



## A Brief Introduction to Perception

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### Abstract

This paper aims to give a brief introduction to the concept of perception: including the definition, the three stages of perception process, the two dimensions of perception, the research status quo of perception at home and abroad, and the main cultural factors which account for the existence of perception diversity. Based on former studies of perception and intercultural communication, I try to classify perception diversity and make analysis of the influence culture has on perception diversity. This study is of great importance because, understanding and appreciating differences in perception are crucial if we are to improve our communication ability and to get along well with people from other cultures.

**Key words:** Perception; Diversity; Intercultural communication

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### 1. THE OVERVIEW OF PERCEPTION

In our interaction with the physical outside world, it is necessary to process information from it for the purpose of making sense of the world and also making ourselves safe and reassured. And since our human beings enjoy the abilities to hear, see, smell, touch and taste, we are able to sense the outside and be aware of what happens around—this process of sensing the outside world is completed by

our perception, which, with our sensory organs, allows us to recognize and identify the existence of all kinds of stimuli and then evaluate and give meanings to them.

#### 1.1 Definition

In common terminology, perception is defined by Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English as “a) the way you think about something and your idea of what it is like; b) the way that you notice things with your senses of sight, hearing etc.; c) the natural ability to understand or notice things quickly.”<sup>1</sup>

In philosophy, psychology, and cognitive science, perception is the process of attaining awareness or understanding of sensory information. The word “perception” comes from the Latin words *perceptio*, *percipio*, and means “receiving, collecting, action of taking possession, and apprehension with the mind or senses.”<sup>2</sup>

#### 1.2 Perception Process

The perception process consists of three stages: selection, organization, and interpretation.

##### 1.2.1 Selection

Selection is the first stage in the process of perception, during which we convert the environment stimuli into meaningful experience. In daily life we are bombarded constantly by such a large variety of information that at a blink moment we may encounter these stimuli: the words we are hearing, the witness of an accident, the ticking of a clock, to name but a few. Since our world embraces everything, these are countless stimuli arriving at our sensory organs simultaneously and waiting to be processed. However, we can not perceive all the information available to us, because in doing so we would experience information overload and disorder. Therefore,

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.Idoceanline.com/dictionary/perception>

<sup>2</sup> From Oxford English Dictionary: The definitive record of the English language

we perceive only part of the information from the environment through a selective process, just as Singer (1987, p.9) notes: “We experience everything in the world not as it is—but only as the world comes to us through our sensory receptors.” A lot of researchers have paid great attention to this selection stage of perception. Bruner (1958, p.85), for instance, posits that “In the interest of not overloading ourselves with too much information, we limit our attention to those aspects of strangers or the situations that are essential to what we are doing”. Also, Watts (1966, p.29) points out that

to notice is to select, to regard some bits of perception, or some features of the world, as more noteworthy, more significant than others. Of these, we attend, and the rest we ignore—for which reason...attention is the same time ignorance despite the fact that it gives us a vividly clear picture of what we choose to notice. Physically, we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch innumerable features that we never notice.

Some people make an analogy of this selective process to make a map. According to them, one can not put everything into it when making a map, instead, they have to make generalizations and deletions, so that the unnecessary or unimportant information will be deleted or generalized, with the important information being marked in the map un-proportionately. Otherwise, it would be impossible to draw a map. Similarly, when being surrounded by many competing stimuli, we only pay attention to those stimuli which we are familiar with or interested in through the selective process of perception. Thus the existence of perception’s partiality, which will possibly cause misunderstandings in communication, just as Chen and Starosta says (2007, p.34) “The partiality of our perception is the origin of misunderstanding in interactions, especially when people are from different cultural backgrounds with diverse perception systems” .

### 1.2.2 Organization

The second stage in perception process is organization. After selecting information from the outside world, we need to organize it in some way by finding certain meaningful patterns. This organization stage is accomplished by putting things or people into categories, and that is why it is also termed categorization by some researchers. In this stage of perception, the social and physical events or objects we encounter will immediately have shape, color, texture, size, etc. For instance, when asked what a human being is, some people may describe it from the perspective of skin color, others from that of race or nationality. If we close our eyes and think what our university library is, we experience an organized environment with an internal and external structure.

Organization allows “us to structure and give coherence to our general knowledge about people and the social world, providing typical patterns of behavior and the range of likely variation between types of people and their characteristic actions and attributes” (Cantor

et al., 1982, p.34). Perception at this stage enjoys two characteristics. First, the organizing process gives human perception structure. We always put raw stimuli from the outside world into structured meaningful experience. Second, the process shows that human perception possesses stability. That is to say, after we select stimuli and put them into categories, the selected stimuli become durable.

### 1.2.3 Interpretation

The third stage in perception is interpretation, which refers to the process of attaching meaning to the selected stimuli. Once the selected stimuli have been categorized into structured and stable patterns, we try to make sense of these patterns by assigning meanings to them. But different people may give different interpretations of the same stimulus. For instance, a police officer’s arriving at the crime spot can be interpreted differently—the victim may regard it as soothing and relief-giving, but the criminal will definitely be frightened by it. Another example, a kiss or a big hug in public is a common way of greeting each other in some western countries, which has the function of saying “Hello!”, whereas in many other countries they are always considered to be “lovemaking” behaviors.

Such interpretation differences arise because “Culture provides us with a perceptual lens that greatly influences how we interpret and evaluate what we receive from the outside world” (Samovar et al., 2000, p.57). When confronting a physical object or event, almost everybody agrees on its objective part of meaning, but what it means to any unique individual varies according to that individual’s past experiences and cultural background. Different experiences and backgrounds will result in people’s attributing different meanings to the same stimulus, so perception diversity appears.

In the meaning-attribution process, people from cultures that are close will have similar store of past experiences and knowledge, so they will probably attribute similar meanings to the same stimulus, thus similar perceptions. Then with these similar perceptions, it is easier for communicators to understand the accurate meaning of each other’s verbal and nonverbal behaviors, so communication goes smoothly. By contrast, if communicators use experiences or knowledge gained from their own culture to explain the unknown behaviors in another culture, they will attribute quite different meanings to the same stimulus, then perceptions differ and communication problems arise. It is no wonder that Varner and Beamer (2006, p.29) remark “When we don’t share common experiences, there is greater chance we will assign an incorrect meaning to the signal”.

### 1.3 The Two Dimensions of Perception

From the above analysis of perception process, we are quite clear that perception of our physical and social world is an internal operation where we select stimuli

and process them through our nervous systems and brains until we create structure, stability, and meanings for them. In order to understand how we develop structure, stability, and meanings for the selected stimuli, namely, how perception takes place, we must take the two fundamental dimensions of perception into account: the physical and the psychological. Working together with one another, these two dimensions are responsible for our perceptual outcomes.

### 1.3.1 The Physical Dimension of Perception

People's physical mechanisms of perception are much the same—we all have such sensory organs as eyes, ears, and nose, which permit us to sense the environment. These sensory organs receive stimuli, which are routed through the nervous system to the brain, where they are created with the structure and stability and attributed meanings. Although the physical dimension is important, it is the initial phase and provides little help in improving our ability in intercultural communication (hereafter referred to as IC), that is why we only examine a few concepts here.

The physical dimension of perception is mainly about the conversion of a stimulus into a usable form, and it functions in people's acquisition of information or knowledge about the outside world. It includes not only the energy characteristics of stimuli, the nature and functions of human sensory organs, but also the transmission of stimuli through nervous systems to brains. This physical dimension of perception causes little difficulty in IC because physical differences that exist between one person and another are inconsequential when compared with psychological ones. Namely, no matter which culture we are from, what language we speak, or what skin color we have, we have very similar eyes, ears, noses and nerve endings that make us able us to sense the world. With these similar sensory organs, we can all feel the breeze on our face, hear a baby's cry, enjoy the beautiful music in the world, smell the fragrance of flowers, see the full moon in the night sky, feel the pain of a knife cut on a finger, experience thirst and hunger, so on and so forth.

### 1.3.2 The Psychological Dimension of Perception

When IC is concerned, the psychological dimension becomes more significant. It is because people's beliefs, values, attitudes, needs, interests, etc. have much greater impact on how they perceive the outside world. It is during this phase that people give interpretations of selected stimuli and by doing so they have their unique personal touch on the outside world. For instance, as to parents' living together with their children, Chinese and American people tend to interpret it differently. In China, it is natural and quite usual for parents to live together with their children, so in Chinese, there is such an expression "living under the same roof". Because children are always told by their education that it is their responsibility or obligation

to take care of their parents and living together with the old and seeking advice from them is regarded as an asset as well as a blessing. Nevertheless, American parents and children would rather live independently because o their privacy is of high priority and they don't want others to interfere in their personal life. This kind of difference is due to their different cultural values or attitudes towards life. Consequently, it is people's values, attitudes or motives (the psychological dimension) rather than their sensory organs (the physical dimension) that determine what stimuli will attract people's attention and hence receive meanings.

## 2. STUDIES ON PERCEPTION AT HOME AND ABROAD

Some foreign scholars attach much importance to perception in IC. Larry A. Samovar, Richard E. Porter, William J. Starosta, William B. Gudykunst, Fred E. Jandt, etc. have all discussed perception in their works: giving definitions of perception, describing the perception process, as well as analyzing the cultural influence on perception and so on. With detailed illustration, they have proved that perception is of great significance in IC study. Chen Guoming and William J. Starosta probe into the nature of perception and analyze the stages of perception process in *Foundations of Intercultural Communication* (2007). In their opinion, the subjective nature of perceptual framework arising from culture usually results in the perception partiality and inaccuracy. Iris Varner and Linda Beamer discuss perception and communication in their book *Intercultural Communication in the Global Workplace*. They argue that communication is the perception of verbal and nonverbal behaviors and the assignment of meaning to them. They (2006, p.28) hold that "When a receiver of signals perceives those signals, decides to pay attention to them as meaningful, categorizes them according to categories in his or her mind, and finally assigns meaning to them, communication occurs". Their discussion makes us clear about the close relationship between perception and communication, which provides a basis for this study concerning perception diversity and IC. In *Intercultural Communication: A Reader*, Larry A. Samovar and Richard E. Porter (2007, p.12) report that culture plays an important part in perception because "the world looks, sounds, tastes, and feels the way it does because our culture has given you the criterion of perception". And in *Communication Between Cultures* (2000), Larry A. Samovar, Richard E. Porter and Lisa A. Stefani hold that there are direct links among culture, perception and behavior and that some differences in cultural beliefs, values and patterns might influence both perception and communication. In *Communicating with Strangers: An Approach to Intercultural Communication* (2007), William

B. Gudykunst and Young Yun Kim propose that there are three critical aspects of perceptions that influence our communication with strangers: Perceptions are selective, perceptions involve categorizations, and rigid categories inhibit effective communication. They have analyzed the close relationship between perception and communication and stated that people can increase the accuracy of perceptions and attributions about strangers' behavior if they are mindful of their communication behavior. Carley H. Dodd, in *Dynamics of Intercultural Communication*, holds that language acts as a filter molding perception, which is partially coincident with David Katan's perception filters theory. Dodd (2006, p.129) deems that not only our cultural experiences but also our language can shape how we see things. In *An Introduction for Translators, Interpreters and Mediators*, Katan (2004, p.87) provides that there are four filters that affect perception of reality: physiological filter, social engineering/culture filter, individual filter and language filter. Due to these filters, the reality is not perceived by individuals as what "objectively exists in the outside world". Michael H. Prosser and John Hayward hold, in the book *The Cultural Dialogue: An Introduction to Intercultural Communication* (1985) that people perceive every situation in a manner determined by their past cultural and personal experiences. Jandt (1995) in *Intercultural Communication: An Introduction* explains how culture affects sensing and each step of the perception process. Additionally, he comments that perceptual interpretations provided by a culture can reveal much about that culture.

In China, only a few researchers or authors have mentioned perception in their works or papers. However, it is widely accepted by these authors that perception decides the communication meaning and has a great impact on IC. Ren (2004) probes into perception in his paper *The Developing Strategy for Cross-Cultural Perception Competence*. He sets forth that communicators frequently encounter perception differences because of the cultural influence, and these differences usually result in communication misunderstandings. He analyzes the mechanism by which culture influences perception, points out the connotation of cross-cultural perception competence, and also puts forward strategies to improve communicators' perception competence. Cai (1997) in his paper *The Influence of Cultural Perception on Word Meanings* contends that it is inappropriate to discuss the meaning of a single word without taking our cultural perception into account. Because word meanings are mainly decided by our cultural perception, i.e. people from different cultures will make different interpretations of the same word. In his paper he makes further studies on culture and perception. He proposes that a good understanding of the relationship between language and perception plays a key role in foreign language studies and IC. He also reports that people's perception is

selective because of their different cultural backgrounds, but prejudices and stereotypes will obstacle people's perception selection, thus hindering successful IC. Guo (2002) in *The Cultural Perception and Memory in Intercultural Communication* provides that in IC, communicators should possess not only the language skills, but also cultural perception competence. And by researching into the superficial and deep cultural differences, she proves that cultural perception is crucial in IC. Bai (2001) concludes in her paper *On the Relationship Between Language and Perception* that perception enjoys the characteristics of selectivity, partiality and diversity. And she comes up with the idea that in order to be successful in IC, one has to eliminate ethnocentrism and treat different cultures in the world equally so as to develop mutual understanding. Li and Wu (2005) in their paper *Communication Barriers and Cultural Perception in Intercultural Communication* concludes that the analytic framework based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions can help people enhance their cultural perception competence and eliminate communication barriers.

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### 3. CULTURE AND PERCEPTION

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#### 3.1 Cultural Influence on Perception Process

It is not difficult to notice that, in our contact with the outside world, external objects are the same, whereas our responses towards and interpretations of them are different. This is due to the fact that perception is culturally determined. That is to say, culture influences the way people perceive the world and events, just as Triandis notes, "Cultural factors provide some of the meaning involved in perception and are, therefore, intimately implicated with that process" (qtd. in Samovar et al., 1981, p.115).

Although our physical makeup and social roles affect the way we perceive external stimuli, both are essentially conditioned by our culture. ...Culture not only provides the foundation for the meanings we give to our perceptions, it also directs us to word specific kinds of messages and events (Chen & Starosta, 2007, p.35).

For instance, when we hear something from the outside, although the sound waves arrive at our ears, being transmitted from our nervous system to the brain in very much the same way for everyone, how we evaluate and interpret what we hear is greatly determined by our culture. For instance, whether you feel delighted or sick at the sight or even thought of eating the flesh of a dog, snake or some other animals largely depends on what your culture has taught you about.

It is universally agreed that the influence of culture on perception process is so pervasive that there seems to be very few aspects of our perception outcome are not touched upon by our culture. Whether it is our judgment



of beauty or response to a snake, the way we perceive the outside is primarily the result of our culture. It is no wonder that people in the United States might respond positively to those who “speak his mind”, while this same behavior would be frowned upon in most Asian cultures.

Most of the researchers or scholars in the study of perception agree that culture has great impact on perception, but few have made detailed explanation of how on earth culture influences perception. In the following, by exploring the cultural influence on the three stages of perception—selection, organization and interpretation respectively, I draw a conclusion that culture is the biggest factor which account for perception diversity.

### 3.1.1 Cultural Influence on Selection

People are exposed to large quantities of outside stimuli, but they are able to perceive only part of these stimuli. They pay special attention to some stimuli, and in the meantime neglect some other stimuli. This selective process of perception is determined by one’s cultural background, i.e. the decisions we make as to what will arouse and hold our attention and hence be attributed meanings rest with our culture or our past experiences.

In most instances we have learned as members of a particular culture what is important and what stimuli we will pay attention to. We intentionally look for situations in which we can perceive certain things, and we also avoid perceiving particular aspects of our environment by not placing ourselves in a position to encounter them. When we desire to receive certain stimuli, we are more sensitive to them, and when we do not want to receive some other stimuli, we are less sensitive to them. For example, people who go on diet may be more sensitive to food commercials on TV, feel angry at these commercials and yell at others, “Turn that damn TV off!” But others may not display such strong feelings. Similarly, if we expect a person to be kind, we might attend to those cues indicating his/her friendliness, on the contrary, if our friends anticipate him/her to be unfriendly, they would selectively attend to those cues that indicate the opposite. Such difference derives from culture’s teaching us what stimuli we should pay or not pay attention to.

This cultural influence on perception selection can be better illustrated by James Bagby’s (1957, pp.331-334) research test. In the test, two groups of participants from the United States and Mexico were asked to view ten pairs of photographs respectively. Each pair of photographs included a picture standing for their own culture—a bullfight picture representing Mexican culture, while a baseball game picture representing the US culture. After viewing all the photographs, the participants were asked to recall what they had seen. Even though both groups of participants experienced equal exposure to all the photographs, the Mexicans recognized the bullfight picture most frequently and the Americans responded to

the baseball game picture equally often. The result shows that participants always select and perceive those stimuli representing or reflecting their own culture.

### 3.1.2 Cultural Influence on Organization

Cultural factors such as one’s past categories, languages, values, prejudices directly influence the organization stage of perception. People put selected stimuli into categories and these categories are formed depending on their past experiences, languages, or values, etc. Although we have to admit that some categories are well accepted and widespread in a particular culture, they are by no means universal; instead, they are determined by culture. For instance, the physical energies which are transformed into the category “house” differ considerably from an Eskimo resident of the Alaskan tundra to a Hollywood movie star who lives in Beverly Hills, and to an Arab nomad living in the Saudi Arabia desert.

In the following, we can understand the cultural influence on organization/categorization from how people categorize animal life and the bullfighting activity. Some people possibly categorize animals into something used for food, while others would rather categorize them into something used for recreation or sports. For instance, most western people put dogs in the category of pet, keeping company with and pouring warmth and loving feelings into them. In westerners’ eyes, dogs are cute, loving creatures, so the sight of others’ eating dogs is terribly disgusting and makes them uncomfortable. In a word, whether dogs are pets or food all depends on how you categorize them. Similarly, people’s various attitudes towards bullfighting activity reflect the difference in categorization. In some cultures, bullfighting is categorized as a popular sport for it is regarded as a contest of courage between man and beast, symbolizing the triumph of good over evil. A lot of people, especially the Spanish are almost crazy about it. In their part, this activity is evaluated positively, and witnessing the triumph of the matador is the exercise of courage, skill, and physical agility. On the contrary, people in other cultures may frown upon this activity and categorize it into a kind of animal cruelty. They take the systematic wearing down and killing of a bull as typically brutal, so they are strongly against it, and avoiding viewing it even on television.

### 3.1.3 Cultural Influence on Interpretation

Culture plays a crucial part in our perception process—it conditions and influences our perception in such a way that it determines not only what stimuli reach our recognition, but more importantly, what meanings we attribute to them. Culture, with its conflicting values and beliefs, influences our evaluation of the reality, determines the meaning we attribute to the selected stimuli, and thus affects the perception outcome.

Culture provides us an environment for attributing meanings to those selected stimuli. People from different

cultures will perceive and interpret others' behaviors in different ways. If two communicators share common experiences and cultural values, it is easier for one to interpret accurately the behaviors of the other. However, if they don't share common experiences, there is great possibility that each will assign an incorrect meaning to the other's behavior. Take people's different interpretations of the smile as an example, a Japanese athlete, after being terribly defeated, will force a smile on his face, because the smile is interpreted by him as a painful expression to cover his embarrassment of being defeated. But most American audience may be quite furious about the smile because they interpret it as an expression indicating that the Japanese athlete doesn't care about losing the game.

Different interpretations of colors also show the cultural influence. People from different cultural backgrounds assign totally different meanings to the same color. For instance, color red is regarded as the traditional color and of great significance in China since it always represents luck, warmth, prosperity, and celebration, but to Americans, it has no such cultural entailment; instead, it means danger because it is the color of blood. Meanings attached to other colors are also culturally-determined: black is very much welcome in the Caribbean and African countries, but in many other cultures it symbolizes death and horror; green is a holy color to Moslems but means adultery to the Chinese; and yellow is a noble color for Indians, whereas it is associated with death for Peruvians, Iranians, and Mexicans.

### **3.2 The Main Cultural Factors Accounting for Perception Diversity**

We have already made the following clear: First, what is perceived as important tends to vary from culture to culture. Second, what and how a person communicates are reflections of what his/her culture perceives. Hence, a crucial precept of IC is that the world we perceive and communicate about may not be the same as being experienced and expressed by others from another culture.

Our human beings have an inextricable relationship to culture. Whether we like it or not, we are greatly influenced by our culture. We create culture and in turn constrained and transformed by it. Once culture is created, it inevitably influences the way we perceive the world and things around. By supplying us with perspectives of perceiving the reality, culture is considered as a major factor in perceptual discrepancies. A lot of researchers and scholars have discussed the cultural influence on perception. According to them, perception varies because people hold different values, beliefs, worldviews, etc.

There are many cultural factors accounting for our perception differences. In the following, we will give accounts of the three major socio-cultural elements: a) beliefs, values, and attitudes; b) worldviews; and c) social organizations because these elements directly influence the meanings we attach to our perceptions. Although not

exhaustive, they are major contributors to how we learn to perceive the world.

#### **3.2.1 Beliefs, Values and Attitudes**

Beliefs, in a general sense, can be viewed as uniquely held subjective probabilities that some object or event is related to some other object or event or to some value, concept, or attribute. In short, an object or event possesses certain characteristics (Samovar et al., 1981, p.39). Beliefs are quite influential in IC because they affect our conscious and unconscious minds. People in the world tend to hold diversified beliefs and these beliefs will greatly influence the way people perceive the outside world. For instance, a Hindu, with a strong belief in reincarnation, not only perceives time differently from a Christian, but also his/her answers to the major questions of life differ from those of a Catholic, Muslim, Taoist, and atheist. Likewise, people who hold the religious belief of Christianity usually perceive that salvation is achievable only through Christ, while people who are Jewish, Islamic, or Buddhist, are not supportive of that belief. They hold their own beliefs and perceive salvation or what happens to the human spirit when the body dies in a different way.

One of the most important functions of belief systems is that they are the basis of our values. Formally, a value may be defined as "an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to another" (Rokeach, 1968, p.5). Values "represent a learned organization of rules for making choices and for resolving conflicts" (Ibid., p.161). Values tell us what is good or bad, right or wrong, beautiful or ugly, proper or improper and they define what deserves protecting or dying for. Since values are not accessible by direct investigation, they prescribe behaviors that members of a culture are supposed to perform. All in all, values are a way of thinking about the world and they provide the basic set of standards which guide our perception, just as Gudykunst and Kim (2007, p.13) comment, "Most importantly, cultural values guide both perception and behavior."

Perception deals with developing both objective and subjective meanings for people, events, and objects, and a culture's hierarchy of values influence people's perceptions in that culture. So we will probably attribute one's impatience attitude to his/her value of time, and associate self-disclosure with the value of friendship, aggressiveness with the value of competition, and so on. People in a culture which highly values benevolence will perceive violent acts differently from those in a culture stressing survival-of-the-fittest. Also, people perceive the aged differently mainly because of their different cultural values. For instance, in Native American cultures, the aged is positively valued, so it is noticeable that old people are always sought for counsels on important matters. Young people respect them much and ask them to take part in social gatherings. However, people in the

dominant American culture perceive the aged in such a different way that the old means uselessness and a burden of life. It is no wonder that people in the U.S. will be offended when others say they are old.

Where a culture places its female members in its value hierarchy will affect the way how women are perceived and govern men's attitudes or behaviors toward them. For instance, Indian women are much lower than men in the value hierarchy: They complete their meals separately after men have been served. And women are perceived positively only if they behave in accordance with cultural values. If they behave contrary to their cultural values, they would be perceived negatively and dealt with harshly.

Specific cases associating values with perceptions could fill an entire book, but these salient examples are not the most important part; instead, what we want to stress here is that what a culture believes to be important or unimportant affects people's perceptions.

Beliefs and values contribute to the development of our attitude systems, deciding part of the content of these systems. An attitude is a learned tendency to respond in a consistent manner to a given object of orientation (Tang, 2000, p.128). Diverse attitudes also lead to people's perception differences. For instance, by nature we are afraid of being injured, and if we know boxing is likely to cause injury, we may not be well inclined to boxing (an attitude), thus perceiving boxing matches as cruel and brutal, rather than exciting or as a reflection of courage.

### 3.2.2 Worldviews

Though abstract in concept and description, worldviews are considered one of the most important elements found in the IC perceptual aspects. A worldview is defined as individuals' way of perceiving their relationship to the world. Being influenced by culture, a worldview is a learned cultural way of perceiving the outside, and become important in shaping the way individuals perceive other people, objects and events. Worldviews affect people's perceptions in such a way that different worldviews make people think, make decisions, and interpret events differently. During IC, people carry with them their worldviews, which determine their interpretations of situations or events. Frequently, one's interpretations of situations or events in another culture do not match the interpretations made by members of that culture, so potentially IC problems appear.

Differences in worldviews are usually the trigger of conflict between individuals from different cultures. With various worldviews, individuals tend to experience the world in different ways. For instance, due to their distinct worldviews, Native Americans perceive nature in a way which differs sharply from that of the Euro-Americans. Native Americans have a worldview that human and nature are a whole, so they try to keep a balance between man and nature, perceiving their relationship as equal and mutually-dependent. Conquering nature to them is

regarded as wrong and stupid. However, Euro-Americans have a human-centered point view of the world and they hold that humans are supreme and apart from nature. That is why they always make use of the universe to carry out their needs, ambitions, and desires through advanced science and technology, so as to become master of nature.

In the following example, misunderstandings arise because people with distinct worldviews form different perceptions. An American student felt quite confused and awfully wronged, when his eastern friend complained that: "Why don't you take my side when we are involved in an argument with a third party? You are not my best friend!" In the easterner's part, being good friends means always supporting each other and standing on the same side. To them, it is a kind of responsibility to help friends, family members or relatives save face or avoid embarrassment, no matter they are right or wrong. But westerners feel no such obligation. In their opinion, when others are wrong, they will not stand on their side. Instead, they will probably correct or even go against them.

### 3.2.3 Social Organizations

The way in which a culture organizes itself and its institutions also affect how members of that culture perceive the world, communicate and behave. Our schools, families, and governments all help determine how we perceive and respond to the outside world. Here we will take the family for example. It is family that teaches a child since his/her birth what the world looks like and what is important in his/her culture. If living together with many people in a house, the child may learn about the concept of an extended family; and if living together with the elderly people, the child learns to value and respect the aged. In these ways, children form different perceptions of the world or people around.

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## 4. THE CLASSIFICATION OF PERCEPTION DIVERSITY

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Understanding and appreciating differences in perception are crucial if we are to improve our communication ability and to get along well with people from other cultures. In order to make people more sensitive to the phenomenon of perception diversity, I try to illustrate perception differences from the following aspects.

### 4.1 Perception Diversity in Viewing the Same Physical Object or Event

People may disagree over a single event or a physical object because they actually perceive it differently. Viewing the same external happening, people "saw" two different events. As individuals we do have specialized and unique differences that force us to perceive the external world in highly personalized fashions. What's more, dissimilar cultural backgrounds can also call forth vastly different responses to the same physical object



or event. The greater the difference between people, the greater the disparity in their perceptions is likely to be. In western countries, a man wearing a gold chain around his neck might be perceived as “cool”, but in China, especially in the past, that same object might be considered as ridiculous and ostentatious. In Chinese culture, a beautiful woman or a handsome man is generally slender, muscular, neat, and has no unusually obvious features. Yet in some other cultures plump people are perceived as beautiful, while slim ones are perceived as being sickly and unhealthy.

We see the same physical object or event and agree upon what it is in objective terms, but what it means to us individually differ considerably. People usually give different perception interpretations of the same physical object or event. Both a Saudi and an American would agree that a particular person is a woman in the objective sense, but they would completely disagree on what a woman is in a social sense. In Saudi Arabia, women still occupy very traditional roles, and they are perceived and responded to quite differently from those in America. In Saudi Arabia, women have few legal rights and in most instances, they are even not allowed to drive a car or obtain a passport without a male family member’s written consent. Conclusively, to a certain physical object or event, people from different cultural backgrounds may agree on what it is in objective terms, but the meanings they attribute to them are diversified.

As to the phenomenon that a tree limb covered with snow broke off a tree and fell onto the ground—an example which is always taken to analyze people’s different perceptions—two observers might rightly agree that the event occurred, and they might describe it in identical objective terms. But, when it came to the specific cause of the limb breaking, the two might differ remarkably. To Americans, things break because they are weak or lack strength, so matter-of-factly, they would respond that the limb broke because it was weak. Yet, in a Taoist’s opinion, what is strong is weak, and what is weak has strength, therefore, the Taoist might say the limb broke because it was strong. The tree limb was strong, so it could not bend to the weight of snow. With the snow continuing to accumulate, the limb could not bear any more and it broke. That is to say, the limb broke because it was strong and could not bend or give in. Such disagreement derives from people’s different perceptions.

## 4.2 Perception Diversity in Verbal Behaviors

### 4.2.1 Different Perceptions of Words or Expressions

It is easy to notice that in our verbal communication, people tend to have different perceptions of certain words and expressions. As to the word “tree”, you may interpret your perception of it as shade and comfort from a hot sun, but your environmental friend may interpret the perception as the earth’s life process. “grass”, to one

person might mean something in front of the house that is green, has to be watered, and must be mowed once a week, while to another person, it may mean something that is rolled in paper and smoked.

Perception diversity exists not only because words or expressions are sometimes individually unique, but also because they are circumstance-bound. It is difficult to grasp the meanings of certain words or expressions because they are usually given different interpretations under different circumstances. For example, if we have experience in professional baseball, we can understand a “rope” is a line drive, rather than a strong or thick cord. And in the rock music world, “monster” does not refer to something ugly or evil, but rather a very successful record. The word “love” is another example. It is often used to denote people’s strong feelings of attachment, whereas in the context of a tennis game, love means that not a single point has been scored.

Even those seemingly equivalent words or expressions, the meanings attached to them to show greater variety, carrying some cultural traits. People have different perceptions of those words or expressions, so misunderstandings usually arise. *airen* in Chinese and “lover” in English seem to be equivalents, but people have different perceptions of them. To Chinese, *airen* is a term for one’s spouse, while the word “lover” in English refers to a man in love with or having a sexual relationship with a woman outside of marriage. So if a Chinese man introduces his wife as “my lover”, English natives may be shocked and stare in surprise. How could the Chinese, who are known to be so circumspect on such matters, be so open about having a lover?

The same is true of “family” and *jiating*. Meanings of these two words are similar when referring to people connected by blood or marriage, but the following example tells us that people’s perceptions of them are also different. A Chinese (A) attended her American friend’s (B) wedding. Two years later, the two met again. Here is their conversation:

A: Have you started a family?

B: Oh, yes. You attended my wedding, remember?

A: I mean if you’ve had children.

Family is a concept that every language and culture possesses, but people, especially those from different cultures, have different perceptions of it. In some languages, such as in Asian languages, it includes components such as father, mother, brother, sister, son, daughter, etc. To them, family refers to the image of specific persons and relationships. But speakers of some Western language like English are more likely to think of the psychological qualities like love and togetherness. Therefore, in the above example, misunderstanding arises because the American associates family with marriage, love and togetherness, while the Chinese takes it for having children.



## 4.2.2 Different Perceptions of the Way People Express Themselves

People have not only different perceptions of the same word or expression, but also diversified perceptions of the way people express themselves. When the first Vietnamese refugees arrived in Australia in 1978, many of them settled in a south-western suburb of Sydney. At that time, the majority of shops there were run by Australians or by migrants who had lived in Australia for such a long time that they had been to a great extent acculturated. When a Vietnamese went into a shop, he would ask the shopkeeper for what he wanted: "Give me a packet of cigarettes", "I want a kilo of pork". Such direct requests in Vietnamese were totally appropriate, however, the Australian shopkeeper, judging from the lack of such softeners as "Could I have...", "Would you please...", and the lack of "Thank you", concluded that the Vietnamese was rude. So the shopkeeper would raise his/her voice and speak abruptly. Seeing this, the Vietnamese, who thought he himself had behaved perfectly and normally, would form the opinion that the only reason for this obvious display of anger must be prejudice or racial discrimination. Therefore, he fiercely conveyed his contempt for the shopkeeper by body language, which made the shopkeeper more convinced that Vietnamese were rude, and impolite, while the Vietnamese equally believed that the shopkeepers in the US were unkind and arrogant.

Guilmet's (1979, pp.87-91) study also reflected the perception diversity in people's manner of expressing themselves. In the study, Caucasian mothers tended to interpret those aspects of children's speech and behaviors that reflected assertiveness, excitement, and interest as positive, while Navajo mothers who observed their children's same speech or behaviors regarded them as mischievous and lacking discipline. The perception difference lies in that, to Caucasian mothers, assertive speech and behaviors reflected self-discipline and were therefore beneficial for children, while to Navajo mothers, they represented discourtesy, egoism, and lack of discipline.

## 4.3 Perception Diversity in Nonverbal Behaviors

### 4.3.1 Different Perceptions of Gestures

According to Deng and Liu (2003, p.135), "Gestures can be particularly troublesome, for a slight difference in making the gesture itself can mean something quite different from that intended". It means that most of our gestures are culturally-conditioned and given different interpretations. We make a zero form with our thumb and index finger as a way of "saying" OK or everything works out right. Yet the same gesture is perceived as money in Japan, being an insult in Greece, and an obscene gesture in Brazil. By raising one hand to their throat, fingers extended and palm down, Americans convey the message of "I am full up to here", while this same

gesture in other cultures, such as in China, means "to kill somebody", which is a totally different interpretation.

Different perceptions of a certain gesture may cause people's unexpected reactions or even communication tragedies. It is said that when Captain Cook, the famous British explorer, landed on the Fiji Island and walked to meet a group of natives, he thrust out his hand to show his friendship. It never occurred to him that his offer to shake hands could be interpreted as a threatening gesture, since this gesture was always "read" as friendly by people in this own country. In the split second of his action, however, the natives, who were ignorant of this gesture, interpreted the thrust of hand and arm as an aggressive action, and promptly killed the explorer. Legend has it that before Cook made his gesture, the natives were ready to be friendly. They just did not understand the conventional gesture that was called handshake.

### 4.3.2 Different Perceptions of Silence

Silence may be interpreted as indication of agreement, lack of interest, or negative feelings, but we have to bear in mind that silence can be interpreted differently in different cultures. In general, people in the United States are involved with such sound-producing activities as chatting, watching TV, listening to music, in order to keep them away from silence. Because silence to them, especially to those who come from the dominant culture, is regarded as somewhat passive or negative, therefore not a meaningful part of life. Compared with the American view of silence, the eastern one is much more different. According to many eastern traditions, it is believed that inner peace and wisdom can only be achieved through silence, and a wordy person may be interpreted as unfaithful. These different perceptions of silence are responsible for people's different responses to speeches. American speakers in China often feel uneasy about the silence shown by Chinese audience, because in their culture the more questions the audience ask, the more interested they are, indicating more successful the speaker is. But in China, it is not the case. Students are taught that listening to the teacher or speaker quietly is regarded as of good manners and a way of showing respect to others.

### 4.3.3 Different Perceptions of Space

People's different perceptions of space can be illustrated from the physical distance people keep in communication. It is well known that Arabs and Latins tend to interact more closely than North Americans. When a Saudi Arabian stands close to an American, the American will be conditioned to back away. The Saudi may take this reaction as abrupt and impolite, which makes him quite irritated, and then the IC is likely to fail quickly. But Americans view it differently. They keep some physical distance away from others due to the fact that American culture stresses more on individualism and they generally demand more space than those from

collective cultures. If their space is violated they will probably take an active and aggressive stance. However, in other cultures, close distance means intimacy and more friendly relationship.

Here is another vivid example of how different cultures perceive the use of space. The English value personal space in such a way that members of that culture always follow various conventions for the use of space—such as queuing up. Chinese people, nevertheless, perceive space quite differently and they always crowd instead of following the lines, which is seriously criticized by the English as uncivil.

#### 4.3.4 Different Perceptions of Time

People in one culture often perceive time quite differently from those in other cultures. Some view time with great precision and expect others to be precise too. Americans, for example, put great emphasis on being punctual and they treat time in such a way that it is for every reason to call them “slaves to the clock”. To avoid wasting time, Americans plan their time as much as possible, making schedules for meetings, appointments or even dates. Some busy Americans even carry a small calendar around to help them remember their daily schedules. They treat time as money and will be mad with other’s being terribly late. Nevertheless, in other cultures, such as African, Asian, and Latin American cultures, the concept of time is more flexible. Things happen when they are ready to happen, rather than when the clock says so. People see their friends when they feel like getting together, not when their calendar or watch tells them it is time. Being on time in these cultures has no real meaning, so a statement like “I’ll meet you at two o’clock.” may mean that one intends to see the other some time that afternoon or never. What you may find very interesting in India is that the whole system of their country is being late—even buses and trains are always late for about half an hour!

Both in English and Chinese, there are many expressions or proverbs concerning time, reflecting people’s perception diversity of time. Americans are time-conscious and they believe that time should be “used wisely” as much as possible. So there are such proverbs as “Time is money.” and “Time passed will never be regained.” Comparatively, Chinese people are less time-conscious than Americans. In their daily life, they spend quite a lot of time in relaxing and entertaining themselves with such activities as drinking tea or playing mahjong. Also, the expression “*Bu zhaoji, manman lai.*”, which means “take one’s time” is always used to advise others to relax and not hurry.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, I made a detailed introduction to the concept of perception: Its definition, the three stages of perception process, and the two dimensions of perception,

how culture influences the three stages respectively and how perception diversity comes into being. Based on former studies of perception and intercultural communication, I exemplified that a) beliefs, values and attitudes; b) worldviews; and c) social organizations are the main cultural factors causing perception diversity. In order to make people more sensitive to the phenomenon of perception diversity, I made the following classifications: a) perception diversity in viewing the same physical object or event; b) perception diversity in verbal behaviors; c) and perception diversity in nonverbal behaviors. Although such classification is not exhaustive, it is necessary and important, because it makes people not only aware of differences in perception, but also cautious about interaction misunderstandings caused by them, so as to make intercultural communication smooth and successful.

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