

Lecture 3: Perceptions & Critical Thinking

Objectives: After our discussion of the topics in italics, you should be able to:

The Perception Process and its Influences

1. Outline the perceptual process
2. Describe perceptual blocks to clear and critical thinking: personal barriers, sensing, and physiology

Man is an emotional animal, occasionally rational; and, through his feelings, he can be deceived to his heart's content.

~ Will Durant, Mansions of Philosophy

The way we think forms our identity: we *are* how we think. Our personalities are shaped mostly by our early childhood experiences (i.e., by what we ‘soak up’ up through our five physical senses during the *psychomotor* and *pre-operational* stages of our cognitive development). Some genetically predetermined traits, however - apart from being human, that is – also play a role in producing the uniqueness of our individualities (for example, our temperament, our physical / psychological health and tendencies, etc.).

In lecture 2, we discussed the crucial role of perceptions in the development of human brain – remember the words of Thomas Aquinas (the Italian philosopher and theologian of the 13th century AD): ‘***There is nothing in the mind unless it is first in the senses.***’ Provided we have been born with the ‘hardware’ of human brain intact, we learn the world around us through our senses. Our early sensual experiences, and particularly the software of language installed in our minds through social interaction, then enable us to think symbolically and ‘process’/ rationalize our environment. Our environment (family, friends and relatives, the society we live in, etc.) is what really shapes our thinking, our self-concept and our emotions (these can both inspire and distort our thinking – we’ll talk about it next time). Today we will focus on how the ‘software’ our environment installs in our brains affects our thinking.

Re-cap: our unique personalities, our psychological worlds, are shaped both by genetic factors and by cultural influences of the environment we grow up and live in. These influences may nurture or inhibit sound thinking.

Enculturation: the Lens of Our Mind’s Eye

Imagine, if you were born in a different place, and at a different time – would you have been you? Would your values and beliefs, your likes and dislikes, your preferences and taboos – would they have been different? Would your ways and behaviour be different, if you were born of a different sex (gender) from what you are? Most probably, yes! Why? Because of the varying *influences* and *social expectations* that shape us in the process of ***enculturation***. Just like the physical temperature of the surrounding determines the sex of the hatchlings from crocodile eggs, so environmental influences shape who we become. Enculturation is a continuous process – it goes on even now, no matter your age. But what has it got to do with thinking? Just this: your ability to think critically about ideas that conflict with your basic views and attitudes becomes less, the more you are enculturated (the two are inversely related). Cultural influences shape and colour our perceptions, just like the zoom or wide-angle lens and light filters alter the image produced by the camera.

Sources of Enculturation

Our whole environment is the source of enculturation: our family, relations, friends, social and religious institutions, mass media – the whole society we live in – have certain demands and expectations of us. That is how we learn our religious beliefs, ethical standards, prejudices and general attitudes, behaviours and habits.

Some common beliefs in Port Moresby (tell me if I am wrong! ☺):

1. **It's okay to kill animals.**
 - a. The Jains of India consider it a sin to kill anything, even insects.
2. **It's morally wrong to go outside without clothing, even if you go to Ela Beach.**
 - a. Dutch women feel quite comfortable gardening in their backyards topless.
 - b. People walk stark naked on nude beaches in America and Western Europe generally.
 - c. People in distant part of Africa, and the South Pacific, wear very little clothing.
3. **Jesus is God.**
 - a. People of Jewish, Buddhist or Islamic faith would disagree with this – they have their own ideas about God!
4. **Marriage is (and should be!) between a man and a woman.**
 - a. You must have heard about the legalisation of gay and lesbian marriages in North America and parts of Western Europe.

Self-Concept: Ego

Recognizing and evaluating the extent of our own enculturation lessens its effect on our mind and promotes critical thinking. Our self-concept is the way we view ourselves. It may be unhealthy, if it is distorted – for example, if we view ourselves too negatively (as when we think we are ugly, stupid, incapable, etc.) or too positively ('I am Napoleon!' or 'I am an unrecognized Genius,' etc.). A healthy self-concept is an accurate, objective assessment of your own qualities and potential.

What goes into our idea of our own identity includes not only our intelligence and physical attractiveness, but many other aspects of our personalities: our political and religious views, our gender and ethnicity, our age and social category, our moral values and professional skills, and so many other things: our possessions, our home, our friends, our belonging to various social/ sports clubs, etc. Some people's image of themselves is so fused with things like material possessions, social status, etc., that they become overly aggressive when they think that their identity (*ego*) is threatened. This aggression against any perceived threat to their identity (Ego, Self) is often what drives conflict, violence, and even wars (i.e., the Crusades, the present conflict in the Middle East, etc.).

Aggression, anger, hatred - any emotional response to a perceived threat to our notion of who we are – paralyze our ability to think critically.

THINKING ACTIVITY 4.1 ~ Our Own Enculturation

from Chapter 2 of the *Thinking* text (also available on the UPNG Intranet):

Below is an exercise in enculturation. Answer honestly “yes” or “no” to the following questions. The purpose of this exercise is to examine the foundations of some of your thinking, not your conclusions, so don’t be concerned with whether your answer is right or wrong. In some instances, there is no general agreement on what the right answer should be.

1. Do you believe that the democratic form of government is the best kind of government in the world?

- a. Are you aware of the problems of democracy often cited by sociologists and people from non-democratic countries?
- b. Can you express the basic philosophy of alternative forms of government?
- c. Can you cite any positive aspects of either communism or socialism?

2. Do you believe that abortion is wrong in most or all cases?

- a. Do you have good arguments to support your belief?
- b. Do you know at what moment a human being comes into existence?
- c. Do you know at what moment a developing embryo has human rights?
- d. Do you know at what moment a developing fetus becomes conscious?
- e. Do you know at what moment a developing fetus is capable of experiencing pain?
- f. Can you cite any arguments used by pro-choice advocates to support abortion?
- g. Do you believe that a seed of an apple has the same value as an apple tree?

3. Do you believe that capital punishment is justified for mass murderers?

- a. Do you know that capital punishment is a more expensive way to punish than life imprisonment because of the numerous and very expensive judicial appeals of the former?
- b. Have you seen any statistics that clearly show capital punishment to inhibit murder?
4. Do you believe there is a God?
 - a. Have you ever heard of an argument against this idea?
 - b. Can you present an argument against this idea?

5. Do you believe that it is moral to use animals for medical experiment to make life better for human beings?

- a. Do you believe that it would be moral for beings on another planet with intelligence superior to ours to use human beings as guinea pigs for the advancement of their alien culture?
- b. Have you ever seen experimental animals suffer in an experimental laboratory?
- c. Do you know that pigs are blowtorched under anesthesia, bunnies have their eyes sewed shut, and monkeys have their heads smashed to study the effects of burn treatment, cosmetics, and concussion, respectively?
- d. Have you ever read any argument against the use of animals in a laboratory?
- e. Can you cite such an argument now?

6. Do you believe that Extra-Sensory Perception (ESP) is nonsense?

- a. Have you read any studies by parapsychologists?
- b. Do you believe that if we cannot explain something it does not exist?

7. Do you believe that humans are the most intelligent life forms in the universe?

- a. Do you know that there are billions of galaxies, each with billions of stars, so that if just one in 10 billion stars has a planet with life, there would be billions of planets with life?

b. Do you know that human life emerged on this planet in about 4.5 billion years and that the universe is old enough for this evolutionary process to have happened three times in succession?

8. Do you believe that one racial group is innately superior to another?

- a. Do you know that Japanese score slightly higher on intelligence tests than whites?
- b. Do you know the extent to which the environment determines intelligence?
- c. Do you know the amount of genetic similarity among racial groups?

9. Do you believe that America is the best country in the world?

- a. Do you know that our infant mortality rate is higher than that of many other modern industrial countries?
- b. Do you know that the United States has one of the highest rates of violent crime in the world?
- c. Do you know that the top 10 percent of the U.S. population hold more than 67 percent of all wealth in the country, including 90 percent of stocks and bonds?

10. Do you believe that humans did not evolve from lower life forms but were created separately?

- a. Have you ever read a book on the evidence for evolution?
- b. Have you ever talked to a paleontologist, geologist, biochemist, or zoologist about evolution?
- c. Are you aware of any of the following?
 - Homologous structures
 - Vestigial traces
 - Fossil discoveries
 - DNA similarities
 - How our embryonic ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny

If you answered “yes” to the numbered questions above, but “no” to parts a, b, c, and so on, it *could* be that you have merely adopted your position through an enculturation process, that is, picked it up through your acquaintance with your peers, parents, religious community, and so on, instead of through careful reflection and the gathering of facts. A “yes” response to many of the questions above might be supported by sound reasoning and facts. The point is not to determine what is true about the issues but to illustrate the lack of both thinking and knowledge that tends to go into these beliefs

Instead of clear, objective thinking, we engage our ego defense mechanisms, self-serving biases, etc., to justify our actions and convince ourselves that what we think we are is *good*.

Ego Defenses

Ego defenses are psychological coping mechanisms we use to distort reality to fit our psychological needs, in order to protect ourselves from anxiety, feelings of inadequacy, guilt, and other ‘bad’ feelings. Some of the more common ones are

- **denial**, when we simply refuse to accept an unpleasant reality (i.e., our own incompetence, bad behaviour, greed, etc.)

- **projection**, when our vision of ourselves and others is so distorted that we see in others traits of character that we cannot admit to having ourselves (for example, we may think others are hostile to us, when in fact it is we who are hostile towards them, etc.), and
- **rationalization**: this self-defence mechanism is the greatest inhibitor of critical thinking (the easiest person to deceive is one's self, they say). We try to justify our behaviour and motives, in order to feel better about ourselves. Basically, we lie to ourselves about the real reasons for our behaviour and feelings, until we begin to believe in our own lies.

Self-serving biases

Man believes what he wants to believe, goes the Chinese proverb. *Demosthenes** (the famous Ancient Greek orator) reportedly said,

***“Nothing is easier than self-deceit.
For what each man wishes, that he also believes to be true.”***

***Demosthenes** (384–322 BC) one of the greatest of all Ancient Greek orators. ... Born the son of a wealthy sword-maker, Demosthenes was orphaned at the age of seven. His father left him well-provided-for, but his legal guardians defrauded him and squandered his inheritance. As soon as Demosthenes came of age, he prosecuted the trustees, who had attempted to defraud him. He succeeded in retrieving only a portion of his inheritance, however, and turned to the profession of writing speeches for use in private legal suits.

As a boy, Demosthenes used to stammer and managed to overcome this speech impediment through self-designed exercises (legends describe him talking with pebbles in his mouth and reciting verses with a sword blade positioned to cut his chin at the slightest tremor. (Based on material retrieved on April 1, 2006 from:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demosthenes>).

Self-serving biases are cognitive distortions that put us in a favorable position (a form of rationalization, really, when we openly try to justify our actions). Self-serving biases usually present as a tendency to take credit for our successes and blame others for our failures. This is how some drivers, involved in car accidents and asked to describe them in their insurance statements, summarized the circumstances:

1. A pedestrian hit me and went under my car.
2. As I approached the intersection, a sign suddenly appeared in a place where no sign had ever appeared before.
3. My car was legally parked, as it backed into the other vehicle.
4. The indirect cause of this accident was a little guy in a small car with a big mouth.
5. An invisible car came out of nowhere, struck my vehicle, and vanished.
6. A telephone pole was approaching; I was attempting to swerve out of the way, when this guy struck my front end.
7. I had been driving for forty years when I fell asleep at the wheel.
8. To avoid hitting the car in front of me, I swerved and struck a pedestrian.
9. The pedestrian had no idea which direction to run, so I ran over him.

Thinking Activity 4.2: Owning Up to Our Dark Side

(based on Activity 2.4 in Ch. 2 of the Thinking Text available on the UPNG Intranet)

Failure to see and *accept* ourselves the way we are is what triggers off our ego defenses (*rationalization, denial, projection, etc.*) and makes our reasoning vulnerable to self-serving biases. Therefore, it is good to look at the dark side of ourselves and **accept it as part of who we are**. This can be a rather depressing exercise: in order to make it a more balanced experience, it is important to write down our positive characteristics as well.

Privately - for your eyes only! ☺ - write down 10 positive characteristics of your personality. Then, be honest to yourself and write down some of your less positive characteristics that you have never really admitted you have.

Becoming aware of your ‘shadows’ is a liberating experience – particularly for your critical mind.

Not only do we see the world the way we want/need to see it, we also tend to think of it in terms of what we *expect* to see. We tend to be influenced by preconceived ideas and attitudes, the calcified residues of our previous experiences that form mental structures in our minds, the so-called *schemata*. We tend to *not see* reality and ‘stretch’ the truth to fit our expectations and – often unwarranted – assumptions.

But that is the subject of our next discussion. Now – try to summarize the gist of this one!

Barrier Challenges:

1. Would you eat cow? Would people in India eat cow? Do you think it’s okay to eat dog? Do you know any cultures in which they do eat dog?
2. What does your religion teach you about the right way to think about contemporary issues such as abortion, war, euthanasia, the role of women in society and in the family, etc.? In what other ways does your religion shape your values, beliefs, and attitudes?
3. How has your hometown (village) influenced you? How might you be different if you’d been born in a different province of PNG? Or in Australia, America, Asia, Europe, or in Africa?
4. How have your friends and school influenced your values?
5. When was the last time you rationalized? It is easier to look back and recognize it than to see it as it is happening.
6. When was the last time you failed in doing something important? Did you use any of the self-serving biases to protect your self-esteem?

THINKING ACTIVITY 4.3 ~ The Idea of Self

What is our idea of self? Were we born with it? It seems not. Then have we made it our own creation? If so, have we done the right thing in creating it? Does the self truly exist? Or is it only the mind's idea? Whether our idea of self refers to a real or an illusory self, most will agree that we do spend a lot of time defending, maintaining, and creating that idea of self, as when we fight with others when they demean us, explain away a bad exam grade in order to appear more intelligent, or buy a new car to show off our wealth. According to the Buddhist Walpola Rahula, the idea of self . . . produces harmful thoughts of “*me* and *mine*,” selfish desire, craving, attachment, hatred, ill-will, conceit, pride, egoism, and other defilements, impurities, and problems. It is the source of all troubles in the world from personal conflicts to wars between nations. In short, to this false view can be traced all the evil in the world. (1974, p. 51)

Do you agree with Rahula's statement? Is the idea of self this dangerous? Can you cite instances to support it? Can you cite reasons to disagree with this statement?

Pay special attention to the news for the next few days. To what extent can the “troubles in the world” be attributed to the idea of self?

What about troubles in your own personal life? Reflect on your recent arguments or moments of tension with others. To what extent was your thinking affected by your need to protect your self-concept?

Finally, as an exercise in “self,” try to respond to others today and tomorrow without a sense of self, without protecting your ego. How difficult was it? What were the results?

Reading:

Gary R. Kirby and Jeffrey R. Goodpaster: Thinking, 1999:

Chapter 3: *Sensing*

Chapter 4: *Brain and Memory*

Appendix: Excerpts from JOHN STUART MILL's essay ON LIBERTY (1860)

Retrieved March 9, 2007 from <http://www.constitution.org/jsm/liberty.htm>

“Though society is not founded on a contract, and though no good purpose is answered by inventing a contract in order to deduce social obligations from it, every one who receives the protection of society owes a return for the benefit, and the fact of living in society renders it indispensable that each should be bound to observe a certain line of conduct towards the rest. This conduct consists, first, in not injuring the interests of one another; or rather certain interests, which, either by express legal provision or by tacit understanding, ought to be considered as rights; and secondly, in each person's bearing his share (to be fixed on some equitable principle) of the labors and sacrifices incurred for defending the society or its members from injury and molestation. These conditions society is justified in enforcing, at all costs to those who endeavor to withhold fulfillment. Nor is this all that society may do. The acts of an individual may be hurtful to others, or wanting in due consideration for their welfare, without going the length of violating any of their constituted rights. The offender may then be justly punished by opinion, though not by law. As soon as any part of a person's conduct affects prejudicially the interests of others, society has jurisdiction over it, and the

question whether the general welfare will or will not be promoted by interfering with it, becomes open to discussion. But there is no room for entertaining any such question when a person's conduct affects the interests of no persons besides himself, or needs not affect them unless they like (all the persons concerned being of full age, and the ordinary amount of understanding). In all such cases there should be perfect freedom, legal and social, to do the action and stand the consequences.

It would be a great misunderstanding of this doctrine, to suppose that it is one of selfish indifference, which pretends that human beings have no business with each other's conduct in life, and that they should not concern themselves about the well-doing or well-being of one another, unless their own interest is involved. Instead of any diminution, there is need of a great increase of disinterested exertion to promote the good of others. But disinterested benevolence can find other instruments to persuade people to their good, than whips and scourges, either of the literal or the metaphorical sort.

...

But the strongest of all the arguments against the interference of the public with purely personal conduct, is that when it does interfere, the odds are that it interferes wrongly, and in the wrong place. On questions of social morality, of duty to others, the opinion of the public, that is, of an overruling majority, though often wrong, is likely to be still oftener right; because on such questions they are only required to judge of their own interests; of the manner in which some mode of conduct, if allowed to be practised, would affect themselves. But the opinion of a similar majority, imposed as a law on the minority, on questions of self-regarding conduct, is quite as likely to be wrong as right; for in these cases public opinion means, at the best, some people's opinion of what is good or bad for other people; while very often it does not even mean that; the public, with the most perfect indifference, passing over the pleasure or convenience of those whose conduct they censure, and considering only their own preference. There are many who consider as an injury to themselves any conduct which they have a distaste for, and resent it as an outrage to their feelings; as a religious bigot, when charged with disregarding the religious feelings of others, has been known to retort that they disregard his feelings, by persisting in their abominable worship or creed. But there is no parity between the feeling of a person for his own opinion, and the feeling of another who is offended at his holding it; no more than between the desire of a thief to take a purse, and the desire of the right owner to keep it. And a person's taste is as much his own peculiar concern as his opinion or his purse.

...

As a first instance, consider the antipathies which men cherish on no better grounds than that persons whose religious opinions are different from theirs, do not practise their religious observances, especially their religious abstinences. To cite a rather trivial example, nothing in the creed or practice of Christians does more to envenom the hatred of Mahomedans against them, than the fact of their eating pork. There are few acts which Christians and Europeans regard with more unaffected disgust, than Mussulmans regard this particular mode of satisfying hunger. It is, in the first place, an offence against their religion; but this circumstance by no means explains either the degree or the kind of their repugnance; for wine also is forbidden by their religion, and to partake of it is by all Mussulmans accounted wrong, but not disgusting. Their aversion to the flesh of the "unclean beast" is, on the contrary, of that peculiar character, resembling an instinctive antipathy, which the idea of uncleanness, when once it thoroughly sinks into the feelings, seems always to excite even in those whose personal habits are anything but scrupulously cleanly and of which the sentiment of religious impurity, so intense in the Hindoos, is a remarkable example. Suppose now

that in a people, of whom the majority were Mussulmans, that majority should insist upon not permitting pork to be eaten within the limits of the country. This would be nothing new in Mahomedan countries. Would it be a legitimate exercise of the moral authority of public opinion? and if not, why not? The practice is really revolting to such a public. They also sincerely think that it is forbidden and abhorred by the Deity. Neither could the prohibition be censured as religious persecution. It might be religious in its origin, but it would not be persecution for religion, since nobody's religion makes it a duty to eat pork. The only tenable ground of condemnation would be, that with the personal tastes and self-regarding concerns of individuals the public has no business to interfere.

To come somewhat nearer home: the majority of Spaniards consider it a gross impiety, offensive in the highest degree to the Supreme Being, to worship him in any other manner than the Roman Catholic; and no other public worship is lawful on Spanish soil. The people of all Southern Europe look upon a married clergy as not only irreligious, but unchaste, indecent, gross, disgusting. What do Protestants think of these perfectly sincere feelings, and of the attempt to enforce them against non-Catholics? Yet, if mankind are justified in interfering with each other's liberty in things which do not concern the interests of others, on what principle is it possible consistently to exclude these cases? or who can blame people for desiring to suppress what they regard as a scandal in the sight of God and man?

No stronger case can be shown for prohibiting anything which is regarded as a personal immorality, than is made out for suppressing these practices in the eyes of those who regard them as impieties; and unless we are willing to adopt the logic of persecutors, and to say that we may persecute others because we are right, and that they must not persecute us because they are wrong, we must beware of admitting a principle of which we should resent as a gross injustice the application to ourselves.”
<http://www.constitution.org/jsm/liberty.htm>

“[T]he sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is **to prevent harm to others**. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinion of others, to do so would be wise, or even right. These are good reasons for remonstrating with him, or reasoning with him, or persuading him, or entreating him, but not for compelling him, or visiting him with any evil in case he do otherwise” (emphasis mine –OT; <http://www.iep.utm.edu/m/milljs.htm#SH2e>).

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