Perception, the Self, and Communication

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

Our perceptions of others shape the way we communicate with them. Several factors influence these perceptions:

- Our success at constructing shared narratives through communication.
- Our tendency to make several perceptual errors.
- Factors arising from our own experience and from our prior relationship with that person.
- Our cultural background.
- Our ability to empathize.

The skill of perception checking can help clarify mistaken perceptions, leading to a shared narrative and smoother communication.

Communication depends on the way we perceive ourselves, as well as others. You will appreciate the importance of the self as you read about

- How communication shapes the self-concept.

- The way culture shapes our self-perceptions.
- The role of personality in shaping our perceptions.
- How self-fulfilling prophecies can lead to either more-satisfying or less-productive communication.

As Chapter 1 explained, one reason we communicate is to persuade others to view ourselves as we want to be seen. To understand how this principle of identity management operates, Chapter 2 explains

- The difference between perceived and presenting selves.
- How we communicate to manage our identities, both via face-to-face and mediated channels.
- Reasons why we communicate to manage our identities.

- Two classmates, one black and the other white, are discussing their latest reading assignment in an American history class. "Malcolm X was quite a guy," the white student says sincerely to the black one. "You must be very proud of him." The black student is offended at what sounds like a condescending remark.
- A student is practicing his first speech for a public address class with several friends. "This is a stupid topic," he laments. The others assure him that the topic is interesting and that the speech sounds good. Later in class he becomes flustered because he believes that his speech is awful. As a result of his unenthusiastic delivery, the student receives a low grade on the assignment.
- In biology class, a shy but earnest student mistakenly uses the term *orgasm* instead of *organism* when answering the professor's question. The entire class breaks into raucous laughter. The student remains quiet for the remainder of the semester.
- Despite her nervousness, a graduating student does her best to look and sound confident in a job interview. Although she leaves the session convinced she botched a big chance, a few days later she is surprised to receive a job offer.

Stories like these probably sound familiar. Yet behind this familiarity lie principles that affect our communication more than almost any others discussed in this book.

- Two or more people often perceive the world in radically different ways, which presents major challenges for successful communicating.
- The beliefs each of us holds about ourselves—our self-concept—have a powerful effect on our own communication behavior.
- The messages we send can shape others' self-concepts and thus influence their communication.
- The image we present to the world varies from one situation to another.

These simple truths play a role in virtually all the important messages we send and receive. The goal of this chapter is to demonstrate the significance of these truths by describing the nature of perception and showing how it influences the way we view ourselves and how we relate to others.

PERCEIVING OTHERS

Suppose you woke up tomorrow in another person's body. Imagine how different the world would seem if you were fifteen years older or younger, a member of the opposite sex or a different ethnic group, far more or less intelligent, vastly more attractive or ugly, more wealthy or poverty-stricken. It doesn't take much imagination to understand that the world feels like a different place to each of us, depending on our physical condition as well as our social and personal backgrounds.

Narratives and Perception

We all have our own story of the world, and often our story is quite different from those of others. A family member or roommate might think your sense of humor is inappropriate, whereas you think you're quite clever. You might blame an unsatisfying class on the professor, who you think is a long-winded bore. On the other hand, the professor might characterize the students as superficial and lazy

"I know what you're thinking, but let me offer a competing narrative."

and blame the class environment on them. (Chapter 3 will talk about the sort of name-calling embedded in the previous sentences.)

Social scientists call the personal stories that we and others create to make sense of our personal world **narratives.**[1] In a few pages we will look at how a tool called "perception checking" can help bridge the gap between different narratives. For now, though, the important point is that differing narratives can lead to problematic communication.

After they take hold, narratives offer a framework for explaining behavior and shaping future communication. One study of sense making in organizations illustrates how the process operates on the job.[2] Researchers located employees who had participated in office discussions about cases where a fellow worker had received "differential treatment" from management about matters such as time off, pay, or work assignments. The researchers then analyzed the conversations that employees held with fellow workers about the differential treatment. The analysis revealed that these conversations were the occasion in which workers created and reinforced the meaning of the employee's behavior and management's response. For example, consider the way workers made sense of Jane Doe's habit of taking late lunches. As Jane's coworkers discuss her behaviors, they might decide that her late lunches aren't fair—or they might agree that late lunches aren't a big deal. Either way, the coworker's narrative of office events *defines* those events. Once they are defined, coworkers tend to seek reinforcement for their perceptions by keeping a mental scorecard rating their fellow employees and management. ("Did you notice that Bob came in late again today?" "Did you notice that the boss chose Jane to go on that trip to New York?") Although most of us like to think we make judgments about others on our own, this research suggests that sense making is an *interactive* process. In other words, reality in the workplace and elsewhere isn't "out there"; rather, we create it with others through communication.

Research on long-term happy marriages demonstrates that shared narratives don't have to be accurate to be powerful.[3] Couples who report being happily married after fifty or more years seem to collude in a relational narrative that doesn't always jibe with the facts. They agree that they rarely have conflict, although objective analysis reveals that they have had their share of disagreements and challenges. Without overtly agreeing to do so, they choose to blame outside forces or unusual circumstances for problems instead of attributing responsibility to one another. They offer the most charitable interpretations of one another's behavior, believing that their spouse acts with good intentions when things don't go well. They seem willing to forgive, or even forget, transgressions. Examining this research, one scholar concludes:

> Should we conclude that happy couples have a poor grip on reality? Perhaps they do, but is the reality of one's marriage better known by outside onlookers than by the players themselves? The conclusion is evident. One key to a long happy marriage is to tell yourself and others that you have one and then to behave as though you do![4]

Common Perceptual Tendencies

Shared narratives may be desirable, but they can be hard to achieve. Some of the biggest problems that interfere with understanding and agreement arise from errors in what psychologists call *attribution*—the process of attaching meaning to behavior. We attribute meaning to both our own actions and to the actions of others, but we often use different yardsticks. Research has uncovered several perceptual errors that can lead to inaccurate attributions—and to troublesome communication.[5] By becoming aware of these errors, we can guard against them and avoid unnecessary conflicts.

WE OFTEN JUDGE OURSELVES MORE CHARITABLY THAN WE JUDGE OTHERS In an attempt to convince ourselves and others that the positive face we show to the world is true, we tend to judge ourselves in the most generous terms possible. Social scientists have labeled this tendency the **self-serving bias.**[6] When others suffer, we often blame the problem on their personal qualities. On the other hand, when we suffer, we find explanations outside ourselves. Consider a few examples:

- When they botch a job, we might think they weren't listening well or trying hard enough; when we botch a job, the problem was unclear directions or not enough time.
- When he lashes out angrily, we say he's being moody or too sensitive; when we blow off steam, it's because of the pressure we've been under.
- When she gets caught speeding, we say she should have been more careful; when we get caught, we deny we were driving too fast or say, "Everybody does it."

The egocentric tendency to rate ourselves more favorably than others see us has been demonstrated experimentally.[7] In one study, members of a random sample of men were asked to rank themselves on their ability to get along with others.[8] Defying mathematical laws, all subjects—every last one—put themselves in the top half of the population. Sixty percent rated themselves in the top 10 percent of the population, and an amazing 25 percent believed they were in

the top 1 percent. In the same study, 70 percent of the men ranked their leadership in the top 25 percent of the population, whereas only 2 percent thought they were below average. Sixty percent said they were in the top 25 percent in athletic abilities, whereas only 6 percent viewed themselves as below average.

Evidence like this suggests how uncharitable attitudes toward others can affect communication. Your harsh opinions of others can lead to judgmental messages, and self-serving defenses of your own actions can result in a defensive response when others question your behavior.

WE ARE INFLUENCED BY WHAT IS MOST OBVIOUS   Every time we encounter another person, we are bombarded with more information than we can possibly manage. You can appreciate this by spending two or three minutes just reporting on what you can observe about another person through your five senses. ("Now I see you blinking your eyes . . . Now I notice you smiling . . . Now I hear you laugh and then sigh . . . Now I notice you're wearing a red shirt . . .") You will find that the list seems almost endless and that every time you seem to near the end, a new observation presents itself.

Faced with this tidal wave of sense data, we need to whittle down the amount of information we will use to make sense of others. There are three factors that cause us to notice some messages and ignore others. For example, we pay attention to stimuli that are *intense* (loud music, brightly dressed people), *repetitious* (dripping faucets, persistent people), or *contrastive* (a normally happy person who acts grumpy or vice versa). *Motives* also determine what information we select from our environment. If you're anxious about being late for a date, you'll notice whatever clocks may be around you; if you're hungry, you'll become aware of any restaurants, markets, and billboards advertising food in your path. Motives also determine how we perceive people. For example, someone on the lookout for a romantic adventure will be especially aware of attractive potential partners, whereas the same person at a different time might be oblivious to anyone but police or medical personnel in an emergency.

If intense, repetitious, or contrastive information were the most important thing to know about others, there would be no problem. But the most noticeable behavior of others isn't always the most important. For example:

- When two children (or adults, for that matter) fight, it may be a mistake to blame the one who lashes out first. Perhaps the other one was at least equally responsible, by teasing or refusing to cooperate.
- You might complain about an acquaintance whose malicious gossiping or arguing has become a bother, forgetting that, by previously tolerating that kind of behavior, you have been at least partially responsible.
- You might blame an unhappy working situation on the boss, overlooking other factors beyond her control such as a change in the economy, the policy of higher management, or demands of customers or other workers.

WE CLING TO FIRST IMPRESSIONS, EVEN IF WRONG   Labeling people according to our first impressions is an inevitable part of the perception process. These labels are a way of making interpretations. "She seems cheerful." "He seems sincere." "They sound awfully conceited."

If they're accurate, impressions like these can be useful ways of deciding how to respond best to people in the future. Problems arise, however, when the labels we attach are inaccurate, because after we form an opinion of someone, we tend to hang on to it and make any conflicting information fit our image.

Suppose, for instance, you mention the name of your new neighbor to a friend. "Oh, I know him," your friend replies. "He seems nice at first, but it's all an act." Perhaps this appraisal is off-base. The neighbor may have changed since your friend knew him, or perhaps your friend's judgment is simply unfair. Whether the judgment is accurate or not, after you accept your friend's evaluation, it will probably influence the way you respond to the neighbor. You'll look for examples of the insincerity you've heard about—and you'll probably find them. Even if the neighbor were a saint, you would be likely to interpret his behavior in ways that fit your expectations. "Sure he *seems* nice," you might think, "but it's probably just a front." Of course, this sort of suspicion can create a self-fulfilling prophecy, transforming a genuinely nice person into someone who truly becomes an undesirable neighbor as he reacts to your suspicious behavior.

Given the almost unavoidable tendency to form first impressions, the best advice we can offer is to keep an open mind and be willing to change your opinion as events prove that the first impressions were mistaken.

WE TEND TO ASSUME THAT OTHERS ARE SIMILAR TO US   People commonly imagine that others possess the same attitudes and motives that they do. For example, research shows that people with low self-esteem imagine that others view them unfavorably, whereas people who like themselves imagine that others like them, too.[9] The frequently mistaken assumption that others' views are similar to our own applies in a wide range of situations. For example:

- You've heard a raunchy joke that you found funny. You might assume that it won't offend a somewhat conservative friend. It does.

- You've been bothered by an instructor's tendency to get off the subject during lectures. If you were a professor, you'd want to know if anything you were doing was creating problems for your students, so you decide that your instructor will probably be grateful for some constructive criticism. Unfortunately, you're wrong.

- You lost your temper with a friend a week ago and said some things you regret. In fact, if someone said those things to you, you would consider the relationship finished. Imagining that your friend feels the same way, you avoid making contact. In fact, your friend feels that he was partly responsible and has avoided you because he thinks you're the one who wants to end things.

Examples like these show that others don't always think or feel the way we do and that assuming that similarities exist can lead to problems. For example, one study revealed that men evaluate women who initiate first dates as being more interested in sex than do the women who initiated the dates.[10]

How can you find out the other person's real position? Sometimes by asking directly, sometimes by checking with others, and sometimes by making an educated guess after you've thought the matter out. All these alternatives are better than simply assuming that everyone would react the way you do.

WE TEND TO FAVOR NEGATIVE IMPRESSIONS OVER POSITIVE ONES   What do you think about Harvey? He's handsome, hardworking, intelligent, and honest. He's also very conceited.

Did the last quality mentioned make a difference in your evaluation? If it did, you're not alone. Research shows that when people are aware of both the positive and negative traits of another, they tend to be more influenced by the negative traits. In one study, for example, researchers found that job interviewers were likely to reject candidates who revealed negative information even when the total amount of information was highly positive.[11]

Sometimes this attitude makes sense. If the negative quality clearly outweighs any positive ones, you'd be foolish to ignore it. A surgeon with shaky hands and a teacher who hates children, for example, would be unsuitable for their jobs whatever their other virtues. But much of the time it's a bad idea to pay excessive attention to negative qualities and overlook positive ones. This is the mistake some people make when screening potential friends or dates. They find some who are too outgoing or too reserved, others who aren't intelligent enough, and still others who have the wrong sense of humor. Of course, it's important to find people you truly enjoy, but expecting perfection can lead to much unnecessary loneliness.

Don't misunderstand: We don't always commit the kind of perceptual errors described in this section. Sometimes, for instance, people *are* responsible for their misfortunes, and sometimes our problems are not our fault. Likewise, the most obvious interpretation of a situation may be the correct one. Nonetheless, a large amount of research has proved again and again that our perceptions of others are often distorted in the ways listed here. The moral, then, is clear: Don't assume that your first judgment of a person is accurate.

Situational Factors Influencing Perception

Along with the attribution errors described in the preceding pages, we consider a whole range of additional factors when trying to make sense of others' behavior.

I have heard students say things like, "It was John's fault, his speech was so confusing nobody could have understood it." Then, two minutes later, the same student remarked, "It wasn't my fault, what I said could not have been clearer. John must be stupid." Poor John! He was blamed when he was the sender and when he was the receiver. John's problem was that he was the other person, and that's who is always at fault.

Stephen W. King

1. You can gain appreciation for the way perceptual errors operate by making two attributions for each situation that follows: Develop your first explanation for the behavior as if you were the person involved. Your second explanation for the behavior should be developed as if someone you dislike were the person described.

   - Dozing off in class
   - Getting angry at a customer on the job
   - Dressing sloppily in public
   - Being insensitive to a friend's distress
   - Laughing at an inappropriate or offensive joke

2. If your explanations for these behaviors differ, ask yourself why. Are the differing attributions justifiable, or do they support the tendency to make the perceptual errors listed on pages 36–39?

3. How do these perceptual errors operate in making judgments about others' behavior, especially when those others come from different social groups?

Relational Satisfaction   The behavior that seems positive when you are in a satisfying relationship might seem completely different when the relationship isn't going well. For example, you might regard the quirks of a housemate with amusement when things are going smoothly, but find them very annoying when you are unhappy with his other behavior. (In this sense, our willingness to tolerate the potentially bothersome behavior of people we like is rather like the amusement we get when a beloved cat climbs the Christmas tree or the dog sneaks a hamburger when nobody is looking.)

Degree of Involvement with the Other Person   We sometimes view people with whom we have or seek a relationship more favorably than those whom we observe from a detached perspective.[12] One study revealed how this principle operates in everyday life. A group of male subjects was asked to critique presentations by women who allegedly owned restaurants. Half of these presentations were designed to be competent and half incompetent. The men who were told they would be having a casual date with the female speakers judged their presentations—whether competent or not—more highly than did those who didn't expect any involvement with the speakers.[13]

Past Experience   What meaning have similar events held? If, for example, you've been gouged by landlords in the past, you might be skeptical about an apartment manager's assurances that careful housekeeping will assure the refund of your cleaning deposit.

Expectations   Anticipation shapes interpretations. If you imagine that your boss is unhappy with your work, you'll probably feel threatened by a request to "see me in my office first thing Monday morning." On the other hand, if you imagine that your work will be rewarded, your weekend will probably be pleasant.

Social Roles   A number of social relationships can influence the way we perceive others. For example, one recent study of communication in the workplace revealed that observers—both men and women—interpret facial expressions dif-

ferently depending on their status relative to the other person.[14] Subjects were shown a photo of someone and asked to judge how that person was feeling. When the person pictured was a manager, subjects saw less fear than when they were told that the person pictured was an employee. Gender also makes a difference in how we perceive others: Seeing a woman and a man pose an anger display of the same intensity, subjects saw more anger and less fear in a man's expression than in a woman's, probably because gender stereotypes of emotion guided their interpretations.

Knowledge   If you know that a friend has just been jilted by a lover or been fired from a job, you'll interpret his aloof behavior differently than you would if you were unaware of what had happened. If you work in an environment where socializing is common and colleagues have friendly relationships, you may be less likely to perceive a fellow worker's remark as sexual harassment than you would if you were in an unfamiliar environment.[15]

Self-Concept   When you're feeling insecure, the world is a very different place from the world you experience when you're confident. For example, the recipient's self-concept has proved to be the single greatest factor in determining whether people who are on the receiving end of being teased interpret the teaser's motives as being friendly or hostile and whether they respond with comfort or defensiveness.[16] The same goes for happiness and sadness or any other opposing emotions. The way we feel about ourselves strongly influences how we interpret others' behavior.

Perception and Culture

Perceptual differences make communication challenging enough between members of the same culture. But when communicators come from different cultures, the potential for misunderstandings is even greater. Culture provides a

))) UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY

NON-WESTERN VIEWS OF WESTERN MEDICAL CARE

Author Anne Fadiman explains why Hmong emigrants from the mountains of Laos preferred their traditional shamanistic healers, called txiv neebs, to American doctors.[17] *After the Hmong's objections are made explicit, it becomes clear why Western medicine can feel threatening and intrusive to patients who are already uncomfortable in a strange new environment.*

A *txiv neeb* might spend as much as eight hours in a sick person's home; doctors forced their patients, no matter how weak they were, to come to the hospital, and then might spend only twenty minutes at their bedsides. *Txiv neebs* were polite and never needed to ask questions; doctors asked about their sexual and excretory habits. *Txiv neebs* could render an immediate diagnosis; doctors often demanded samples of blood (or even urine or feces, which they liked to keep in little bottles), took X rays, and waited for days for the results to come back from the laboratory—and then, after all that, sometimes they were unable to identify the cause of the problem. *Txiv neebs* never undressed their patients; doctors asked patients to take off all their clothes, and sometimes dared to put their fingers inside women's vaginas. *Txiv neebs* knew that to treat the body without treating the soul was an act of patent folly; doctors never even mentioned the soul.

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perceptual filter that influences the way we interpret even the simplest events. This fact was demonstrated in studies exploring the domination of vision in one eye over the other.[18] Researchers used a binocular-like device that projects different images to each eye. The subjects were twelve Americans and twelve Mexicans. Each was presented with ten pairs of photographs, each pair containing one picture from U.S. culture (e.g., a baseball game) and one from Mexican culture (e.g., a bullfight). After viewing each pair of images, the subjects reported what they saw. The results clearly indicated the power of culture to influence perceptions: Subjects had a strong tendency to see the image from their own background.

The same principle causes people from different cultures to interpret similar events in different ways. Blinking while another person talks may be hardly noticeable to North Americans, but the same behavior is considered impolite in Taiwan. A "V" sign made with two fingers means "victory" in most of the Western world—as long as the palm is facing out. But in some European countries the same sign with the palm facing in roughly means "shove it." The beckoning finger motion that is familiar to Americans is an insulting gesture in most Middle and Far Eastern countries.

Even beliefs about the very value of talk differ from one culture to another.[19] North American culture views talk as desirable and uses it to achieve social purposes as well as to perform tasks. Silence in conversational situations has a negative value in this culture. It is likely to be interpreted as lack of interest, unwillingness to communicate, hostility, anxiety, shyness, or a sign of interpersonal incompatibility. Westerners are uncomfortable with silence, which they find embarrassing and awkward. Furthermore, the *kind* of talk that Westerners admire is characterized by straightforwardness and honesty. Being indirect or vague—"beating around the bush," it might be labeled—has a negative connotation.

On the other hand, most Asian cultures discourage the expression of thoughts and feelings. Silence is valued, as Taoist sayings indicate: "In much talk there is great weariness," or "One who speaks does not know; one who knows

CULTURAL IDIOM

jilted: rejected

does not speak." Unlike Westerners, who are uncomfortable with silence, Japanese and Chinese believe that remaining quiet is the proper state when there is nothing to be said. To Easterners, a talkative person is often considered a show-off or insincere. And when an Asian does speak up on social matters, the message is likely to be phrased indirectly to "save face" for the recipient.

It is easy to see how these different views of speech and silence can lead to communication problems when people from different cultures meet. Both the talkative Westerner and the silent Easterner are behaving in ways they believe are proper, yet each views the other with disapproval and mistrust. Only when they recognize the different standards of behavior can they adapt to one another, or at least understand and respect their differences.

Perceptual differences are just as important right at home when members of different cocultures interact. Failure to recognize cocultural differences can lead to unfortunate and unnecessary misunderstandings. For example, an uninformed white teacher or police officer might interpret the downcast eyes of a Latino female as a sign of avoidance, or even dishonesty, when in fact this is the proper behavior in her culture for a female being addressed by an older man. To make direct eye contact in such a case would be considered undue brashness or even a sexual come-on.

Eye contact also differs in traditional black and white cultures. Whereas whites tend to look away from a conversational partner while speaking and at the partner while listening, blacks do just the opposite, looking at their partner more when talking and less when listening.[20] This difference can cause communication problems without either person's realizing the cause. For instance, whites are likely to use eye contact as a measure of how closely the other person is listening: The more others make eye contact, the more they seem to be paying attention. A white speaker, therefore, might interpret a black partner's lack of eye contact as a sign of inattention or rudeness when quite the opposite could be true.

Cross-cultural differences can be quite subtle. For example, when meeting with academic counselors, Latinos preferred to be respected as members of their own culture as well as individuals. On the other hand, blacks preferred to be acknowledged as individuals rather than being identified as members of an ethnic group.[21]

Along with ethnicity, geography also can influence perception. A fascinating series of studies revealed that climate and geographic latitude were remarkably accurate predictors of communication predispositions.[22] People living in southern latitudes of the United States are more socially isolated, less tolerant of ambiguity, higher in self-esteem, more likely to touch others, and more likely to verbalize their thoughts and feelings. This sort of finding helps explain why communicators who travel from one part of a country to another find that their old patterns of communicating don't work as well in their new location. A southerner whose relatively talkative, high-touch style seemed completely normal at home might be viewed as pushy and aggressive in a new northern home.

Empathy and Perception

By now it is clear that differing perceptions present a major challenge to communicators. One solution is to increase the ability to empathize. **Empathy** is the ability to re-create another person's perspective, to experience the world from the other's point of view.

CULTURAL IDIOM

"save face": protect one's dignity

come-on: sexual advance

When I meet someone from another culture, I behave in the way that is natural to me, while the other behaves in the way that is natural to him or her. The only problem is that our "natural" ways do not coincide.

Raymonde Carroll

UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY

TODAY'S LESSON: EMPATHY

Time and time again, it was the bathroom stalls that got to Laura Manis and Kevin McCarthy.

"It's doable, but it's tight," said Manis, as she maneuvered a three-point turn into one stall.

"I should have come in forward," she observed after spending several minutes backing into another.

"I'm glad I didn't really have to go to the bathroom," said McCarthy after emerging from a third.

The pair, both second-year students in the University of Cincinnati's physical therapy assisting program, visited four suburban restaurants Thursday in an exercise that was part lesson in empathy and part consumer survey. Though neither has any physical disability, they and their classmates spent the day in wheelchairs to see how accessible 44 area restaurants were. Working off a checklist, 11 pairs of students tested the ramps, entrances, tables, salad bar and bathrooms of establishments.

"Students come away with the impression that there are a lot of barriers and obstacles for (disabled) people if they want to lead a normal life," said Tina Whalen, the instructor who organized a similar exercise two years ago. "I think it's really

an eye-opener, too, as far as an energy expenditure. By the time they get into a restaurant, through the door and up to a table, some of them are too tired to eat."

Recent legislation such as the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act has made it illegal for businesses to discriminate on the basis of physical handicaps, and most buildings are now required to have wheelchair access and other provisions for the disabled. But Thursday, the students found that legal doesn't always mean easy—or safe. Take, for instance, the wheelchair ramp into the front door of Wendy's fast-food restaurant near Tri-County Mall. It slopes out of a pair of wide doors—and into the restaurant's drive-through lane.

McCarthy and Manis found the excursion a reinforcement of lessons learned in the classroom. "This (exercise) allows us the opportunity to experience the reality of life of someone who's disabled, as opposed to just learning about it in a textbook," said Manis.

Julie Irwin

DIMENSIONS OF EMPATHY   As we'll use the term here, *empathy* has three dimensions.[23] On one level, empathy involves *perspective taking*—the ability to take on the viewpoint of another person. This understanding requires a suspension of judgment, so that for the moment you set aside your own opinions and take on those of the other person. Besides cognitive understanding, empathy also has an *emotional* dimension that allows us to experience the feelings that others have. We know their fear, joy, sadness, and so on. When we combine the perspective-taking and emotional dimensions, we see that empathizing allows us to experience the other's perception—in effect, to become that person temporarily. A third dimension of empathy is a genuine *concern* for the welfare of the other person. When we empathize we go beyond just thinking and feeling as others do and genuinely care about their well-being.

It is easy to confuse empathy with **sympathy,** but the concepts are different in two important ways. First, sympathy means you feel compassion *for* another person's predicament, whereas empathy means you have a personal sense of what that predicament is like. Consider the difference between sympathizing with an unwed mother or a homeless person and empathizing with them—imagining what it would be like to be in their position. Despite your concern, sympathy lacks the degree of identification that empathy entails. When you sympathize, it is the other's confusion, joy, or pain. When you empathize, the experience becomes your own, at least for the moment. Both perspectives are important ones, but empathy is clearly the more complete of the two.

Empathy is different from sympathy in a second way. We only sympathize when we accept the reasons for another's pain as valid, whereas it's possible to empathize without feeling sympathy. ==You can empathize with a difficult relative, a rude stranger, or even a criminal without feeling much sympathy for that person==. Empathizing allows you to understand another person's motives without requiring you to agree with them. After empathizing, you will almost certainly understand a person better, but sympathy won't always follow.

The ability to empathize seems to exist in a rudimentary form in even the youngest children.[24] Virtually from birth, infants become visibly upset when they hear another infant crying, and children who are a few months old cry when they observe another child crying. ==Young children have trouble distinguishing others' distress from their own==. If, for example, one child hurts his finger, another child might put her own finger in her mouth as if she was feeling pain. Researchers report cases in which children who see their parents crying wipe their own eyes, even though they are not crying.

"*How would you feel if the mouse did that to you?*"

Although infants and toddlers may have a basic capacity to empathize, studies with twins suggest that the degree to which we are born with the ability to sense how others are feeling varies according to genetic factors. Although some people may have an inborn edge, environmental experiences are the key to developing the ability to understand others. Specifically, the way in which parents communicate with their children seems to affect their ability to understand others' emotional states. When parents point out to children the distress that others feel from their misbehavior ("Look how sad Jessica is because you took her toy. Wouldn't you be sad if someone took away your toys?"), those children gain a greater appreciation that their acts have emotional consequences than they do when parents simply label behavior as inappropriate ("That was a mean thing to do!").

There is no consistent evidence that suggests that the ability to empathize is greater for one sex or the other.[25] Some people, however, seem to have a hereditary capacity for greater empathizing than do others.[26] Studies of identical and fraternal twins indicate that identical female twins are more similar to one another in their ability to empathize than are fraternal twins. Interestingly, there seems to be no difference between males. Although empathy may have a biological basis, environment can still play an important role. For example, parents who are sensitive to their children's feelings tend to have children who reach out to others.[27]

==Total empathy is impossible to achieve. Completely understanding another person's point of view is simply too difficult a task for humans with different backgrounds and limited communication skills. Nonetheless, it is possible to get a strong sense of what the world looks like through another person's eyes==.

The value of empathy is demonstrated by the results of a simple experiment.[28] In a study, college students were asked to list their impressions of people either shown in a videotaped discussion or described in a short story. Half the students were instructed to empathize with the person shown as much as possi-

ble, and the other half were not given any instructions about empathizing. The results were impressive: The students who did not practice empathy were prone to explain the person's behavior in terms of personality characteristics. For example, they might have explained a cruel statement by saying that the speaker was mean, or they might have attributed a divorce to the partners' lack of understanding. The empathetic students, on the other hand, were more aware of possible elements in the situation that might have contributed to the reaction. For instance, they might have explained a person's unkind behavior in terms of job pressures or personal difficulties. In other words, practicing empathy seems to make people more tolerant.

A willingness to empathize can make a difference in everyday disputes. For example, communication researchers have spelled out how understanding opposing views can increase understanding and constructive problem solving in conflicts between environmentalists who want to preserve native species and landowners who want to earn a profit. After the parties begin to see one another's point of view, they can discover ways of protecting native species *and* allow landowners to carry on their enterprises.[29]

You might argue here, "Why should I be more tolerant? Maybe the other person's position or behavior isn't justified." Perhaps so, but research clearly shows that we are much more charitable when finding explanations for our own behavior.[30] When explaining our own actions, we are quick to suggest situational causes: "I was tired," "She started it," "The instructions weren't clear." In other words, we often excuse ourselves by saying, "It wasn't my fault!" As we've already said, we're less forgiving when we judge others. Perhaps becoming more empathetic can help even the score a bit, enabling us to treat others at least as kindly as we treat ourselves.

PERCEPTION CHECKING Good intentions and a strong effort to empathize are one way to understand others. Along with a positive attitude, however, there is a simple tool that can help you interpret the behavior of others more accurately. To see how this tool operates, consider how often others jump to mistaken conclusions about your thoughts, feelings, and motives:

"Why are you mad at me?" (Who said you were?)
"What's the matter with you?" (Who said anything was the matter?)
"Come on now. Tell the truth." (Who said you were lying?)

As you'll learn in Chapter 7, even if your interpretation is correct, a dogmatic, mind-reading statement is likely to generate defensiveness. The skill of **perception checking** provides a better way to handle your interpretations. A complete perception check has three parts:
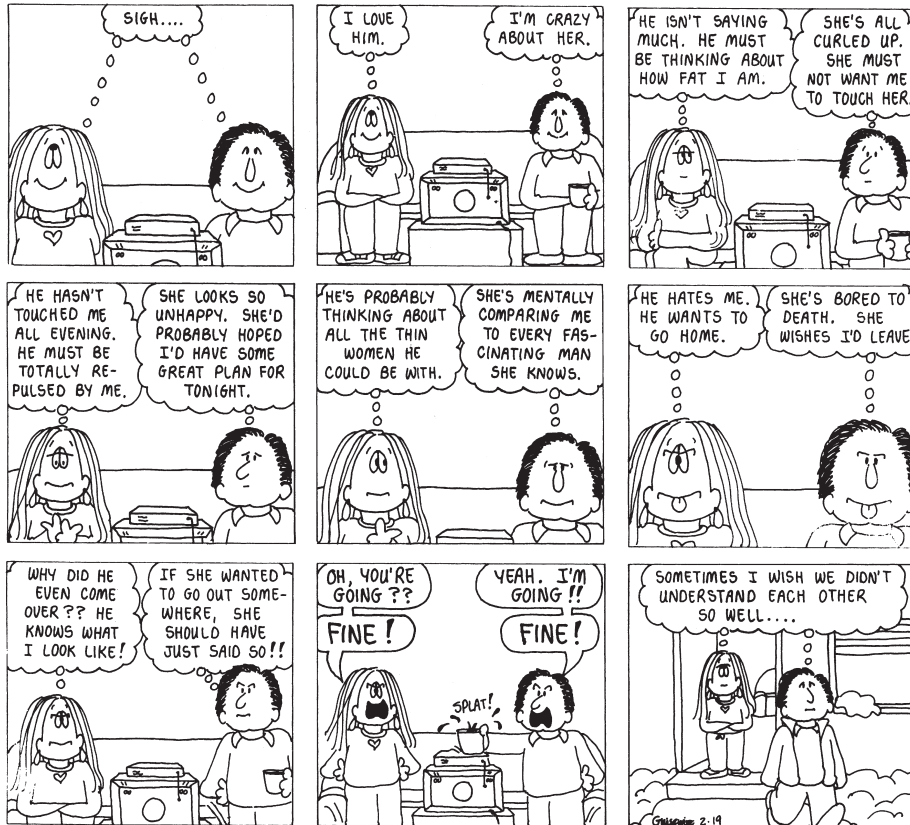
- A description of the behavior you noticed
- At least two possible interpretations of the behavior
- A request for clarification about how to interpret the behavior.

Perception checks for the preceding three examples would look like this:

"When you stomped out of the room and slammed the door *[behavior],* I wasn't sure whether you were mad at me *[first interpretation]* or just in a hurry *[second interpretation].* How did you feel *[request for clarification]*?"

"You haven't laughed much in the last couple of days *[behavior].* I wonder whether something's bothering you *[first interpretation]* or whether you're just feeling quiet

Cathy

SIGH....

I LOVE HIM. / I'M CRAZY ABOUT HER.

HE ISN'T SAYING MUCH. HE MUST BE THINKING ABOUT HOW FAT I AM. / SHE'S ALL CURLED UP. SHE MUST NOT WANT ME TO TOUCH HER.

HE HASN'T TOUCHED ME ALL EVENING. HE MUST BE TOTALLY RE-PULSED BY ME. / SHE LOOKS SO UNHAPPY. SHE'D PROBABLY HOPED I'D HAVE SOME GREAT PLAN FOR TONIGHT.

HE'S PROBABLY THINKING ABOUT ALL THE THIN WOMEN HE COULD BE WITH. / SHE'S MENTALLY COMPARING ME TO EVERY FAS-CINATING MAN SHE KNOWS.

HE HATES ME. HE WANTS TO GO HOME. / SHE'S BORED TO DEATH. SHE WISHES I'D LEAVE.

WHY DID HE EVEN COME OVER?? HE KNOWS WHAT I LOOK LIKE! / IF SHE WANTED TO GO OUT SOME-WHERE, SHE SHOULD HAVE JUST SAID SO!!

OH, YOU'RE GOING?? FINE! / YEAH. I'M GOING!! FINE! SPLAT!

SOMETIMES I WISH WE DIDN'T UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER SO WELL....

[second interpretation]. What's up *[request for clarification]*?"

"You said you really liked the job I did *[behavior],* but there was something about your voice that made me think you may not like it *[first interpretation].* Maybe it's just my imagination, though *[second interpretation].* How do you really feel *[request for clarification]*?"

Perception checking is a tool for helping us understand others accurately instead of assuming that our first interpretation is correct. Because its goal is mutual understanding, perception checking is a cooperative approach to communication. Besides leading to more accurate perceptions, it minimizes defensiveness by preserving the other person's face. Instead of saying in effect "I know what you're thinking . . ." a perception check takes the more respectful approach that states or implies "I know I'm not qualified to judge you without some help."

Sometimes a perception check won't need all of the parts listed earlier to be effective:

"You haven't dropped by lately. Is anything the matter *[single interpretation combined with request for clarification]*?"

"I can't tell whether you're kidding me about being cheap or if you're serious *[behavior combined with interpretations].* Are you mad at me?"

"Are you *sure* you don't mind driving? I can use a ride if it's no trouble, but I don't want to take you out of your way *[no need to describe behavior]*."

Retrospectively, one can ask "Who am I?" But in practice, the answer has come before the question.

J. M. Yinger

Of course, a perception check can succeed only if your nonverbal behavior reflects the open-mindedness of your words. An accusing tone of voice or a hostile glare will contradict the sincerely worded request for clarification, suggesting that you have already made up your mind about the other person's intentions.

PERCEIVING THE SELF

It should be clear by now that our perceptions of others are subjective and that it takes a real effort to bridge the gap between our ideas about others and the way they view themselves. Now we will turn our examination inward, exploring the way we perceive ourselves and discussing how our self-perceptions affect our communication.

Self-Concept Defined

The **self-concept** is a set of relatively stable perceptions that each of us holds about ourselves. The self-concept includes our conception about what is unique about us and what makes us both similar to, and different from, others. To put it differently, the self-concept is rather like a mental mirror that reflects how we view ourselves: not only physical features, but also emotional states, talents, likes and dislikes, values, and roles.

We will have more to say about the nature of the self-concept shortly, but first you will find it valuable to gain a personal understanding of how this theoretical construct applies to you. You can do so by answering a simple question: "Who are you?"

How do you define yourself? As a student? A man or woman? By your age? Your religion? Occupation?

There are many ways of identifying yourself. Take a few more minutes and list as many ways as you can to identify who you are. You'll need this list later in this chapter, so be sure to complete it now. Try to include all the characteristics that describe you:

- Your moods or feelings
- Your appearance and physical condition
- Your social traits
- Talents you possess or lack
- Your intellectual capacity
- Your strong beliefs
- Your social roles

Even a list of twenty or thirty terms would be only a partial description. To make this written self-portrait complete, your list would have to be hundreds—or even thousands—of words long.

Of course, not all items on such a list would be equally important. For example, the most significant part of one person's self-concept might consist of social roles, whereas for another it might consist of physical appearance, health, friendships, accomplishments, or skills.

An important element of the self-concept is **self-esteem:** our evaluations of self-worth. One person's self-concept might include being religious, tall, or athletic. That person's self-esteem would be shaped by how he or she felt about these

qualities: "I'm glad that I am athletic," or "I am embarrassed about being so tall," for example.

==Self-esteem has a powerful effect on the way we communicate.[31] People with high self-esteem are more willing to communicate than people with low self-esteem==. They are more likely to think highly of others and expect to be accepted by others. They aren't afraid of others' reactions and perform well when others are watching them. They work harder for people who demand high standards of performance, and they are comfortable with others whom they view as superior in some way. When confronted with critical comments, they are comfortable defending themselves. ==By contrast, people with low self-esteem are likely to be critical of others and expect rejection from them. They are also critical of their own performances==. They are sensitive to possible disapproval of others and perform poorly when being watched. They work harder for undemanding, less critical people. They feel threatened by people they view as superior in some way and have difficulty defending themselves against others' negative comments.

Communication and Development of the Self

So far we've talked about what the self-concept is; but at this point you may be asking what it has to do with the study of human communication. We can begin to answer this question by looking at how you came to possess your own self-concept.

==Our identity comes almost exclusively from communication with others==. As psychologists Arthur Combs and Donald Snygg put it:

> ==The self is essentially a social product arising out of experience with people. . . . We learn the most significant and fundamental facts about ourselves from . . . "reflected appraisals," inferences about ourselves made as a consequence of the ways we perceive others behaving toward us==.[32]

The term **reflected appraisal,** coined by Harry Stack Sullivan,[33] is a good one, because it metaphorically describes the fact that we develop an image of our-

UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY

WAIT, YOU'RE NOT CHINESE? NAMING AND PERCEPTION

Recently I married and took my husband's name: Chang. I am white and I am Jewish and now I am Chinese—at least on paper. I grew up on 1970's feminism; I went to law school, became a professional, and always imagined I would keep my birth name to celebrate my selfhood. Yet when I married a Chinese man, I realized that I could support our marriage best by changing my name to his.

Hyphenation was an option, but hyphenated names often create a cumbersome jingle. In my case, Berk-Chang. It sounded like a stomach ailment ("I've been in the bathroom all night with the Berk-Changs"). I thought of keeping my birth name but did not want the burden of repeatedly explaining, "My husband is Chinese, you know."

People sometimes take offense when they discover that I am not Chinese, as if I were engaged in a form of false advertising. Friends recalled the "Seinfeld" episode in which Jerry speaks to a woman named Donna Chang after dialing a wrong number, asks her out and is disappointed to find she is a white woman from Long Island. She had shortened her name from Changstein.

When a group of women friends from out of town unexpectedly visited me in Manhattan, I called a popular Chinese restaurant and asked if it could possibly seat eight people that evening. "You need to call further in advance for a party that large," the hostess told me. "I have only 11 P.M." I asked to be put on the waiting list and gave her my name. Then I heard the rustling of pages. "Well," she said, "I could squeeze you in at 8:30."

When we arrived, I announced my name. "Chang party? You're the Changs?" the hostess said. "That's us," I said. I felt guilty as she begrudgingly led us to our table, but what are we Donna Changsteins of the world to do? Should I have interjected on the telephone that afternoon, "Incidentally, ma'am, I am not Chinese—but my husband is"?

I also unwittingly confused the personnel department at the law firm where I practiced at the time of my wedding. After I notified it that I had changed my name from Pari Berk to Pari Chang, a switch was made in the company directory and on my office door. I quickly learned that this meant the assumption of a completely new professional identity. I received the following e-mail message from a work friend the next day:

1. Who the heck is Pari Chang?
2. Does she count in the firm's minority statistics for recruitment purposes?
3. Do the Asian attorneys now view her as competition for the partnership?

During recruitment season, people in the personnel department, not having met me, must have assumed I was Asian, and asked me to interview anyone who was of Asian descent. No doubt some of the candidates I interviewed were perplexed. I noticed a few sidelong glances that suggested "Is she half?"

As time passes, I feel emboldened by my new identity. Losing my birth name, ironically, has been for me a matter of self-definition. I am tickled by the irony of having made a modern decision by doing the most traditional of all things wifely: taking my husband's name.

Pari Chang

selves from the way we think others view us. This notion of the "looking-glass self" was introduced in 1902 by Charles H. Cooley, who suggested that we put ourselves in the position of other people and then, in our mind's eye, view ourselves as we imagine they see us.[34]

As we learn to speak and understand language, verbal messages—both positive and negative—also contribute to the developing self-concept. These messages continue later in life, especially when they come from what social scientists term **significant others**—people whose opinions we especially value. A teacher from long ago, a special friend or relative, or perhaps a barely known acquaintance whom you respected can all leave an imprint on how you view yourself. To see the importance of significant others, ask yourself how you arrived at your opinion of you as a student, as a person attractive to the opposite sex, as a competent

worker, and so on and you will see that these self-evaluations were probably influenced by the way others regarded you.

As we grow older, the influence of significant others is less powerful.[35] The evaluations of others still influence beliefs about the self in some areas, such as physical attractiveness and popularity. In other areas, however, the looking glass of the self-concept has become distorted, so that it shapes the input of others to make it conform with our existing beliefs. For example, if your self-concept includes the element "poor student," you might respond to a high grade by thinking "I was just lucky" or "The professor must be an easy grader."

You might argue that not every part of one's self-concept is shaped by others, insisting there are certain objective facts that are recognizable by self-observation. After all, nobody needs to tell you that you are taller than others, speak with an accent, can run quickly, and so on. These facts are obvious.

Though it's true that some features of the self are immediately apparent, the *significance* we attach to them—the rank we assign them in the hierarchy of our list and the interpretation we give them—depends greatly on the social environment. The interpretation of characteristics such as weight depends on the way people important to us regard them. Being anything less than trim and muscular is generally regarded as undesirable because others tell us that slenderness is an ideal. In one study, young women's perceptions of their bodies changed for the worse after watching just thirty minutes of televised images of the "ideal" female form.[36] Furthermore, these distorted self-images can lead to serious behavioral disorders such as depression, anorexia nervosa, bulimia, and other eating disorders. In cultures and societies where greater weight is considered beautiful, a Western supermodel would be considered unattractive. In the same way, the fact that one is single or married, solitary or sociable, aggressive or passive takes on meaning depending on the interpretation that society attaches to those traits. Thus, the importance of a given characteristic in your self-concept has as much to do with the significance that you and others attach to it as with the existence of the characteristic.

Premier Artiste

Watch me perform!
I walk a tightrope of unique design.
I teeter, falter, recover and bow.
You applaud.
I run forward, backward, hesitate and
    bow.
You applaud.
If you don't applaud, I'll fall.
Cheer me! Hurray me!
Or you push me
Down.

Lenni Shender Goldstein

ETHICAL CHALLENGE

IS HONESTY THE BEST POLICY?

By now it should be clear that each of us has the power to influence others' self-concepts. Even with the best of intentions, there are cases when an honest message is likely to reduce another person's self-esteem. Consider a few examples:

- Your friend, an aspiring artist, asks "What do you think of my latest painting?" You think it's terrible.
- After a long, hard week you are looking forward to spending the evening at home. A somewhat insecure friend who just broke off a long romantic relationship calls to ask if you want to get together. You don't.
- A good friend asks to use your name as a reference for a potential employer. You can't honestly tell the employer that your friend is qualified for the job.

In situations like these, how do you reconcile the desire to avoid diminishing another person's self-esteem with the need to be honest? Based on your conclusions, is it possible to always be both honest and supportive?

UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY

DEAFNESS AND IDENTITY[37]

The experience of Howard offers a dramatic example of how reference groups and reflected appraisal can shape identity. Every member of Howard's immediate family—parents, brother, aunts, and uncles—was deaf. He spent his entire early childhood around deaf people and in his preschool life accepted this way of being as the natural state of affairs.

Even as a young child, Howard knew about deafness. The American Sign Language sign for "deaf" was part of his everyday vocabulary. But when he began school, Howard soon discovered that the same sign had a subtle but dramatically different meaning. Among his family, "deaf" meant "us—people who behave as expected." But in a mostly hearing world, the same term meant "a remarkable condition—different from normal."

This sense of difference can shape the identity of a deaf child, especially in environments where sign language is discouraged in favor of communication forms that are favored in the hearing world, such as lip reading and speaking. In such an environment, it's not hard to imagine how the identity "I'm deaf" can come to mean "I'm different," and then "I'm deficient." Howard's physical condition didn't change when he began school, but his sense of himself shifted due to the reflected appraisal of his teachers and the broader reference groups he experienced in the hearing world.

Culture and the Self-Concept

At the dawn of a new millennium, the challenges and opportunities that come from cultural diversity are becoming more apparent. But the power of culture is far more basic and powerful than most people realize. Although we seldom recognize the fact, our whole notion of the self is shaped by the culture in which we have been reared.[38]

The most obvious feature of a culture is the language its members use. If you live in an environment where everyone speaks the same tongue, then language will have little noticeable impact. But when your primary language is not the majority one, or when it is not prestigious, the sense of being a member of what social scientists call the "out-group" is strong. At this point the speaker of a nondominant language can react in one of two ways: either to feel pressured to assimilate by speaking the "better" language, or to refuse to accede to the majority language and maintain loyalty to the ethnic language.[39] In either case, the impact of language on the self-concept is powerful. On one hand, the feeling is likely to be "I'm not as good as speakers of the native language," and on the other, the belief is "there's something unique and worth preserving in my language." A case study of Hispanic managers illustrates the dilemma of speaking a nondominant language.[40] The managers—employees in a predominantly Anglo organization—felt their "Mexican" identity threatened when they found that the road to advancement would be smoother if they deemphasized their Spanish and adopted a more colloquial English style of speaking.

Cultures affect the self-concept in more subtle ways, too. Most Western cultures are highly individualistic, whereas other cultures—most Asian ones, for example—are traditionally much more collective.[41] When asked to identify themselves, Americans, Canadians, Australians, and Europeans would probably respond by giving their first name, surname, street, town, and country. Many Asians do it the other way

CULTURAL IDIOM
tongue: language

around.[42] If you ask Hindus for their identity, they will give you their caste and village as well as their name. The Sanskrit formula for identifying one's self begins with lineage and goes on to family and house and ends with one's personal name.[43]

These conventions for naming aren't just cultural curiosities: They reflect a very different way of viewing one's self.[44] In collective cultures a person gains identity by belonging to a group. This means that the degree of interdependence among members of the society and its subgroups is much higher. Feelings of pride and self-worth are likely to be shaped not only by what the individual does, but also by the behavior of other members of the community. This linkage to others explains the traditional Asian denial of self-importance—a strong contrast to the self-promotion that is common in individualistic Western cultures. In Chinese written language, for example, the pronoun "I" looks very similar to the word for "selfish."[45] Table 2–1 summarizes some differences between individualistic Western cultures and more collective Asian ones.

This sort of cultural difference isn't just an anthropological curiosity. It shows up in the level of comfort or anxiety that people feel when communicating. In societies where the need to conform is great, there is a higher degree of communication apprehension. For example, as a group, residents of China, Korea, and Japan exhibit significantly more anxiety about speaking out than do members of individualistic cultures such as the United States and Australia.[46] It's important to realize that different levels of communication apprehension don't mean that shyness is a "problem" in some cultures. In fact, just the opposite is true: In these cultures, reticence is valued. When the goal is to *avoid* being the nail that sticks out, it's logical to feel nervous when you make yourself appear different by calling attention to yourself. A self-concept that includes "assertive" might make a Westerner feel proud, but in much of Asia it would more likely be cause for shame.

In Japan, in fact, everything had been made level and uniform—even humanity. By one official count, 90 percent of the population regarded themselves as middle-class; in schools, it was not the outcasts who beat up the conformists, but vice versa. Every Japanese individual seemed to have the same goal as every other—to become like every other Japanese individual. The word for "different," I was told, was the same as the word for "wrong." And again and again in Japan, in contexts varying from the baseball stadium to the watercolor canvas, I heard the same unswerving, even maxim: "The nail that sticks out must be hammered down."

Pico Iyer
Video Night in Katmandu

TABLE 2-1   The Self in Individualistic and Collectivistic Cultures

Individualistic Cultures	Collectivistic Cultures
Self is separate, unique individual; should be independent, self-sufficient	People belong to extended families or in-groups; "we" or group orientation
Individual should take care of self and immediate family	Person should take care of extended family before self
Many flexible group memberships; friends based on shared interests and activities	Emphasis on belonging to a very few permanent in-groups, which have a strong influence over the person
Reward for individual achievement and initiative; individual decisions encouraged; individual credit and blame assigned	Reward for contribution to group goals and well-being; cooperation with in-group members; group decisions valued; credit and blame shared
High value on autonomy, change, youth, individual security, equality	High value on duty, order, tradition, age, group security, status, hierarchy

Adapted by Sandra Sudweeks from H. C. Triandis, "Cross-cultural Studies of Individualism and Collectivism," in J. Berman, ed., *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation* 37 (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), pp. 41–133, and E. T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976).