

Perceptions and Beliefs

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss how our existing belief systems lead to perceptions that affect how we interpret present experiences. Two areas of focus include:

1. Perceptions and How They Are Formed
2. Influence of Perceptions on Conflict Response

1. Perceptions and How They Are Formed

As you learned in a previous lesson, our **beliefs**, or mental senses of what is true or right in a particular situation, come from:

- Experiences that we have
- People we interact with
- Communities we live in
- Languages we speak
- Cultures we are part of

Together, these beliefs form a **belief system**, which is a combination of beliefs that becomes a model for an aspect of a person's world. This model helps us make sense of what we're seeing.

Perceptions come from the beliefs that we hold. A perception is a person's awareness and interpretation of an event, condition, or person; it's what we consciously notice when we observe something.

We filter these observations through our belief systems; maybe we aren't always aware of this, but we will give more weight to experiences that confirm our belief systems. The more important a belief system is, the more weight we're going to give to experiences, events, and situations that confirm that belief system.

➡ **EXAMPLE** You and a friend want to see a movie. You like to watch movies at home by streaming them on your TV through Netflix. You prefer to be in the comfort of your own home when you see a movie.

Conversely, your friend loves going to the movie theater. She talks you into going to the movie theater with her. Afterwards, when she asks if you liked the movie, your response might be: "I liked the movie, but the theater's floors were dirty; I didn't even want to put my purse down. I could hear the person next to me eating popcorn. It was noisy in there. Plus, it was cold—I should have worn a sweater. I just didn't like the environment."

Your friend says, "Really? I thought it was a fabulous place to watch this movie. I loved the big screen. I really liked sitting there eating popcorn. I tuned everything else out. I liked being part of the crowd, and hearing it respond to the action in the movie." Same movie, same theater, but two very different perceptions.

➦ **EXAMPLE** You and your spouse are looking to buy a new home, and you walk into a bungalow that was built maybe back in the '30s.

You realize that there's old carpet on the floor, and there's wallpaper. Things look a little worn, but this could be a fabulous place. All you'd have to do is strip the wallpaper and paint the walls. You could even take up the carpet because there are probably hardwood floors.

Your spouse says, "Not so fast. What I see here is a lot of hard work and money. Maybe we'd paint the walls, but what's behind those walls?" Maybe their belief system, based on their experiences, causes them to see nothing but a challenge or a money pit, while you're seeing beauty and opportunity. You're looking at the same house, but you have two different perceptions.



TERMS TO KNOW

Belief

A person's mental sense of what is true or right/correct in a situation.

Belief System

A combination of beliefs that becomes a model for an aspect of a person's world.

Perception

A person's awareness and interpretation of an event, condition, or person.

2. Influence of Perceptions on Conflict Response

When we move into areas where there are perhaps political or religious beliefs involved, people are even more inclined to give weight to perceptions that will confirm the belief systems they have.

➦ **EXAMPLE** Gun rights, or the right to bear arms in the Second Amendment, often comes into conflict with the need to make our streets and schools safer. Some gun owners may believe that schools and neighborhoods are not safe because school staff aren't equipped with guns for protection.

Some prioritize their right and any other person's right to own guns instead of lowering violent crime rates by restricting guns. Others may believe guns are only for hunting and that schools and neighborhoods aren't safe because civilians have access to all types of advanced weapons. We're going to give more weight to one side or the other, depending on our experiences.

➦ **EXAMPLE** Political candidates take positions such as being for or against legal abortion, or for or against raising taxes. One candidate believes abortion is morally wrong but believes people should have a choice. Because of this belief, they are okay with raising taxes to support social programs that would reduce unwanted pregnancies.

In contrast, another candidate who also believes abortion is morally wrong is more concerned with babies' right to live and lowering taxes. This candidate commits to doing so by cutting funding to social programs that would help reduce unwanted pregnancies. Both candidates are against abortion as a practice but they have different perceptions of the issue based on their beliefs, which results in their having different stances on whether abortion should be legal.

Depending on where you fall on that spectrum, you're going to give more weight to what you read in support of your position, and less weight to the other side.

Thus, what we perceive, or consciously notice, comes from these belief systems and our innate desire to support them. When we get into a conflict, we may begin to have some new experiences and beliefs about the other party during the resolution process.

However, we're consciously trying to fit these new experiences into our current belief systems; one of the challenges in conflict resolution is helping parties feel comfortable altering their beliefs, or evaluating new experiences without skewing them toward previously held belief systems.



HINT

It's important to remember that being open to changes in your belief system doesn't necessarily mean that you have to adopt another's point of view. Rather, it means that you at least recognize that this point of view is valid for this other individual.

You need to respect the validity of this person's experience, just as you would expect this person to respect the validity of your perception and your experience. The goal of conflict resolution is to help us see more fully, and move away from just weighting our experiences towards what we already believe.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about **perceptions and how they are formed** from our established belief systems. You now understand that the way our **perceptions influence our response to conflict** depends on whether or not we are open to having our belief systems challenged. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



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