**What Is Person Perception?**

**How Do We Form Impressions of Other People?**



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In social psychology, the term **person perception** refers to the different mental processes that we use to form impressions of other people. This includes not just how we form these impressions, but the different conclusions we make about other people based upon our impressions.

Consider how often you make these kinds of judgments every day. When you meet with a new co-worker, you immediately begin to develop an initial impression of this person.

When you visit the grocery store after work, you might draw conclusions about the cashier who checks you out, even though you know very little about this person.

This allows us to make snap judgments and [decisions](https://www.verywell.com/decision-making-strategies-2795483), but it can also lead to biased or stereotyped perceptions of other people. Let's take a closer look at how person perception works and the impact it has on our day-to-day interactions with other people.

**What Information Do We Use to Form Impressions of Others?**

Obviously, person perception can be a very subjective process that can be impacted by many variables. Factors that can influence the impressions you form of other people include the characteristics of the person you are observing, the context of the situation, your own personal traits and your past experiences.

People often form impressions of others very quickly with only minimal information. We frequently base our impressions on the **roles and social norms** we expect from people.

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For example, you might form an impression of a city bus driver based on how you would anticipate that a person in that role to behave, considering individual [personality characteristics](https://www.verywell.com/trait-theory-of-personality-2795955) only after you have formed this initial impression.

**Physical cues** can also play an important role. If you see a woman dressed in a professional-looking suit, you might immediately assume that she works in a formal setting, perhaps at a law firm or bank.

**Salience** of the information we perceive is also important. Generally, we tend to focus on the most obvious points rather than noting background information. The more novel or obvious a factor is, the more likely we are to focus on it. If you see a woman dressed in a tailored suit and her hair styled in a bright pink mohawk, you are likely to pay more attention to her unusual hairstyle than her sensible business attire.

**Social Categorization**

One of the [mental shortcuts](https://www.verywell.com/what-is-a-heuristic-2795235) that we use in person perception is known as **social categorization**. In the social categorization process, we mentally categorize people into different groups based on common characteristics. Sometimes this process occurs consciously, but for the most part social categorizations happens automatically and unconsciously. Some of the most common grouping people use include age, gender, occupation and race.

As with many mental shortcuts, social categorization has both positive and negative aspects. One of the strengths of social categorization is that it allows people to make judgments very quickly.

Realistically, you simply do not have time to get to know each person you meet on an individual, personal basis. Using social categorization allows you to make decisions and establish expectations of how people will behave in certain situations very quickly, which allows you to focus on other things.

The problems with this technique include the fact that it can lead to errors and as well as stereotyping or even [prejudice](https://www.verywell.com/what-is-prejudice-2795476).

Consider this example:

Imagine that you are getting on a bus but there are only two seats available. One seat is next to a petite, silver-haired, elderly woman, the other seat is next to a burly, grim-faced man. Based on your immediate impression, you sit next to the elderly woman, who unfortunately turns out to be quite skilled at picking pockets. Because of social categorization, you immediately judged the woman as harmless and the man as threatening, leading to the loss of your wallet. While social categorization can be useful at times, it can also lead to these kinds of misjudgments.

**Implicit Personality Theories**

An **implicit personality theory** is a collection of beliefs and assumptions that we have about how certain traits are linked to other characteristics and behaviors. Once we know something about a [cardinal trait](https://www.verywell.com/what-are-cardinal-traits-2794966), we assume that the person also exhibits other traits that are commonly linked to that key characteristic.

For example, if you learn that a new co-worker is very happy, you might immediately assume that she is also friendly, kind and generous. As with social categorization, implicit personality theories help people make judgments quickly, but they can also contribute to stereotyping and errors.

References

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