

14. PERCEPTION

Perception is the process of understanding sensations or attaching meanings based on past experience to signs.

Characteristics of perception

1. **Perception shifts:** Just like attention perception also shifts. As we attend to one part of the stimulus we perceive that part and then as attention passes on to another part we perceive that part also.
2. **Perception is a grouping and combining response:** We put several stimuli together and make a joint response to it. When we perceive the face of a friend there are several stimuli coming to us from different parts of our face, eyes, ears, nose etc. We put them all together and understand it as a totality.
3. **Figure has advantage over background in perception:** There are no gaps in nature and the human mind also hates gaps. It tends to fill in gaps and perceive things as having a definite form.
4. **Perception is an isolating response:** We perceive the thing we select for our attention and do not perceive the things that are not attended to.
5. Perception follows the '**Law of Reduced cues**'. Applied to perception, the law of reduced cues means that as we become more and more acquainted with an object, the signs by which we can perceive it become less and less till at last, a fraction of the original sign is enough for us to recognize that object.

Determinants of perception

The various factors that determine our perception can be grouped as follows:

1. **The sense organs:** Perception depends upon the number, structure and function of the available sense organs. For example, if colours are not developed in the retina there cannot be perception of colour. Similarly absence of certain taste buds will limit one's taste perception.
2. **Brain function:** Perception depends on the nature of the brain function. This gives us various frames of reference against which perception is made. Certain relations such as bigger and smaller, lighter and heavier, above and below etc., are all perceived because of the function of the brain.
3. **Past experience:** Perception also depends on one's past experience: The few light sensations that come from a ship are interpreted as a ship because of our past experience. We are able to supplement a number of characteristics that are not sensed

at the particular moment. Past experience may also influence perception in the form of creating various kinds of prejudices and assumptions regarding the object perceived.

4. **Set or attitude:** Perception also depends very much on one's set or attitude. This is the subjective conditions.
5. **Organic conditions:** One's organic condition will also influence his perception. The individual who is starving from hunger will easily perceive the eatable objects. One's motive also determines his perception.

Errors of perception

There are several possibilities of our perception process being wrong and misleading. Such errors of perception are studied as two different phenomena viz., illusions and hallucinations.

a) Illusions:

An illusion is a wrong or mistaken perception. The perceptual process always involves an interpretation of the sensory experience in the light of our past experience or recent attitude, our organic needs etc. In some cases this interpretation is done wrongly and so the stimulus is perceived wrongly. Such a phenomenon is called 'illusion'. (Eg: We perceive the coil of a rope in darkness as a snake).

Psychologists have experimented with a number of geometrical designs to understand the phenomenon of illusion. Two of the well known examples,

- 1) Muller-Lyer Illusion
- 2) Horizontal-vertical illusion

In the Muller-Lyer illusion there are two straight lines of equal length. One bounded at the two ends by pairs of short opening outwards. The other is bounded by two pairs of short lines which are reversed and give the idea of closure.

Though two lines are equal in length invariably the latter is perceived to be shorter than the former. This is an illusion.

In the horizontal-vertical illusion there are two straight lines, one is horizontal and other is vertical. Both are of equal length. But invariably the vertical line is perceived to be longer than the other.

b) Hallucinations

We perceive a figure or an object purely because of our subjective conditions, when there is no stimulus at all.

Such an error in perception which has no basis in a real sensory stimulus is called

'hallucination'. While illusion is wrong perception, hallucination is false perception.

If at night we see a ghost when there is practically no stimulus in the form of a human figure or anything resembling it would be an example of hallucination