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## What Do You See? Using Photos to Teach about Perception

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# GIFTS: What Do You See? Using Photos to Teach about Perception

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This activity is intended for Intercultural Communication and Interpersonal Communication courses, but it can be used in any course that discusses human perception.

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## Activity Description

The main goal and objective of this activity is to illustrate the subjective nature of human perception by pointing out factors that make it subjective, especially culture.

## *Pedagogical Rationale*

Perception is a process through which we make sense of the world, using our senses. It is “the active process of creating meaning by selecting, organizing, and interpreting people, objects, events, situations, and other phenomena”<sup>1</sup> In the first stage (i.e., selection), the brain notices the object (e.g., a person or an incident). In the second stage (i.e., organization), the brain organizes the noticed information through cognitive schemata (e.g., stereotyping). In the third and last stage (i.e., interpretation), one attaches meaning to the subject. These three stages occur simultaneously, and culture (along with other factors) plays a key role in each stage. Since one’s perception guides one’s worldview, which in turn dictates one’s actions, it is important to understand the subjective nature of perception.

## *Procedure*

- 1) Ask 4-5 student volunteers, preferably from diverse cultural/ethnic/national backgrounds, to participate in the activity. The rest of the class will serve as audiences.
  - Take the student volunteers outside the classroom and shut the door behind.
  - Show each volunteer student a selected photograph<sup>2</sup> separately for about 10 seconds, asking them to take in as much information about the photo as they can.

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<sup>1</sup> For further discussion on perception see Wood, J. (2016). *Interpersonal communication: Everyday encounters*. Boston, Cengage Learning), p. 75.

<sup>2</sup> Use a photo that is likely to be unfamiliar to the students. One of the photos that I have used in my classes is of my father sitting outdoors and smoking a water pipe with one of his sisters.

- Once they have all looked at the photo, tell them that they will soon be asked to go back to the classroom one by one to tell the class about the photo.
  - Ask them to not discuss the photo with each other while waiting.
- 2) Have the student volunteers return to the classroom one by one and ask them to tell class what they saw in the photo.
    - Their descriptions are normally about the man in the photo (e.g., his age, his perceived ‘racial’/ethnic/national background, what he is wearing) the environment he is in, and what he is doing. They include comments such as: “I saw an old Asian (or ‘Middle Eastern’ or ‘Native American’ or ‘Chinese’ or ‘White’) wearing a watch”; “He is sitting outdoors smoking something”; “He is holding a wooden object” [referring to a water pipe]). Very few of them notice the person sitting next to the “old man.”
  - 3) Ask the audience members to tell the class if there were any differences in the student volunteers’ remarks, and why.
  - 4) Show the photo to the entire class and watch their reactions, especially those of the volunteer students.
    - Looking at the photo for the second time, the student volunteers usually notice things that they missed the first time, and are surprised by it.
  - 5) Reveal to the class the content of the photo (e.g., “This is a photo of my father. He and his sister are smoking a water pipe in the backyard.”)
  - 6) Use the volunteer students’ descriptions of and remarks about the photo to discuss the three stages of perception. For example:
    - That not all the volunteer students noticed exactly the same things in the photo, serves as an illustration of the selection stage (e.g., you notice things that are important to you, that are out of the ordinary, and that you are familiar with).
    - That the man in the photo looks “Asian” to one and “Chinese” or “Native American” to “Middle Eastern” to “White,” illustrates the organization stage of perception (e.g., people who have slanted eyes are “Asian” or people in the “Middle East” smoke water pipe).
    - Finally, a comment such as, “I’m not sure what the man is smoking, but whatever it is, it looks illegal,” illustrates the interpretation stage of perception.

Such a discussion helps students to understand the significant role of culture in all stages of perception; it points to the subjective nature of human perception.

### ***Typical Results***

Students generally find the activity enlightening:

- They are surprised by the differences in the participants’ comments and find them rather funny.

- ❑ They realize that perception is, therefore, subjective.
- ❑ They cannot help but reflect on factors that shape their own perceptions.

***How to debrief the activity***

- What did you learn from the activity about the concept of perception?
- What did you learn about your own perception?
- How can the activity help your perception of others in different (intercultural) communication settings?
- How can you assure the accuracy of your perception in different situations?