

The role that perception plays psychology essay



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To a great extent, our behavior is fashioned by our perceptions, personalities, emotions and experiences. In this essay, the role that perception plays in affecting the way that we see the world and its impact on our work related behaviors will be examined. Perception is the process by which individuals select, organize, and interpret their sensory impressions in order to give meaning to their environment (Ivancevich, Konopaske, Matteson). Perception and reality however can be two entirely different things and in addition to this, the perceptions of two or several different people will very rarely be the same even when reflecting back on the same incident or event. It can therefore be argued that the accuracy of one's interpretation of a given situation will determine the effectiveness of their response to it and essentially, the outcome. This is why perception is an essential factor to be considered when examining Organizational Behavior.

More often than not a manager is rated differently by his or her subordinates. The importance of taking perception into consideration in an organization cannot be overlooked by the managers themselves. The way a manager perceives an employee within an organization should not be influenced by their stature or position as with different situations for which perceptions have to be primarily based as closely as possible on solid facts. The below table depicts significant mean differences of perception between supervisors and their subordinates on a scale from 1-5.

On these grounds, three distinct factors that contribute to perceptual differences and the perceptual process among people at work arise:

The Perceiver (Factors of influence: past experiences, needs or motives, personality, values and attitudes).

The Situation or Setting (Factors of influence: physical, social, and organizational).

The Perceived or Object/Target (Factors of influence: characteristics of the perceived person, object, or event, such as contrast, intensity, figure/ground separation, size, motion, and repetition or novelty).

It must not however be overlooked that although these factors help in shaping the perception of individuals, they may also sometimes distort such perceptions.

Fig 2 (Kondalkar 2007, p. 117)

THE PERCEPTUAL PROCESS

There are several stages that determine a subject's perception and reaction as a result of processing information; these information processing stages are best depicted in the following figure.

The information-processing stages are divided into information attention and selection;

organization of information; information interpretation; and information retrieval.

Fig 3 (Schermerhorn,, Grant & Osborn 2002, p. 32)

Our senses are repeatedly overloaded with too much information to process, unless our minds are selective in what to absorb and what to overlook we would quickly become debilitated as a result of this overload of information. Much of this mental sieving is done consciously and the perceiver is full-aware that they are processing information. This function of the mind is referred to by Schermerhorn, Grant & Osborn as selective screening.

On the other hand, this selective screening process can take place sub-consciously without the awareness of the perceiver. When the mind is functioning like this, it is normally whilst performing a task such as walking and talking on ones mobile phone at the same time, in other words, walking devoid of consciously thinking of the act walking. The ability of the mind to slip out of this sub-conscious state is there in event of a non-routine occurrence, however if not done quickly enough an accident can occur.

Despite selective screening taking place in the attention stage, it is still necessary for this information to be organized in such a way that it can be retrieved efficiently. Cognitive frameworks known as schemas help us achieve this by acquiring knowledge through experience.

A self schema is created by one's self awareness and is rooted around their appearance, behavior and personality.

A person schema refers to the way by which one tends to categorize others based on prominent features normally regarding such demographic characteristics as gender, age,

able-bodiedness, and racial and ethnic groups; this is commonly referred to as stereotyping or prototyping. Once this stereotype is created it is then stored in the long term memory for future reference. Once formed a stereotype may be difficult to change and will tend to last a long time (Schermerhorn,, Grant & Osborn). On this note it can be said that our tendency to create stereotypes can be attributed to our memories' oversimplifying of processed information in order to prevent overloading.

A script schema is the mental acquisition of the necessary steps which need to be taken in order to complete a given task (based on experience), such as a manager running a meeting. Finally, person in situation schemas are combinational and are built around people (self and person schemas) and events (script schemas).

As is made apparent in the above figure, schemas have a powerful impact on the organizational and other stages of the perception process. Schemas are primarily automatic and sub-conscious responses that free up space in order to maximize ones mental capacity for controlled processing.

From the moment that one's mind is drawn in by a stimulus and this information has been processed the next course of action is to expose the underlying reasons behind it. This is otherwise known as interpretation. This method of deduction applied the same situation by two different people will not necessarily lead to the same interpretation.

To utilize information stored in ones memory it has to be retrieved. This is depicted by the retrieval step in the above figure. From time to time all of us have difficulty with the recollection of stored information in our memories,
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more precisely, our memories tend to crumble and only provide us with partial bits of the information we are attempting to recall. Schemas play an important role in this as they make it difficult for us to remember traits or characteristics not relatable to ourselves.

PERCEPTUAL DISTORTIONS

It should now be clear that varying viewpoints in perception result in different people seeing different things and consequently attaching different meanings to the same stimuli. When examining the dynamic between the perceiver and the other subject, the accuracy of interpersonal perception and judgments made can be influenced by factors such as the nature of the relationship between the two parties, the order and amount of information received by the perceiver and the overall extent of interaction. There are five main features that can lead to perceptual problems:

Stereotyping

Stereotyping is the tendency that people have to attach positive or negative labels on others based around their own personalized process of categorization and perceived similarities. This perception is normally centered on what is expected, in this respect, by the perceiver. As mentioned earlier on, stereotyping or prototyping is the mind's way of simplifying its intake of stimuli in order to prevent overloading itself (a form of selective screening). The perceiver will tend to place the subject into a preconceived group in which they feel that they best fit. Therefore questionable pre-judgments are formed. Despite the fact that this process condenses information stored in the memory, some extremely negative

implications arise which can lead to situations of bigotry or bias. At the workplace, stereotyping can have negative effects on an employee as a negative preconception will normally have the capability to stick and as a result stigmatize and hinder the subject's career.

The Halo Effect

The Halo Effect occurs when one single characteristic of a person or situation is used by the perceiver to create an overall image or impression. This effect triggers the shutting out of any other relevant characteristics. A specific negative impact of The Halo Effect is what Mullins refers to as perceptual blindness, more specifically this is when rash judgments are made and other important stimuli are simply overlooked as a result of utilizing only what is readily available at that instance.

Another phenomenon known as the Rusty Halo Effect exists; this is where general judgments are made on what can be justified and isolated incidents and a person subjected to this can be wrongfully branded as something that they are not.

Perceptual Defense

Perceptual Defense is a mechanism that surfaces when someone unknowingly or knowingly filters out specific parameters from a given situation that they may find threatening or intimidating. This inadvertently leads to people selectively striking from their minds information that does not support their opinions or points of view.

Projection

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Perception is distorted by feelings and emotions. Projection can result from people overemphasizing undesirable traits that they see in others, whilst at the same time; refuse to see such traits in themselves. Projection also implies attributing or projecting one's own feelings, motives or characteristics to other people (Mullins). This implies that people will tend to be more favorable towards others who seem to be more relatable to them in terms of character, emotional state or momentary state of mind.

According to Freud, projection is a means by which we protect ourselves from acknowledging that we possess undesirable traits and assign them in exaggerated amounts to other people.

The Self Fulfilling Prophecy

This phenomenon arises when a person or situation is hijacked by the misconception of the perceiver or perceivers and consequently ends up becoming that very delusion. This can be attributed to people's strong desire to validate their own perceptions whilst disregarding the actual reality of the situation.

IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

In certain situations, we all attempt to depict our attitudes, personality and competence to others by putting particular emphasis on the way that we physically present ourselves. A job interview is a common example of this; which is referred to as impression management. In the forming of an impression, more emphasis is put on some bits of information than others. It has been proven through research that truly "first impressions count", this is formally known as the primacy effect. Interestingly enough, it has also

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been proven that a negative impression is less likely to change than a positive one.

DISTORTION MANAGEMENT

In a healthy working environment, the collective perceptual process, at some level should be regulated or supervised. This responsibility, known as distortion management, falls to the managers and supervisors of an organization. A manager who successfully practices distortion management should willfully balance conscious and sub-conscious (automatic and controlled) information processing at the attention and selection stage (refer to Fig 3). Responsibilities of theirs such as performance assessment and clear communication require conscious information processing which will potentially be a hindrance to other job responsibilities. Together with this, managers should strive toward seeking out disconfirming information (concerning previous deductions that they have reached in assessing a subordinate or situation) that will help level out their typical perception of information, thereby avoiding bias.

Particular care has to be taken when considering the range of schemas and stereotypes at the information organizing stage. A manager should make a point to expand on his/her schemas and even consider replacing them all together with more precise or wholesome ones. Additionally they should acknowledge that the retrieval stage of the memory can be imprecise. With this in mind a manager should never rely too much on schemas and sensitivity toward perceptual distortions should be ever-present.

ATTRIBUTION THEORY

The attribution theory focuses on how people attempt to understand the causes of a certain event, assess responsibility for the outcomes of the event and evaluate the personal qualities of the people involved in the event.

There are internal and external attributions that can be linked to causes of behavior. Internal causes are within the control of the individual, whereas external causes are variables within a person's environment. There are several factors that can influence internal and external attributions these include:

Distinctiveness: consistency of a person's behavior across situations.

Consensus: likelihood of others responding in a similar way.

Consistency: whether an individual responds the same way across time.

In addition to these three influences, two errors have an impact on internal versus external determination:

The fundamental attribution error: This applies to the evaluation of someone else's behavior whereby success is attributed to situational factors and failure to personal factors.

The self-serving bias: This applies to the evaluation of one's own behavior, where success is attributed to personal factors and failure to situational factors.

CONCLUSION

All problems encountered throughout the course of this paper point directly toward the massive degree of bias which lurks within the perceptual process. Both personally and professionally, people strive to exist in a world ruled by certainty, more specifically their own certainty and it is our individual perceptual systems that oversee this. The underlying absurdity behind all of this is that it is this very idea that is our downfall; as this system is overrun with errors and bias at the same time. And although we are conscious of this and attempt to rectify these glitches, we are essentially working against our perceptual system in its natural state.