

# CHAPTER

# 3

## FOCUS QUESTIONS

- What is the relationship between culture and sensation?
- What is the relationship between culture and each step of the perception process?
- What is the distinction between high-context and low-context cultures?
- What is meant by the concept of face?
- How can cultural interpretations placed on perceptions, such as food, reflect other elements of culture?

# Culture's Influence on Perception

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**T**his chapter is about the effect of culture on our perception of the world external to our minds. Can we say that there is a world external to our minds; that is, independent of our awareness of it? Wexler (2008) states it dramatically by stating “the relationship between the individual and the environment is so extensive that it almost overstates the distinction between the two to speak of a relationship at all” (p. 39). Sensory input is a physical interaction; for example, cells in our mouths and noses have receptor molecules that combine with molecules from the environment to initiate electrical impulses. Our perception and thought processes are not independent of the cultural environment.

If our perception and thought processes are such a part of “what is out there,” what then is the relationship between changes in the cultural environment and who we are? Wexler points out that we humans shape our environment and, hence, it could be said that the human brain shapes itself to a human-made environment. Our brain both is shaped by the external world and shapes our perception of the external world.

In this chapter we first examine the effects of culture on the sensation process. Then we examine the perception process. While the effect of culture on perception is independent of language, language (as we examine in a later chapter), influences thought. Some of the examples in this chapter illustrate the interrelationships of perception, language and thought. Later in the chapter, you will read about the concept of high-context and low-context cultures and the concept of face. And as food choices are examples of the perceptual step of interpretation, you will read about food in China.

### FOCUS ON CULTURE 3.1

#### The Greeks Had Aristotle and the Chinese Had Confucius



Much of the research in this area and most of the examples in this chapter contrast Eastern and Western cultures. Nisbett (2003) and others contend that Eastern and Western cultures literally perceive different worlds. Modern Eastern cultures are inclined to see a world of substances—continuous masses of matter. Modern Westerners see a world of objects—discrete and unconnected things. There is substantial evidence that Easterners have a holistic view, focusing on continuities in substances and relationships in the environment, while Westerners have an analytic view, focusing on objects and their attributes.

### FOCUS ON THEORY 3.1



Phenomenological theories assume that humans come to understand the world through direct personal experience with it. The basic principles are as follows:

- Knowledge is found directly in conscious experience.
- How you relate to an experience determines its meaning for you.
- Language is the vehicle of meaning (Deetz, 1973).

Central to phenomenological theories is the process of interpretation, or assigning meaning to experiences. In phenomenology, interpretation forms what is real for the person. Reality cannot be separate from interpretation. For Heidegger (1959/1972), words assign meaning to experience. Experience, words, and social interaction are linked.

Fritz Heider (1958) developed attribution theory to focus on the ways people infer the causes of behavior; that is, we attribute causes to behavior. We see a person act and draw conclusions that go beyond sensory information. We see a person act, make a judgment as to whether the behavior was intentionally performed, and finally determine whether we believe the person was forced to perform the behavior (attribute cause to the situation) or not (attribute cause to the person).

## SENSING

**Sensation** is the neurological process by which we become aware of our environment. Of the human senses, sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch, including pain, temperature, and pressure, are the most studied (Gordon, 1971). The world appears quite different to other forms of life with different sensory ranges: A bat, for example, senses the world through ultrasound; a snake does so through infrared light; some fish sense distortions of electrical fields through receptors on the surface of their bodies—none of these directly sensed by humans. But is there significant variation in sensation among individual humans? You need to remember that sensation is a neurological process. You are not directly aware of what is in the physical world but, rather, of your own internal sensations. When you report “seeing” a tree, what you are aware of is actually an electrochemical event. Much neural processing takes place between the receipt of a stimulus and your awareness of a sensation (Cherry, 1957). Is variation in human sensation attributable to culture?

Nisbett (2003) has demonstrated that humans sense and perceive the world in ways unique to their environments by contrasting Eastern and Western cultures.

Ancient Greeks had a strong sense of individual identity with a sense of personal agency, the sense that they were in charge of their own destinies. Greeks considered human and non-human objects as discrete and separate. And the Greeks made a clear distinction between the external world and our internal worlds. Thus, two individuals could have two different perceptions of the world because the world itself was static, unchanging, and independent of

perception. It was through rhetorical persuasion that one could attempt to change another's perception. The attributes of individual objects are the basis of categorization of objects and categories are subject to behavioral rules that could be discovered and understood by the human mind. Thus rocks and other objects are in the category of objects that have the property of gravity.

The Chinese counterpart to the Greek sense of personal agency was harmony. Every Chinese was a member of a family and a village. The Chinese were less concerned with controlling their own destinies but more concerned with self-control so as to minimize conflict with others in the family and village. For the Chinese, the world is constantly changing and every event is related to every other event. The Chinese understood the world as continuously interacting substances, so perception focused on the entire context or environment. Chinese thought is to see things in their context in which all the elements are constantly changing and rearranging themselves.

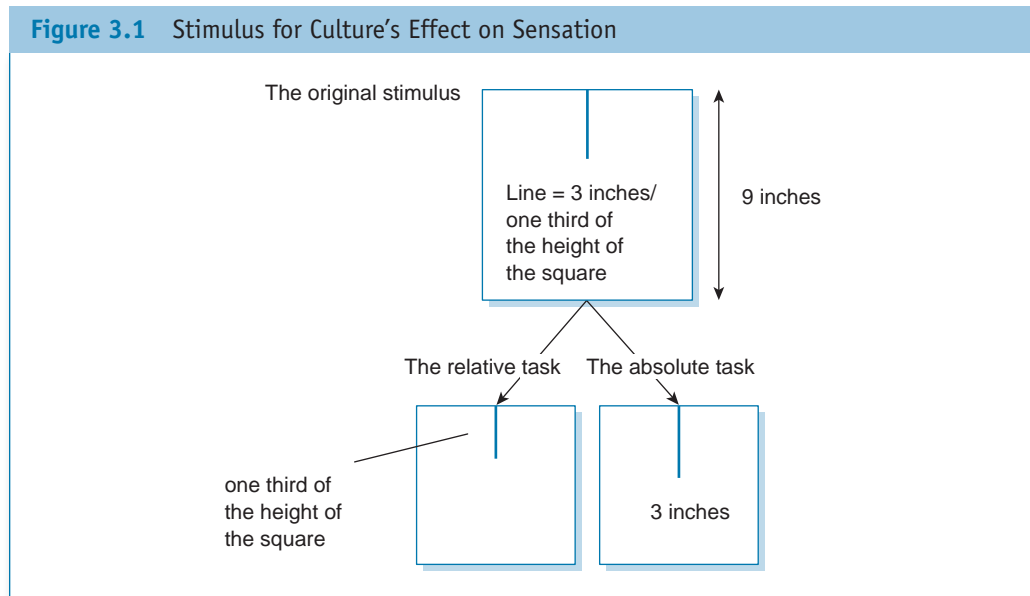
### Effect of Culture on Sensing

How much alike, then, are two persons' sensations? Individuals raised in diverse cultures can actually sense the world differently. For example, Marshall Segall and his associates (Segall, Campbell, & Herskovits, 1966) found that people who live in forests or in rural areas can sense crooked and slanted lines more accurately than can people who live in urban areas. This demonstrates that the rural and urban groups sense the same event differently as a result of their diverse cultural learnings.

The term **field dependence** refers to the degree to which perception of an object is influenced by the background or environment in which it appears. Some people are less likely than others to separate an object from its surrounding environment. When adults in Japan and the United States are shown an animated underwater scene in which one large fish swims among small fish and other marine life, the Japanese describe the scene and comment more about the relationships among the objects in the scene. The Americans were more likely to begin with a description of the big fish and make only half as many comments about the relationships among the objects. Not surprisingly, when showed a second scene with the same big fish, the Americans were more likely to recognize the big fish as the same one as in the first scene (Nisbett, 2003).

More recently, Kitayama, Duffy, Kawamura, and Larsen (2003) showed Japanese and European Americans a picture of a square with a line inside it (see Figure 3.1). They were then given an empty square of a different size and asked to either draw a line the same length as the one they had seen or a line of the same relative length to the one they had seen. The European Americans were significantly more accurate in drawing the line of the same length while the Japanese were significantly more accurate in drawing the line of relative length. Differences in the environment and culture affected sensation.

The researchers then compared Americans who had been living in Japan and Japanese who had been living in the United States. The time for both was a few years. Given the same picture and task, the Americans who had been living in Japan were close to the Japanese in the original study while the Japanese who had been living in the United States were virtually the same as the native-born Americans. While other explanations are possible, one strong suggestion is that even living for an extended time in new culture can modify sensation and cognitive processes.



Source: Ishii and Kitayama (2003).

## PERCEIVING

Culture also has a great effect on the **perception** process (Tajfel, 1969; Triandis, 1964). Human perception is usually thought of as a three-step process of selection, organization, and interpretation. Each of these steps is affected by culture.

### Selection

The first step in the perception process is **selection**. Within your physiological limitations, you are exposed to more stimuli than you could possibly manage. To use sight as an example, you may feel that you are aware of all stimuli on your retinas, but most of the data from the retinas are handled on a subconscious level by a variety of specialized systems. Parts of our brains produce output from the retinas that we cannot “see.” No amount of introspection can make us aware of those processes.

In an interesting study by Simons and Chabris (1999), participants viewed videotape of a basketball game. They were told to count the number of passes one team made. In the video, a woman dressed as a gorilla walks into the game, turns to face the camera, and beats her fists on her chest. Fifty percent of all people who watch the video don't see the gorilla. Mack and Rock (1998) argue that we don't consciously see any object unless we are paying direct, focused attention on that object. When we need something, have an interest in it, or want it,

we are more likely to sense it out of competing stimuli. When we're hungry, we're more likely to attend to food advertisements.

Being in a busy airport terminal is another example. While there, you are confronted with many competing stimuli. You simply cannot attend to everything. However, if in the airport terminal an announcement is made asking you by name to report to the ticketing counter, you would probably hear your name even in that environment of competing stimuli. Just as you've learned to attend to the sound of your name, you've learned from your culture to select out other stimuli from the environment. A newborn child is a potential speaker of any language. Having heard only those sounds of one's own language and having learned to listen to and make only those differentiations necessary, anyone would find it difficult to hear crucial differences in speech sounds in another language.

### Japanese/English Difficulties With Speech Sounds

If you grew up speaking English, certain aspects of the Japanese language are difficult for you to perceive. These aspects do not occur in English, so you never learned to listen for them and you literally do not hear them. For example, vowel length does not matter in English. You can say "Alabama" or "Alabaaama," and others would know you're referring to a southern U.S. state. Vowel length is important in Japanese. Japanese has short-duration vowels and long-duration vowels. Vowel length in the following pairs of Japanese words actually determines their meanings:

<i>obasan</i>	aunt
<i>obaasan</i>	grandmother
<i>kita</i>	came
<i>kiita</i>	heard

Because vowel length is not a critical attribute in English, perceiving the difference in sounds is a problem for those attempting to understand Japanese.

Other sounds that present difficulties for English speakers are the following:

Doubled consonants:

<i>shita</i>	did
<i>shitta</i>	new

Accent:

<i>kaki</i>	oyster
<i>kaki</i>	persimmon

Pitch:

<i>hashi</i>	bridge
<i>hashi</i>	chopsticks
<i>hashi</i>	edge of a table

If you grew up speaking Japanese, some aspects of the English language are difficult for you to perceive. English has some consonant sounds that do not exist in Japanese. If you grew up speaking Japanese, you didn't learn to listen for those consonant sounds. English uses the consonant sounds *f*, *v*, *th* as in *think*, *th* as in *breathe*, *z*, *zh* as in *treasure*, *j* as in the *dge* of *judge*, *r*, and *l*. Thus, if you grew up speaking Japanese, it is difficult to distinguish between the sounds *b* and *v*, *s* and *sh*, *r* and *l*, and so forth, with the result that *lice* and *rice* or *glamour* and *grammar* are frequently pronounced the same way.

Japanese has borrowed thousands of English words. But if you grew up speaking English, you would have difficulty recognizing them. In Japanese, syllables are basically a consonant sound followed by a vowel. Syllables can end only with a vowel sound or an *n*. For example, the Japanese word *iiau* (quarrel) has four syllables—each vowel is pronounced as a separate syllable. A native-born English speaker would not know to do that and would try to pronounce the word as an unsegmented single sound. An English speaker pronounces the word *thrill* as one syllable. In Japanese, consonant sounds do not exist without vowels, so a Japanese speaker would pronounce all three syllables, something like *sooriroo*. The Japanese *r*, by the way, is difficult for English speakers. It's similar to the Spanish *r* in *pero* or *Roberto*. From our first language, we learned what sounds are critical to listen for. Because languages can have different critical sounds, learning a new language means learning to attend to new sounds.

## Organization

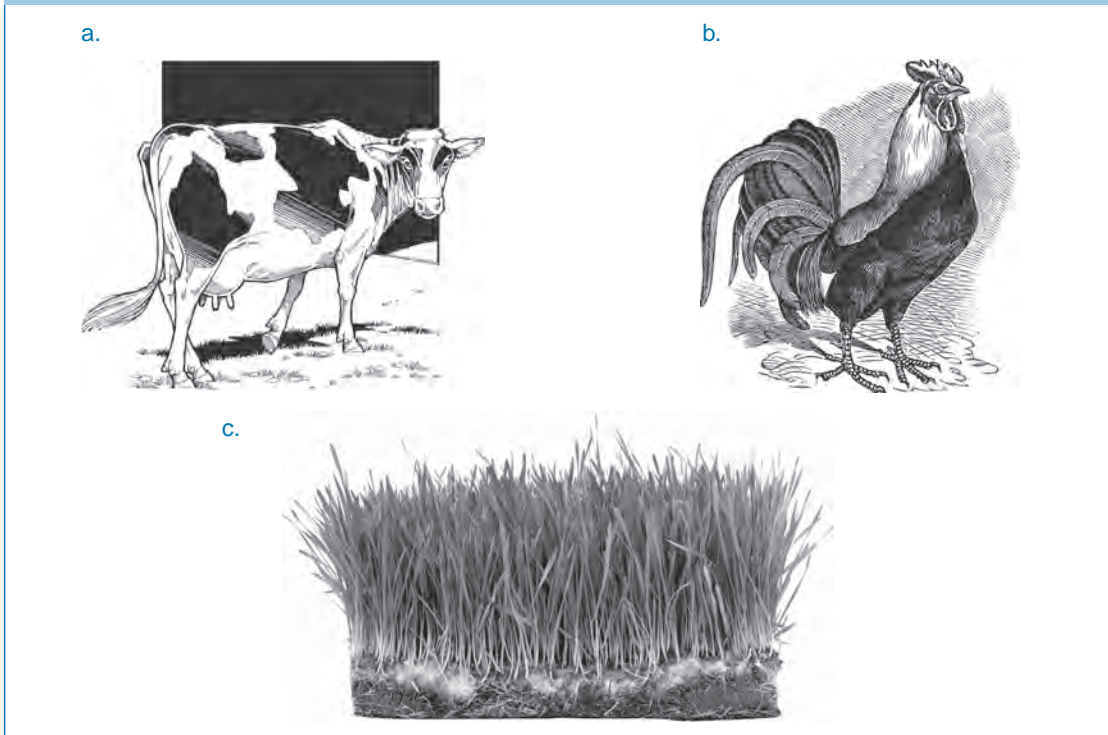
The second step in the perception process is **organization**. Along with selecting stimuli from the environment, you must organize them in some meaningful way. When you look at a building, you do not focus on the thousands of possible individual pieces; you focus on the unified whole, a building. Turning a picture upside down, for example, can trick you into focusing on individual components rather than your unified concept of the object in the picture.

How are perceptions categorized? One argument is that you somehow grasp some set of attributes that things have in common. On that basis they are grouped together in a category provided by language that gives the conceptual categories that influence how its speakers' perceptions are encoded and stored. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), however, concluded that there needs be no such set of shared characteristics. Your language provides the symbol to group perceptions of any kind together.

### Grouping Like Objects Together

“One of These Things” is a song used on *Sesame Street* when children are shown a group of four items, one of which is different from the other three. Children are asked to identify the item that does not belong with the others. Look at the three objects in Figure 3.2.

In this case, which two objects would you place together? The chicken and the grass? The chicken and the cow? Or the grass and the cow? Chiu showed such figures to children from China and the United States. American children grouped objects because they belonged to the same taxonomic category; that is, the same categorization term could be applied to both. The Americans would more likely group the chicken and cow together as “animals.” The Chinese children preferred to group objects on the basis of relationships. The Chinese children would more likely group the cow and grass together because “cows eat grass” (Chiu, 1972).

**Figure 3.2** Stimulus for Culture's Effect on Organization

Source: Adapted from Nisbett (2003), p. 141.

In a similar study Mutsumi Imae and Dedre Gentner (1994) showed objects to Japanese and Americans of various ages and asked them to group them together. For example, one object was a pyramid made of cork, which they called a *dax*, a word that had no meaning to the participants. Then they showed them a pyramid made of white plastic and a different object made of cork. They then asked the participants to point to a *dax*. To which would you point?

Americans in the study chose the same shape, indicating that the Americans were coding what they saw as an object. The Japanese were more likely to choose the same material, indicating that they were coding what they saw as a substance.

### Global Voices

Language plays a large and significant role in the totality of culture. Far from being simply a technique of communication, it is itself a way of directing the perception of its speakers and it promotes for them habitual modes of analyzing experience into significant categories. And to the extent that languages differ markedly from each other, so should we expect to find significant and formidable barriers to cross-cultural communication and understanding.

—Harry Hoijer, *Language in Culture* (1954, p. 94)



## Interpretation

The third step in the perception process is **interpretation**. This refers to attaching meaning to sense data and is synonymous with decoding. The same situation can be interpreted quite differently by diverse people. A police officer arriving at a crime scene can be experienced by the victim as calming and relief giving but by the criminal as fearsome and threatening.

Here, too, the effect of culture is great. As you encounter people of your own culture, you constantly make judgments as to age, social status, educational background, and the like. The cues you use to make these decisions are so subtle that it's often difficult to explain how and why you reach a particular conclusion. Do people in the United States, for example, perceive tall men as more credible? Perhaps.

Applying these same cues to someone from another culture may not work. People in the United States, for example, frequently err in guessing the age of Japanese individuals, such as judging a Japanese college student in her mid-20s to be only 14 or 15.

### Dogs as Pets or as Food

The meanings you attach to your perceptions are greatly determined by your cultural background. Think of how speakers of English categorize life. Most probably use the categories of human life and animal life. Now think of how you typically categorize animal life—probably into wild animals and domesticated animals. Now think of how you typically categorize domesticated animal life—probably into animals used for food, animals used for sport and recreation, and pets. Look at the picture of the puppy and capture your feelings.

Most of us see this puppy in the category of pet, for which we have learned to relate warm, loving feelings. Puppies are cute, cuddly, warm, loving creatures. Now look at the next picture



Many consider dogs as pets. (The author's first dog, Smokey.)

of a man holding up a dog, read the caption, and capture your feelings. Most of us who love dogs find this picture uncomfortable and disgusting. How can people eat dogs? They are pets, not food! It all depends on where you categorize them. Dogs are pets in some cultures and food in others. In the Arab world, dogs are acceptable as watchdogs and as hunting dogs but are not kept in the home as pets because they are seen as unclean and a low form of life. To call someone a dog is an insult among Arabs. People in most cultures have strong ideas about which foods are acceptable for human consumption and which are not. People in some countries think the custom in the United States of eating corn on the cob is disgusting because that food is fit only for pigs. Some Ukrainians like to eat *salo*, raw pig fat with black bread and vodka, which might cause nausea in some, as would knowing that horse meat from California is served in restaurants in Belgium, France, and Japan.



Can you explain your feelings about this photograph? As China's economy boomed and affluence spread, attitudes toward dogs changed. Traditional Chinese may have eaten dog meat because it was thought to improve blood circulation. Urban Chinese today are more likely to have dogs as pampered companions.

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Your reaction of disgust to the picture is a culturally learned interpretation—and that interpretation can be quite strong. In 1989, California made it a misdemeanor for any person to sell, buy, or accept any animal traditionally kept as a pet with the intent of killing the animal for food. More recently, animal rights groups have protested the sale of live animals, such as turtles, frogs, lobsters, crabs, fish, and chicken, for food at Asian-American markets. Asian tradition is that fresh meat is tastier and more healthful, that the best meat “enters your house still breathing.” Animal rights activists contend that the animals are treated inhumanely in the shops and are killed in ways that cause them unnecessary pain. Asian-American groups argue that eating dogs and cats is an extreme rarity among Southeast Asian immigrants and call the law and the animal rights activists racist.

In some cultures, parts of some animals are categorized as medicine. In other cultures, certain animals are considered sacred and certainly would not be eaten. The Hindu elephant-headed God Ganesh is accompanied by a rat whenever he travels. Rats, like cows, are deified in India. No Hindu worship is complete without an offering to Ganesh and his companion, the rat. Rats are fed and rarely killed in India.

### Weather Vane as Christian Cross

The examples so far have been of practices that could offend some English speakers. Let's turn that around with an example of what speakers of English do that could be offensive to others. Johnston Pump Company, a U.S. company now based in Brookshire, Texas, has been doing business with Saudi Arabia for more than 70 years. By the 1930s, Johnston Pump was well

established in California, its pumps having helped change California's arid lands into a leading agricultural area. Johnston's general manager at the time was a world traveler. During a trip to Saudi Arabia, he noted how similar the climate was to areas of California and convinced the Saudi government that vast wastelands could be turned into fertile farmland through the use of Johnston pumps. The first pump was installed in the king's palace.

Over the years, Johnston's success in the kingdom largely has been due to its respect for the country's strict religious customs. All personnel in its international division receive cultural training.

"Making the deserts bloom for 50 years" was Johnston's advertising campaign in 1986. Ads in English and Arabic began appearing in various Middle East publications early in the year. With the success of the campaign, Johnston made large posters of the ads to be distributed throughout the kingdom.

**Making the deserts bloom for 50 years**

**سأهمنآ  
فآ أذهار الصأارآ  
لمدة أمسآن عامآ**

Johnston vertical pumps have supplied life-giving water to Arab deserts for a half century. Johnston pumps were a logical choice for these desert lands, because they were designed to pump hot, sand laden water from deep wells in the desert climate of California over 70 years ago. Since then, Johnston has pioneered many technological advances to make pumps perform better and last longer under harsh conditions. Today Johnston offers a wide variety of pumps for your water supply needs. We at Johnston Pump are proud of our desert heritage, and—together with our agent—we're committed to serving the unique requirements of our customers in the Kingdom.

**Johnston Pump Company**  
1775 E. Allen Ave., Glendora, California 91740 U.S.A.;  
Telephone (714) 599-2351; Telex 67-0487 JohnPump

تأسس مضآات جونستون العومآة بآول مرآة آل الـ لفتح الأمة للصأارآ العرآبة منذ نصف قرن. وأذ كانت مضآات جونستون أأارآ مقلآها وألآا لفة الصأارآ لكآ أن تركة جونستون قد أشتت فآ بآنة صأرآوبة فآ ولآة كآلعربآة منذ أآز من سبعآن عامآ. ومنذ ذآلآها، أومست تركة مضآات جونستون ملى بمرآة الطبعآ بالآسبة للآقدم التآكرومآ الـآى سآازنه للآمل المضآات لآعل بآرآة الفآل بآدة الطول وأحت الظروف الصأب، وقدم الـ اليوم تركة مضآات جونستون لتآكآة واسعة وأصأة من المضآات للآلآ مطآلكم المأآقة. وبالفرآة فآ تركة مضآات جونستون برآآنا للصأارآ. كآآ وأنا قد كرسآ لآسآ وكآآلآ ولآآوبة لآآبة كآآة أمتآآات رآآنا الكرام فآ سآر أآاء المآآة.

**شركة مضآات جونستون**  
1775 أآة آل آلآوب للآسورآ كآلعربآة، الـآلآة للآمة الـآرآبآة.  
هآلآة: (714) 599-2351، تلآكس: 67-0487 - جون بآ

Johnston Pump poster.

Study the Johnston Pump poster and see if you can tell why a Saudi customs inspector would not allow it into the country. Saudi Arabia allows no public worship of any religion other than Islam. No churches, temples, or any symbols of other religions are permitted. To the customs inspector, the weather vane in the poster looked like a Christian cross and would therefore be prohibited from being displayed. It took intervention by the Minister of Customs to allow the posters into the country.

Years later, 10 million bags of potato chips from Thailand were confiscated by the Saudi Ministry of Commerce because toys inside each bag were adorned with crossed triangles that were perceived to be the Star of David. With the perception step of categorization comes a culture's values, and it is those differing categorizations that can so often impede communication, particularly when one group believes its perceptions are right and any other's wrong.

### FOCUS ON THE ENVIRONMENT 3.1



According to C. G. Jung, there are different levels to the psyche: conscious awareness, personal unconscious, and the collective unconscious. The collective unconscious contains basic, instinctive patterns of behavior, emotion, and imagery that are common to all humans, often referred to as archetypes, which guide and give meaning to our interactions with other people and the world.

Jungian psychologists often turn to mythology for symbolic portrayals of archetypes. For example, the moon goddess Artemis, who is associated with forests and hunting, has been nominated as the "Goddess of Conservation." And ecologists and others have adopted the earth goddess, Gaia, as the personification of the whole-earth organism.

When archetypes are projected onto nature, the environment can evoke powerful emotions and take on a profound significance for the individual. Trees can evoke awe-inspiring fascination and reverence. A sequoia grove can be perceived as a sacred paradise on earth, a perfection removed from the everyday world.

*Source:* Schroeder (1991).

## HIGH VERSUS LOW CONTEXT

Another way that culture affects perception is whether the culture is high or low context. The concept of high-context and low-context cultures was popularized by Edward T. Hall (1976). Recall that context was defined in Chapter 2 as the environment in which the communication process takes place and that helps define the communication. Table 3.1 shows examples of both types.

In some recent studies, European Americans and Japanese were shown scenes (Miyamoto, Nisbett, & Masuda, 2006). Each had a background scene and foreground objects. In their experiments, they compared perceptions of changes in the foreground with perception of changes in the background. European Americans were significantly better at detecting changes

<i>High</i>	<i>Low</i>
China	Switzerland
Japan	Germany
Korea	North America, including the United States
American Indian	Nordic states
Most Latin American cultures	
Southern and eastern Mediterranean cultures, such as Greece, Turkey, and the Arab states	

in the foreground, while the Japanese were significantly better at detecting changes in the background. These studies have argued that Europeans (low context) focus attention on objects independent of context (i.e., perceive analytically), whereas East Asians focus on the context (i.e., perceive holistically).

Cultures in which little of the meaning is determined by the context because the message is encoded in the explicit code are labeled **low context**. Cultures in which less has to be said or written because more of the meaning is in the physical environment or already shared by people are labeled **high context**.

Earlier, Hall (1976) had focused attention on the communication of high-context and low-context cultures. Think of the difference this way. On meeting a stranger, your verbal communication with that person is highly explicit—or low context—simply because you have no shared experiences. You cannot assume anything. However, when you communicate with your sister or brother with whom you have shared a lifetime, your verbal communication is less explicit because you make use of your shared context. For example, the mention of a certain name can lead to laughter. With the stranger, you would have to explain in language the story that that name represented. Also, with your sister or brother, a certain facial expression can have a shared meaning, such as “There Mom goes again,” but the stranger would have no idea what your facial expression communicated. Again, you would have to explain in words that your mother’s specific behavior was characteristic, somewhat irritating, but so uniquely her.

In low-context cultures, verbal messages are elaborate and highly specific, they and tend to be highly detailed and redundant as well. Verbal abilities are highly valued. Logic and reasoning are expressed in verbal messages. In high-context cultures, most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person. Very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. High-context cultures decrease the perception of self as separate from the group. High-context cultures are more sensitive to nonverbal messages; hence, they are more likely to provide a context and setting and let the point evolve.

It has been said that language separates people. When understood from the perspective of high and low context, that statement makes sense. In high-context cultures, people are brought closer by the importance of their shared context. Those meanings are often lost in low-context cultures. I have often shown films of the traditional Japanese tea ceremony to classes in the United States. The tea ceremony reflects the Zen and Taoist traditions celebrating the beauty in the mundane, the superiority of spirit over matter, and tranquility with busy

lives. The ceremony united the host and guest in a concert of harmony. Though not as commonly practiced as in the past, the tea ceremony is an excellent example of a high-context experience. Nothing is spoken; all the meanings are in the context of shared experience, the teahouse, the flower arrangement, the calligraphy scroll, and the ceramics. A typical response from a low-context observer is, "Hurry up and drink the tea!" Your social experiences over coffee take little meaning from the context and more from the conversation—the words.



The Japanese tea ceremony, or *chanoyu*, is a revered tradition derived from Zen Buddhism and is approached with great respect and concentration. Adherence to time-honored rules is essential, both during the ceremony itself and in the construction of the tea house, or *cha-shitsu*, which should appear rustic, simple, and tranquil.

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The concept of high and low context also applies to self-understanding. In low-context cultures, one speaks of a person as having attributes independent of circumstances or of personal relations. This self is a free agent who can move from group to group, from setting to setting, without significant changes. But in high-context cultures, the person is connected, fluid, and conditional. Participation in relationships makes it possible to act; completely independent behavior usually isn't possible, nor even desirable (Nisbett, 2003).

### Global Voices

High-context cultures make greater distinction between the insiders and outsiders than low-context cultures do. People raised in high-context systems expect more of others than do the participants in low-context systems. When talking about something they have on their minds, a high-context individual will expect his interlocutor to know what's bothering him, so that he does not have to be specific. The result is that he will talk around and around the point, in effect putting all the pieces in place except the crucial one. Placing it properly—this keystone—is the role of his interlocutor.

—Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (1976, p. 98)

### THE CONCEPT OF FACE

In Chinese culture, **face** is conceptualized in two ways: *lien* (face) and *mien* or *mien-tzd* (image). While these are often used interchangeably, they have different meanings. Hu (1944) defines *lien* as something that “represents the confidence of society in the integrity of ego’s moral character, the loss of which makes it impossible to function properly with the community” (p. 45). *Mien* “stands for the kind of prestige that is emphasized in this country, a reputation achieved through getting on in life, through success and ostentation” (p. 45). Ting-Toomey (1985) has proposed that low-context cultures, such as the United States, with a greater concern for privacy and autonomy, tend to use direct-face negotiation and express

more self-face maintenance, whereas high-context cultures, such as China, with a greater concern for interdependence and inclusion, tend to use indirect-face negotiation and express more mutual-face or other-face maintenance.

Communication in high-context cultures such as China is hence more indirect or implicit and is more likely to use intermediaries. Because social harmony and face maintenance are crucial, communication through intermediaries is especially functional because using intermediaries eliminates face-to-face confrontation and reduces the risk of losing face.

In interviews conducted in central China, Ma (1992) confirmed that unofficial mediation is common in situations involving interpersonal conflict. The mediator is usually a friend of the two parties in conflict or an elderly person respected by both. Intervention by the friend or respected elder is either self-initiated or in response to a request by a person not connected with the competing parties. Impartiality and face maintenance are considered the two key factors in successful mediation.

### A CASE STUDY OF PERCEPTION AND FOOD

Perception interpretations provided by a culture can reveal much about that culture. Cultures use food to reinforce and express identities. One book’s title expresses the importance of cultural identity to food: *You Eat What You Are: People, Culture, and Food Traditions* (Barer-Stein, 1999). In the following case study of food in China, identify the elements of culture that are reflected in food preparation.

## FOCUS ON THE CULTURE 3.2



Americans eat oysters but not snails. The French eat snails but not locusts. The Zulus eat locusts but not fish. The Jews eat fish but not pork. The Hindus eat pork but not beef. The Russians eat beef but not snakes. The Chinese eat snakes but not people. The Jali of New Guinea find people delicious.

*Source:* Robertson (1987, p. 63).

China has the oldest continuing culture of any nation in the world. About 500 BCE, the philosophies of Confucianism and **Taoism** became the prime motivating forces in the development of the cuisine. The counterbalance of these two major philosophies became the basis of Chinese cuisine as an art.

Confucius encouraged a sense of balance and harmony. For example, when meats were used as ingredients, they could not overpower the rice included in the same meal. He also emphasized the aesthetic aspects of cooking and eating. He said a proper dish should appeal to the eye as well as to the palate. For example, intricately carved vegetables are a common decoration.

The distinctive process of preparing Chinese cuisine is based on Confucius and his philosophy of balance. There is a division between *fan*, Chinese for grains and other starch foods, and *chai*, vegetable and meat dishes. A balanced meal, then, must have an appropriate amount of fan and chai.

The main principle of Tao is a life in perfect accord with nature. Taoism as a religion arose from the philosophy of Lao-Tzu. Lao-Tzu means “old philosopher” or even “old child”—and may have been a Chinese philosopher who lived around the 6th century BCE, or it may refer to a line of thought. The basic assumption of Taoism is that there is an underlying pattern or direction of the universe that cannot be explained verbally or intellectually. Lao-Tzu cautioned against naming things, for doing so subjugates reality through abstraction and analysis. The Tao is this underlying pattern, commonly known as “the Way,” which can never be captured in words. The Taoist ideal is a person who leads a simple, spontaneous, and meditative life close to nature. Taoists are encouraged to explore roots, fungi, herbs, marine vegetation, and other natural foods to discover their life-giving elements.

There is also a belief in a balance that governs all of life and nature—the **yin** and the **yang**. Originally, *yin* meant the shady side of a hill and *yang* the sunny side. Yin is the dark, moist, cool aspect of the cosmos. Females have more yin quality. Yang is the bright, dry, warm aspect. Males have more yang quality. Foods also have yin and yang qualities. Most water plants, crustaceans, and certain beans are cooling yin foods. Oily and fried foods, pepper-hot flavoring, fatty meat, and oil plant foods such as peanuts are warm yang foods. The kind of food eaten is related to one's health. When yin and yang forces in the body are not balanced, problems result. Proper amounts of food of one kind or the other must then be eaten to correct this imbalance. For example, a body sore or fever could be due to overeating “warm” foods.





Remember, all elements of a culture interrelate. Half of China is mountainous or unsuited to cultivation. China cannot depend on large animals like cattle that are land intensive. Through necessity, the Chinese have used all forms of edible ingredients—from lotus roots, birds' nests, and sea cucumbers to pig brains and fish lips. Because of a scarcity of fuel and raw materials, stir-frying was developed. Small pieces of meat, poultry, fish, or vegetables take only a few minutes to cook and thus save fuel.

For at least 5,000 years, rice has been grown in China. Its importance has made it synonymous with food and life. Rice is the symbol of well-being and fertility. Leaving one's job is called breaking one's rice bowl. It's considered bad luck to upset a rice bowl. And the worst of all insults is to take another's bowl of rice and empty it onto the ground. At the Chinese table, it's the unspoken words that matter. The meal is the message. *Chi fan!*—Dinner is served!

## SUMMARY

Perception and thought are not independent of the cultural environment; therefore, our brains are both shaped by the external world and shape our perception of the external world. Sensation is the neurological process of becoming aware of our environment and is affected by our cultures.

The Greek idea of a strong individual identity and the Chinese idea of harmony affected both the sensation and perception process in each culture. Perception is usually thought of as having three steps—selection, organization, and interpretation—each affected by culture.

The concept of high-context and low-context cultures was popularized by Edward T. Hall (1976). Cultures in which little of the meaning is determined by the context because the message is encoded in the explicit code are labeled low context. Cultures in which less has to be said or written because more of the meaning is in the physical environment or already shared by people are labeled high context. Low-context cultures, such as the United States, with a greater concern for privacy and autonomy, tend to use direct-face negotiation and express more self-face maintenance, whereas high-context cultures, such as China, with a greater concern for interdependence and inclusion, tend to use indirect-face negotiation and express more mutual face or other-face maintenance.

Perception interpretations can even be revealed in how cultures use food to reinforce and express identities. For example, in China, rice is the symbol of well-being and fertility. Leaving one's job is called breaking one's rice bowl.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. My veterinarian once said that he wished he could be a cat just for a few minutes to experience how a cat senses the world. He speculated, though, that such an experience would forever change him. How would the experience of “two realities” be so disconcerting?
2. Even within one culture, subgroups may have diverse perceptions. Consider the diverse perceptions of a moose by hunters, vegetarians, and even political parties.
3. Consider specific countries that have diverse populations and those with fairly homogeneous populations. How does the concept of high and low context help explain political debate, dispute resolution processes, and other forms of public communication?
4. Describe how the concept of face can help explain dispute resolution. How should a student confront an instructor over a grading error?
5. Speculate (and research) how one's cultural background affects the experience of listening to music.

## KEY TERMS

face 72	low context 70	sensation 60
field dependence 61	organization 64	Taoism 73
high context 70	perception 62	yang 73
interpretation 66	selection 62	yin 73

## READINGS

All readings are from *Intercultural Communication: A Global Reader* (Jandt, 2004).

Kil-Ho Kang, "Korean's Politeness Strategies" (p. 131)

Kiyoko Suedo, "Differences in the Perception of Face: Chinese Mien-Tzu and Japanese Metsu" (p. 292)

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