earshot and will lead t radically different forms of behaviour (involving the taking and the saving of lives respectively). Thus, it is clear that knowledge of the context also affect our attention.

The internal factors affecting perception are:

- **Learning:** Our past experience leads to the development of perceptual expectations or perceptual sets which give us predispositions to perceive and to pay attention to some stimuli and to ignore other information.
- **Personality:** Our personality traits also predispose us to perceive the world in particular ways, to pay attention to some issues and events and human characteristics and not others.
- **Motivation:** We are more likely to perceive as important, and thus to respond to, stimuli that we find motivating.

Much of perception can be described as classification or categorisation. We categorise people as male or female, lazy or energetic, extrovert or shy. We classify objects as cars, buildings, furniture, crockery and so on and we refine our classification schemes further under these headings. It may be noted here that these categories are learned. They are social constructs. What we learn is often culture-bound or culture-specific. For example, the British revulsion at the thought of eating dog (classified as pet), the Hindu revulsion at the thought of eating beef (classified as sacred) and the Islamic aversion to alcohol (classified as proscribed by the Koran) are all culturally transmitted emotions based on learned values.

However, different people within the same culture have different experiences and develop different expectations. The internal factors- our past experience and what we have learned, our personalities, our motivations- contribute to the development of our expectations of the world around us, what we want from it, what will happen in it and what should happen. We tend to select information that fits our expectations and pay less attention to information that does not.

Our categorization process and the search for meaning and pattern are key characteristics of perception. This perceptual work is captured by the concept of perceptual organization. Perceptual organisation is the process through which incoming stimuli are organized or patterned in systematic and meaningful ways.

Max Wertheimer first identified the principles by which the process of perceptual organization operates. The 'proximity principle' states that we tend to group together or to classify stimuli that are physically close to each other and which thus appear to 'belong' together. For example, note how you 'see' tree pairs rather than six blobs here:



The 'similarity principle' states that we classify or group together stimuli that resemble each other in appearance in some respect. For example, note how you 'see' four pairs here, not eight objects:



The fact that we are able to make use of incomplete and ambiguous information by 'filling in the gaps' from our own knowledge and past experience is known as the 'principle of closure'.

It has been noted that often different people perceive a situation differently, in terms of what is selectively perceived and how it is organised, interpreted and finally perceived by them. Individuals receive stimuli from the environment through their five senses namely, taste/smell/hearing/sight/touch. There is a tendency to selectively pay attention to certain aspects of the environment. In other words, a person's perceptual selection may be on account of the interplay of a complex set of factors, some are the internal factors while some form a part of external factors. Say, for instance, the personal secretary to the manager may ignore the sounds (or voices) of the other employees talking but jumps up and becomes alert as soon as the telephone starts ringing.

The next step involves the **perceptual organisation**. Since there will be variations in how people interpret what they perceive i.e., the person organises the stimuli selected into meaningful patterns depending upon the circumstances and the state of mind of those involved.

PERCEPTUAL SETS AND PERCEPTUAL WORLDS

In this unit, you have seen how the perceptual process selects incoming stimuli and organizes them into meaningful patterns. It has also been shown that this processing is influenced by learning, motivation and personality – factors which give rise to expectations. These expectations, in turn, make us more ready to respond to certain stimuli in certain ways and less ready to respond to others. This readiness to respond is called the individual's perceptual set.

A perceptual set is an individual's predisposition to respond to events in a particular manner. A perceptual set is also known as a mental set. As we tend to perceive what we expect to perceive, this can also be called our perceptual expectations. We must accept the fact that two people can observe the 'same' thing but perceive it in quite different ways. Many organisational problems, and particularly communication problems are created by failure to appreciate this feature of the perceptual process. For example, top management of an organisation may perceive that junior employees are overreacting to trivial issues and may dismiss their complaints lightly. On the other hand, the junior employees may perceive that their grievances are genuine and that the top management are simply not taking them seriously. In a situation like this, it makes little sense to ask whose perceptions are correct. The starting point for resolving issues such as this must lie with the recognition that different people hold different, but equally legitimate, views of the same set of circumstances.

Another common example is the differences in perception that occur between the union and management. Some researchers believe that perceptual differences are a major explanation for industrial disputes. The same "facts" in a dispute are perceived quite differently by union members and by management. For example, union members may perceive that they are underpaid whereas management perceives that they are overpaid for the amount of work they do. In reality, pay may have nothing to do with the ensuing dispute. It might be due to the workers not having control over their own jobs and getting any recognition and they are reacting by perceiving that they are underpaid.

We each have a perceptual world that is selective and partial which concentrates on features of particular interest and importance to us. The individual's

perceptual world is their personal internal image, map or picture of their social. Physical and organisational environment. Through the processes of learning, motivation and personality development, we each have different expectations and different degrees of readiness to respond to objects, people and events in different ways.

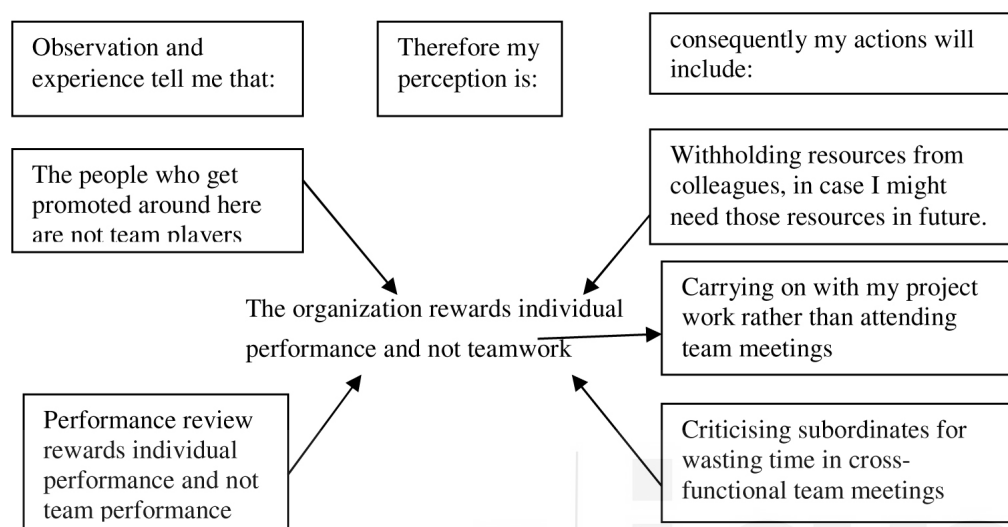


Figure 3: The information-perception-actions link

It may be noted here that our perceptions, that is the meanings that we attach to the information available to us, shape our actions. Behaviour in an organization context can usually be understood once we understand the way in which the individual perceives that context. Figure 3 illustrates the links between available information based on observation and experience, the perception based on that information and outcomes in terms of decisions with respect to actions.

Cultural factors also play a significant role in determining how we interpret available information and experience. Perceptual learning and development take place in the context of socio-cultural environment. It is therefore expected that the socio-cultural background of the individual will influence his/her perceptions. Accordingly, the nature of perceptual organisations will vary.

For example, one well-known piece of research compared the pace of life in six countries (Britain, Italy, Indonesia, Japan, Taiwan and the United States) by measuring:

- The accuracy of clocks in city bank branches,
- The speed at which city pedestrians walked, and
- The length of time it took to buy a postage stamp.

The research revealed that Japanese cities had the most accurate clocks, the fastest pedestrians and the most efficient post office clerks. Indonesian cities, in contrast, had the least accurate clocks and slowest pedestrians. Italy had the slowest post office clerks.

Therefore, it is clear that to understand an individual's behaviour, we need to know something of the elements in their perceptual world and the pattern of information and other cultural influences that have shaped that world. To

change an individual's behaviour, therefore, we first have to consider changing their perceptions through the information and experiences available to them.

6.4 FACTORS INFLUENCING PERCEPTION

It has been understood that each one of us may be the same person, object or event and yet think of it differently. Supposing you visit an arts and craft exhibition, took a look around and then ask your friend also to visit the exhibition. Later on, when you exchange notes with your friend, you will be surprised to note that your friend's views and expressions about the display differ. Usually individuals are involved in a process of perceptual selection whereby people filter out most stimuli so that they can deal with the most important ones. This process depends on several factors. Let us have a look at those factors which affect the perceptual process:

The Perceiver

- **The understanding of what a person interprets when looking at the object or target being perceived will be influenced by the personal traits of the individual who perceives this:** For instance, we presume an individual is planning to purchase a car then it is observed that he starts noticing other brands of cars (falling within his budget) with more interest. Of course, this results in the purchase of a particular brand of car which is influenced by his perception. And this is how factors associated with the perceiver can greatly influence his or her perceptual process.
- **Attitude influences a person's perception:** We can take example, Suma and Uma are two friends who have cleared their bachelor's degree in management and are interested in pursuing further studies and get into reputed business management institutes for obtaining a MBA degree. In order to improve their personality, both of them get enrolled; into a well-known personality development centre. Suma enjoys interacting in a small group because of personal interaction between the lecturer and the student group. However, Uma basically being an introvert preferred to be a part of a large group so as to enjoy anonymity amidst the group. When both Suma and Uma sat down for the first session on 'personality development', with a class of fifty students, Suma seemed unhappy to be amidst a large class while Uma looked relieved to be able to merge unnoticed into the large class. This example reveals that both Suma and Uma saw the same thing but interpreted it differently.
- **Unsatisfied needs or motives influence an individual's perception strongly:** This particular aspect was highlighted in a study with hungry subjects. This research study revealed that people who had been hungry for as long as 16 hours saw more frequently images of food when they were shown blurred pictures in comparison to those who had been hungry only for a short time.
- **The perceptual process can also be influenced by one's interest:** For instance, a fashion designer is more likely to be noticed a beautiful outfit worn by a girl crossing the road rather than the traffic policeman. This can be because his chosen profession has narrowed down his focus.

- **One's experience in the past can also narrow down one's focus. And newness or novelty also influences perception:** An individual has the tendency to perceive those things (or objects) to which he or she can relate. But very often one's past experience may reduce or nullify an object's interest.

In India, the breaking away of the joint family set-up and making way to the working couple nuclear family set up had not been easily accepted by the society especially during the 70's and 80's of the century. However, from the 90's onwards with a significant increase in the number of women joining industries and also occupying senior managerial positions, there is a gradual change and people's negative perception/views/apprehensions about women executives is slowly taking a back seat.

- **Expectations also influence an individual's perception:** At times expectations can affect one's perception such that if we expect to see something we may actually end up seeing that. For instance, if we expect lawyers to be unscrupulous, politicians to be corrupt, youngsters to be rude and so on, we will perceive them to be so, totally ignoring the individual's real traits.

The Target

Perception is impacted by the motion, sound, size and other such characteristics of the target. This usually occurs because the target is not perceived in isolation but along with its background. Moreover, we have a tendency to group close things and similar things together.

- **What one sees and perceives (observes) will generally depend on how one separates the figure from its general background:** For instance, when the lecturer uses the blackboard for teaching and for writing uses white chalk pieces, the students are not seeing them as patches of white chalk but recognise each alphabet and see the words accordingly.
- **At times even physical and time proximity makes one put together objects or targets even when they are unrelated:** For instance, recently we have been hearing of plane crashes involving fighter planes and domestic plane carriers. Suddenly many people may conclude that it is dangerous to travel by air. Though the above incidents may be unrelated, their proximity in time may have led people to develop such unrealistic perceptions about flying.
- **At times people have the tendency to perceive people, objects or events that are similar to each other also as being grouped together:** Greater is the similarity, more is the probability of perceiving them as a common group.

The Situation

The context in which we perceive events or objects is also important. There are elements in our surrounding environment which influence our perception. For instance, if the managing director of a company calls for a meeting with his general managers, and on that day a junior manager makes a small mistake, the general manager is more likely to register and notice that which otherwise on

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any other normal day would have been overlooked. If, say a person attired in a dhoti-kurta were to enter the office premises, he is likely to draw more eyes compared to if he were to be attired in the same dress when walking around in the compound of his house. This means that perception is influenced by various situational factors such as time, location, light, heat and so on. These may simultaneously impact the perception process making it extremely complex.

In brief, the following are the factors influencing perception:

The Perceiver

- Attitudes
- Motives
- Interests
- Past experience
- Expectation

The Target

- Background
- Physical and Time Proximity
- Novelty
- Motion
- Sounds
- Size

The Situation

- Time
- Work environment
- Social environment
- Light
- Heat

Activity 3

Identify examples of the way in which advertisements creatively use stimulus factors to attract our attention in newspapers and magazines, billboards, and television.

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6.5 PERCEPTUAL ORGANISATION

Perceptual organisation is the process by which people group environmental stimuli into recognizable patterns. That is, an attempt is made to explain what happens during the perceptual process when information from the situation is received. A person is not likely to perceive patches of colour, or light or smell. On the contrary, the person usually perceives some organised patterns of stimuli and clearly whole objects which are identifiable.

For instance, if your father gifts you a motor bike, you do not merely perceive the colour, or mileage or looks or the seat cover but you perceive the motor bike as a whole. Simply stated, a person's perceptual process organises the incoming information into a meaningful whole. Even though it is still too early (because a lot is still to be learned) to clearly state on how the human mind assembles, organises and categorises information.

Now, let us take a look at some forms of perceptual organisation, namely: Figure-Ground principle, perceptual grouping, perceptual constancy, perceptual context and perceptual defence.

Figure-Ground Principle

According to this principle perceived objects will be separate from its background. i.e., the figure is always perceived to be in contrast to its background and hence will be noticed. Of course, the manner in which the figure is perceived will depend upon the background. For instance, if one were to have a look at the triangles given below:



What is your observation of the above diagram? Yes, you must have noticed the one dark triangle in the centre more prominently than the other triangles. This is because of that triangle's dissimilarity (it has a darker shade than others) and its position is in the centre of the diagram. Thus, very often our perception of a particular object (or person) is also shaped depending upon the positioning of that object.

Perceptual Grouping

This fundamental principle of perceptual grouping refers to the tendency to group several stimuli into a recognisable pattern. This grouping is usually done on the basis of continuity, closure, proximity and similarity. These factors are briefly explained below:

- a) **Continuity:** The tendency to perceive objects as continuous patterns.
- b) **Closure:** This refers to the tendency to close or complete an object or event and perceive it as a whole even though only a part of the object is evident.

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- c) **Proximity:** This refers to the tendency to perceive a group of objects to be related merely because of their closeness.
- d) **Similarity:** More is the similarity between the objects (or ideas), greater is the tendency to perceive them as a common group.

Perceptual Constancy

“Perceptual constancy can be said to be a sophisticated form of perceptual organisation. Constancy will highly be appreciated in this tremendously changing and highly complex world. Perceptual constancy works on the principle of learning and that it (perceptual constancy) emanates from patterns of cues.

According to this principle, irrespective of the information received by the senses, the size, shape, colour, brightness and location of an object remain fairly constant. The patterns of cues are very often learned by the individual. This learning takes place even though each situation is different and there are interactions between the inborn and learned tendencies within the entire perceptual process.

It is this constancy which helps people to make sense and order out of the chaotic world we live in. For example, with the sudden exit of a financial executive from the firm ABC, a chartered accountant is hired and within a short span of time he is able to put the financial statements in the desired sequence. Take another example, have you not witnessed the ease with which a plumber picks up a particular piece from the heap of plumbing material. In both the above examples, it is due to constancy that both the chartered accountant and the plumber were able to go ahead with their task. For if it were not so, both of them would have seen the size, colour, and shape change every time they looked around and would not have been able to perform their job efficiently.

Perceptual Context

Perceptual context is the highest form of perceptual organisation. It is this context which gives meaning and value to simple stimuli, objects, events, situations, and other individuals in the environment. For instance, just take a look at some doodles given hereunder:



Is one able to understand the meaning of these doodles? Obviously No! But if these doodles were to be communicated in a verbal or written context, it would have indicated some understanding or meaning to a person. This can also be explained with reference to an organisation. The organisation structure and organisation culture are a primary context for the employees and all their behaviour will be relevant to this. For instance, within the organisation, a piece of information communicated in the form of a circular, a notice, a suggestion, a pat on the back, a smile, and a raised eyebrow will acquire a special meaning and added value when placed in the context of the work organisation. Since each context is unique, it will impart a special connotation or meaning to stimuli.

Perceptual Defence

Perceptual defence can be said to be a form of perceptual error, which could occur in reference to perceptual context. It is based on the principle that may prompt a person to build up a defence (or a block or a refusal) to recognise a stimulus or a situational event in a context which may be personally or culturally unacceptable or threatening. Simply put, perceptual defence refers to the tendency among people to protect themselves against ideas, objects or situations which may seem threatening.

6.6 SOCIAL PERCEPTION

Of particular interest in organisational behaviour is the process of social perception or person perception. Person or social perception is the process by which individuals attribute characteristics or traits to other people. It is closely related to attribution which will also be discussed in this unit later on.

The concept of social perception has relevance to organisational behaviour because here the object being perceived in the environment is another person. Even though an understanding of perceptions of situations, events and objects are important, it is the knowledge of individual differences in perception of other people which plays a crucial role in employee behaviour in work environment. Thus, social perception is merely concerned with knowing how one individual perceives other individuals.

We usually categorise factors that influence how a person perceives another in terms of:

- Characteristics or attributes of the person being perceived
- Characteristics of the perceiver
- Situation or context within which the perception takes place.

Characteristics of the Perceiver

The profile of the perceiver can be as follows:

- a) If a person knows himself, it will be easier for him to see others accurately.
- b) One's own characteristics affect the traits one is likely to see in others.
- c) People who accept themselves are more likely to see the positive aspects of other people.
- d) Perceiving others accurately is not a single skill.

The above mentioned characteristics of the perceiver can highly influence the way in which one perceives others.

Characteristics of the Perceived

There are also certain characteristics of the person being perceived which can influence the social perception process. The following are characteristics of the perceived one which influences social perception:

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- a) One gets influenced by the status of the person perceived.
- b) To simplify the viewer's perceptual activities, the person being perceived is usually put into two categories — status and role.
- c) The visible attributes of the person perceived also affect and influence the social perception process.

Thus, it is such attributes which make the social perception a very complex phenomenon. It is important to note that usually one's social perception process is greatly influenced by one's own characteristics and also the characteristics of the other person. Let us take an example. For instance, if the marketing manager with a high self-esteem sees an attractive and pleasant regional manager (sales) is relocated to head office, the marketing manager is likely to perceive the regional manager in a favourable and positive frame of mind. But if the marketing manager was a person with average or low self-esteem while the regional manager is confident and outspoken and aggressive, he may be perceived in a negative and unfavourable manner. Thus, attributes do play a significant role in social perception. Simply stated, very often we have the tendency to perceive others through the filters of our own image of ourselves.

Situation

The setting or situation also influences one's perception about others. The situation may be particularly significant especially while understanding first impressions or primary effects. For instance, when you happen to meet somebody for the first time in a five-star hotel accompanied by a well-known personality whom you admire and respect, such an association is likely to have a positive influence on your assessment of the new acquaintance. But, if he is with someone whom you dislike intensely, you are likely to form a negative first impression.

Of course, the initial perception may change over a period of time when you interact more with the person and get to know him better. Nevertheless, the first impression may come in the way to colour your later perception of the individual.

Problems in Social Perception

There are four common problems or errors which affect the social perception process namely, halo effect, stereotyping, projection, and expectancy.

Halo Effect Error

Evaluation of another person solely on the basis of one attribute, either favourable or unfavourable, is called the halo effect. This means the halo effect blinds the perceiver to take notice of the other attributes which also are to be considered if the evaluator has to obtain a complete and accurate impression of the other person. Managers have to make efforts to guard against the halo effect especially during a preliminary interview with a prospective employee or rating an existing employee's job performance. One trait may be singled out and used for passing judgment on the performance of the individual. For instance, the interviewer may perceive a beautiful candidate to be suitable to be a personal secretary, though actually she may be a poor typist and bad

secretary. Or an excellent attendance record may indicate perceptions of high productivity, quality work and industriousness irrespective of whether this is accurate or not.

Stereotyping

Stereotyping refers to the tendency to assign attributes to a person solely on the basis of a category of people of which he or she is a member. People have a tendency to expect someone identified as a doctor, lawyer, or a politician to possess certain attributes even if they have met few others who did not have these attributes.

Stereotyping often results in attributing favourable or unfavourable traits to the person being perceived. Very often the person may be aware of only the overall category to which the person being perceived belongs and is thus put into a stereotype. (The perceiver fails to recognise the characteristics that will distinguish the person as an individual and his unique traits and qualities). For instance, common man may refer to a politician saying “he is a politician and hence will be corrupt.” It can be inferred from this statement that what the common man may want to say was that because he belongs to the class of politicians he can safely be labelled as “corrupt”.

Stereotyping affects social perceptions in organisations where the most common stereotyped groups are managers, blue collared workers, supervisors, administrative staff and trade union members.

Projection

Under certain conditions, people tend to see in another person traits that they themselves possess. That is, they project their own feelings, tendencies, or motives into their judgement of others. This may be particularly true regarding undesirable traits which the perceiver possesses but fails to recognise in himself. For example, an individual who is himself not very energetic may see others as lazy or may explain their lack of achievement as resulting from their unwillingness to work hard. One who is dishonest may be suspicious of others and may perceive dishonest intentions in others where they do not exist. People who are afraid may interpret others' behaviour as fearful or anxious.

Expectancy

Expectancy is a tendency to perceive people, objects or events on the basis of what we expected them to be in the first place. It is sometimes referred to as “pygmalion effect”. Pygmalion was a mythical Greek sculptor who made a statute of a girl that he wanted and made her come to life so that what sprang to life was what he expected. Through expectancy, one may create certain things in the work situation that he/she is expected to start with. This aspect is also known as “self-fulfilling prophecy”.

6.7 IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

Impression management sometimes also referred to as self-presentation may be defined as an attempt by an individual to manipulate and control the impression that others form about them (the person). In a simple way impression management can be said to be the process by which people attempt to manage or control the

perceptions formed by others. People have a tendency to present themselves in such a way that they seek to impress others in a socially desirable manner.

Impression management plays an important part in understanding a person's perception. Impression management has two distinct facets.

- Impression motivation (the degree to which an individual actively manages the impression that he or she makes).
- Impression construction (how an individual has consciously chosen an image to convey and also on how he goes about doing that).

Everybody is concerned about the impression that he or she makes on others. In organisations also the employee may be motivated to control the way his superior perceives him. Of course, the extent of motivation to impression management will depend on the relevance of impressions to the person's goals, value of these goals, and the differences between the image one would like others to hold and the image one believes others already have.

It is said that there are five factors which have relevance on the kinds of impression that people try to construct. These are: self-concept, desired and undesired identity images, role constraints, target values, and current social image. However, there is only little information on how people select ways to manage other's perceptions of them. But there is no doubt about the fact that in organisations the impression made on others may make significant implications on an employee's career.

Impression Management Strategies

Here we briefly touch upon two basic strategies used by employees to manage impressions. When an employee tries to minimise his responsibility for an unfavourable event or say he wants to be out of trouble, he may use a demotion-preventive strategy. On the other hand, when an employee wants to maximise responsibility for a favourable outcome or wants to portray a better image of himself or herself, then he or she may use a promotion-enhancing strategy.

The demotion preventive strategies may take the form of:

- a) **Justification of action:** If not completed his work, the employee may try to justify himself by saying that he was not keeping well.
- b) **Forwarding an apology:** The employee may apologize to the boss for some unfavourable happening and tries to impress upon his boss that he is extremely sorry for the occurrence and promises to see that it does not reoccur.
- c) **Disassociation:** When an employee is indirectly associated with something that went wrong, he will try to convey the impression that he was only distantly associated and in spite of being against the decision/action was overpowered by others.

Some of the promotion-enhancing strategies can take the form of:

- a) **Entitlements:** When an employee feels that he has not been given due credit for the work done, he will communicate either formally or informally his feelings to the people concerned.

- b) **Enhancement:** When an employee may have received credit but feels that he deserves more, he will highlight about how his efforts in the future can result in enhanced profits.
- c) **Obstacles disclosure:** Under this strategy, the employee is trying to create the perception that since his achievements have been on account of the big obstacles (either personal or organisational hindrances) cleared by him, he deserves more credit.
- d) **Association:** Here the employee tries to be seen with the right people at the right time to create the impression that he is well connected and associated with successful projects.

The above strategies are adopted to build impressions and perceptions. Thus, employees have to be wary of such deliberate attempts at manipulation while evaluating people.

Impression management has its impact on the success of getting a job and also on his or her career. It also has an influence on his or her relationships with others. Superiors feel better disposed towards those subordinates who manage to project better image.

Impression management is not practised only by individuals. Organisations also seek to create impressions. Called the corporate image, organisations gain considerably by this exercise. A good corporate image means better employees, expanded markets, and more responsive investors.

6.8 ATTRIBUTION

Attribution is the process by which we make sense of our environment through our perceptions of causality. An attribution, therefore, is a belief about the cause or causes of an event or an action. Fritz Heider and Harold Kelley developed attribution theory during 1950s and 1960s. They stated that our understanding of our social world is based on our continual attempts at causal analysis based on how we interpret our experience.

Why is that person so successful? Why did that project fail? If we understand the causes of success, failure and conflict, we may be able to adjust our behaviour and other factors accordingly. Attribution is simply the process of attaching or attributing causes or reasons to the actions and events we see. Causality is usually described in terms of internal causality and external causality. For example, we may explain a particular individual's success or promotion with reference to his/her superior skills and knowledge (internal causality) or with reference to luck, 'friends in high places' and coincidence (external causality).

In recent years, attribution theories have been playing an increasingly important role in work motivation, performance appraisal and leadership but are also recognized to influence perceptions. Attributions have been found to strongly affect evaluation of others' performance, to determine the manner in which supervisors behave towards subordinates and to influence personal satisfaction with one's work. For example, what the manager perceives as the cause of a subordinate's behaviour will affect the manager's perception of and resulting behaviour toward the subordinate.

Intrapersonal Processes

Research has revealed patterns in our attributions. For instance, when we are explaining our personal achievements, we point to our capabilities. But, when we are explaining our lack of success, we blame our circumstances. On the other hand, when speaking about others, we tend to attribute success and failure to personality features. In psychology, this tendency to exaggerate the influence of personality when explaining the behaviour of others to overlook the effect of contextual factors is known as the fundamental attribution error.

Attribution refers to the tendency one develops to explain the ways in which a person judges another person's behaviour. Very often we make attempts to understand the more lasting causes behind others' actions by interpreting their traits, motives and intentions through the attribution process. Simply stated, an attribution is the complex process in which we observe others' behaviour and try to infer causes behind it from various areas.

With reference to social perception there are types of attributions which people generally tend to make. These are:

- a) Dispositional attributions (such as personality traits, motivation or ability) or internal factors.
- b) Situational attribution (social influence of others, equipments, and so on) or external factors.

The attribution theory makes attempts to explain how individuals when observing behaviour attempt to determine whether it is internally or externally caused, based on three factors: (1) Distinctiveness, (2) Consensus, and (3) Consistency. There are significant contributions from attribution theories especially in the areas involving psychological and personality processes like motivation, performance appraisal and leadership.

Attribution theory has important implications for managers. If the manager attributes poor performance to internal factors, he or she can adopt certain strategies to improve those factors. On the other hand, if the manager attributes poor performance to external factors, he or she can take relevant steps relating to performance improvement.

Let us take an example in an organisational setting. When the production manager notices the outstanding performance of his supervisor, the assessment of his performance will depend on the causes to which he attributes this performance. If he believes that the performance of the supervisor is on virtue of his competence and inner drive, he may praise him and also reward him. If the production manager believes that the performance is the result of using a newer and superior technology, he is likely to treat it in a different manner. This means that perceptions and the subsequent behaviours change depending upon whether internal or external situational attributes are made.

One can make attribution to oneself. If one attributes pay raise to hard work, he or she continues to work hard. Instead, if poor performance is attributed to external factors (such as boss's friendliness) he or she may put more effort into cementing that friendship.

The fundamental attribution error is: (a) the tendency to underestimate the influence of external factors and overestimate the influence of internal factors when making judgements about the behaviour of others; and (b) the tendency for individuals to attribute their own success to internal factors while putting the blame for failures on external factors.

6.9 PERCEPTION: ERRORS AND REMEDIES

The main sources of errors in perception include the following:

- i. Not collecting enough information about other people.
- ii. Basing our judgements on information that is irrelevant or insignificant.
- iii. Seeing what we expect to see and what we want to see and not investigating further.
- iv. Allowing early information about someone to affect our judgement despite later and contradictory information.
- v. Accepting stereotypes uncritically.
- vi. Allowing our own characteristics to affect what we see in others and how we judge them.
- vii. Attempting to decode non-verbal behaviour outside the context in which it appears.
- viii. Basing attributions on flimsy and potentially irrelevant evidence.

Thus, it is clear that errors in perception can be overcome by:

- i. Taking more time and avoiding instant or 'snap' judgements about others.
- ii. Collecting and consciously using more information about other people.
- iii. Developing self-awareness and an understanding of how our personal biases and preferences affect our perceptions and judgements of other people.
- iv. Checking our attributions- particularly the links we make between aspects of personality and appearance on the one hand and behaviour on the other.

Therefore, it can be said that if we are to improve our understanding of others, we must first have a well-developed knowledge of ourselves- our strengths, our preferences, our weaknesses and our biases. The development of self-knowledge can be an uncomfortable process. In organisational settings, we are often constrained in the expression of our feelings (positive and negative) about other people due to social or cultural norms and to the communication barriers erected by status and power differentials. This may in part explain the enduring emphasis in recent years on training courses in social and interpersonal skills, self-awareness and personal growth.

Adrian Furnham (1997) argues that the process of making evaluations, judgements or ratings of the performance of employees is subject to a number of systematic perception errors. This is particularly problematic in a performance appraisal context. These are:

Intrapersonal Processes

- Central tendency: Appraising everyone at the middle of the rating scale.
- Contrast error: Basing an appraisal on comparison with other employees rather than on established performance criteria.
- Different from me: Giving a poor appraisal because the person has qualities or characteristics not possessed by the appraiser.
- Halo effect: Appraising an employee undeservedly on one quality (performance, for example) because s/he is perceived highly by the appraiser on another quality (attractiveness).
- Horn effect: The opposite of the halo effect. Giving someone a poor appraisal on one quality (attractiveness) influences poor rating on other qualities (performance).
- Initial impression: Basing an appraisal on first impressions rather than on how the person has behaved throughout the period to which appraisal relates.
- Latest behaviour: Basing an appraisal on the person's recent behaviour.
- Lenient or generous rating: Perhaps the most common error, being consistently generous in appraisal mostly to avoid conflict.
- Performance dimension error: Giving someone a similar appraisal on two distinct but similar qualities, because they happen to follow each other on the appraisal form.
- Same as me: Giving a good appraisal because the person has qualities or characteristics possessed by the appraiser.
- Spillover effect: Basing this appraisal, good or bad, on the results of the previous appraisal rather than on how the person has behaved during the appraisal period.
- Status effect: Giving those in higher level positions consistently better appraisals than those in lower level jobs.
- Strict rating: Being consistently harsh in appraising performance.

6.10 PERCEPTION AND ITS APPLICATION IN ORGANISATIONS

People in organisations are always assessing others. Managers must appraise their subordinate's performance, evaluate how co-workers are working. When a new person joins a department he or she is immediately assessed by the other persons. These have important effect on the organization.

Employment Interview: Interviewers make perceptual judgments that are often inaccurate. Different interviewers see different things in the same candidate and arrive at different conclusions about the applicant. Employment interview is an important input into the hiring decision, and perceptual factors influence who is hired and vis-à-vis the Quality of an organisation's labour force.

Performance Appraisals: an employee's performance appraisal is very much dependent on the perceptual process. An employees' future is closely tied to his or her appraisal- promotions, increments and continuation of employment are among the common outcomes. The performance appraisal represents an assessment of an employee's work. While this may be objective most jobs are evaluated in subjective impression of an employee's work, to the degree that the managers use subjective measures in appraising employee's the evaluator perceives to be 'good or bad' employee characteristics/behaviours will significantly influence the appraisal outcome.

Assessing Level of Efforts: In many organisations, the level of an employee's effort is given high importance. Assessment of an individual's effort is a subjective judgement susceptible to perceptual distortions and bias.

Assessing Loyalty: Another important judgement that managers decide about employees is whether they are loyal to the organisation.

Implications of Perception on Performance and Satisfaction

Productivity: What individuals perceive from their work situation will influence their productivity. More than the situation itself than whether a job is actually interesting or challenging is not relevant. How a manager successfully plans and organises the work of his subordinates and actually helps them in structuring their work is far less important than how his subordinates perceive his efforts. Therefore, to be able to influence productivity, it is necessary to assess how workers perceive their jobs.

Absenteeism and Turnover: Absence and Turnover are some of the reactions to the individuals perception. Managers must understand how each individual interprets his job and where there is a significant difference between what is seen and what exists and try to eliminate the distortions. Failure to deal with the differences when individuals perceive the job in negative terms will result in increased absenteeism and turnover.

Job Satisfaction: Job satisfaction is a highly subjective, and feeling of the benefits that derive from the job. Clearly his variable is critically linked to perception. If job satisfaction is to be improved, the worker's perception of the job characteristics, supervision and the organization as a whole must be positive.

Understanding the process of perception is important because (1) It is unlikely that any person's definition of reality will be identical to an objective assessment of reality. (2) It is unlikely that two different person's definition of reality will be exactly the same. (3) Individual perceptions directly influences the behaviour exhibited in a given situation.

The important fact is that people who work together often see things differently, and this difference can create problems in their ability to work together effectively.

In order to decrease the errors involved in perception, one has to keep in mind the way the perceptual process works. By understanding the process one can do a better job at minimizing their negative effect. Secondly, one can compare one's perception with other people, if they are representing different backgrounds,

cultures or training. This may lead to agreements or otherwise, communications can help to sort out the differences. Thirdly, one should understand other person's point of view, it may help to know when one is wrong. The point is that one should listen and understand the other person rather than try to convince him or her that one is right. Fourthly, one should be willing to change, when one comes across new information. Finally, one should view the world in dynamic terms, because one's behaviour can alter the phenomenon that is the basis for one's perceptions, so, one must notice the impact of one's own behaviour.

In short, it can be said that perceptual skills can be enhanced by:

- 1) Knowing and perceiving oneself accurately.
- 2) Being emphatic i.e. to see a situation as it is experienced by others.
- 3) Having positive attitudes, which helps in reduction of perceptual distortions.
- 4) Enhancing one's self-concept, which helps in perceiving more accurately.
- 5) Making a conscious effort to avoid the possible common biases in perception.
- 6) Communicating with employees to erase incorrect perceptions.
- 7) Avoiding attributions.

Perception is an important process in an organization. It plays a vital role in forming the basis of one's behaviour by which one formulates a view of the world.

6.11 SUMMARY

- Perception is the act of seeing what is there to be seen.
- Perception refers to the process of receiving stimuli, selecting, grouping, understanding, and reaction to the external stimuli.
- Perception is influenced by the object of perception, the perceiver, and the situation in which the process occurs.
- A person's needs, habits, impact of past experience, ethics and values, attitudes and personality, all influence the perception process.
- Perceptual process comprises five important stages: (a) receiving, (b) selecting, (c) organising, (d) interpreting, and (e) reacting to the stimuli.
- Each stage in the perceptual process is influenced by several factors.
- Perception plays spoil sport with human behaviour.
- Barriers like stereotyping, halo effect, projection, attribution and self-fulfilling prophecy distort perception.
- Halo effect refers to the tendency of perceiving people in terms of good or bad and assigning all good qualities to one who is good and bad qualities to one who is bad.

- Stereotyping, one of the most common barriers in accurately perceiving others, is a tendency to classify people and events into already known or perceived general categories.
- Projection refers to a tendency for individuals to see their own traits in others.
- Expectancy is the extent to which prior expectations bias perceptions of events, objects, and other persons.
- Perceptual defence is the tendency among people to protect themselves against ideas, objects or situations that may seem to be threatening.
- Being an important variable in individual behaviour, perception needs to be managed effectively.
- Social perception is the process of understanding other people accurately.
- Perceptual organisation is the process by which people group stimuli into patterns.
- Figure-ground principle states that the perceived object or person or event stands out distinct from its background and occupies the cognitive space of the individual.
- Perceptual grouping includes similarity, proximity, closure, continuity, and area.
- Previously held beliefs about objects influencing an individual's perceptions of similar objects is called perceptual-set.
- Role of perception is more felt in performance assessment of employees.
- Impression management refers to the calculated efforts to get others to think of them in the best possible way.
- Attribution is a corollary of perception.
- Attribution has implications for perception, leadership, and motivation.
- Attribution theory refers to the process in which people interpret the reasons or causes for their behaviour.
- Attribution theory suggests that we observe behaviour and then attribute causes to it; i.e., we attempt to explain why people behave as they do.

6.10 SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

- 1) Define perception. Explain the perception process.
- 2) What is perception? Why does perception fail?
- 3) Why is it important for managers to have working knowledge of perception and attribution?
- 4) What do you mean by perceptual errors? Cite suitable examples.

- 5) How does perception affect the organisational process? What type of perceptual processes would be detrimental to the efficient operation of an organisation?
- 6) What is attribution theory? What is its application in OB?

6.11 FURTHER READINGS/ REFERENCES

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