

Selective Perception is a theory that explains the phenomenon of different people having completely different interpretations of the same event. When faced with identical stimulus, people see two different things. Their reading of the evidence depends on their attitude(s) toward the subject, their past knowledge, and their conviction in their beliefs. Selective perception leads to the conclusion that people only see what they want to see, and much of what they're exposed to only serve to reaffirm their prior beliefs.

Development

The history of Selective Perception theory dates back to 1954, after the Princeton/Dartmouth football game. Psychologist Albert Hastorf (of Dartmouth), and sociologist Hadley Cantril (Princeton) noticed that both of the universities ran stories maligning the tactics of the other team. The scientists wondered—how can such divergent opinions exist after one game? If both schools were watching the same match, how can they have such opposing views?

What followed was the landmark study that established that viewers choose what they want to see. If a Princeton student watching the game noticed a foul being committed, they would choose to blame it on Dartmouth, even if Princeton had been at fault. While two subjects may 'see' the same thing, they 'think' completely differently.

Studies in the 1970's delved further into the pervasiveness of selective perception. Psychologists Neil Vidmar and Martin Rokeach launched research aimed at the popular television show 'All In The Family.' The sitcom featured Archie Bunker, an old-fashioned, prejudiced, hard-working man who symbolized old racism and backwards-thinking. Created as a satire to point out the errors of bigotry, many viewers perceived the opposite. The psychologists learned that, while many viewers understood the irony of the show, many did not. People who identified as having 'high' prejudice saw Archie Bunker as a hero of the working-class, an outspoken antidote to the decline of morality in society. This is the classic case of selective perception. Those with similar views as Archie Bunker viewed him as a role model, and those who weren't prejudiced understood he was a spoof of the very people he represented.

Another study that looked at selective perception was conducted by psychologists Wilson and Abrams in 1977. They observed the perceived effects of alcohol on participants. Those who believed they had consumed alcohol were more relaxed, talkative, and dominant. They managed to convince themselves of something based entirely on their perception of what was true. Because they had alcohol, they behaved a certain way, despite the fact that half of them received a non-alcoholic drink. This further demonstrates the power of ideas and how filtering out incongruous facts can lead to a completely wrong conclusion.

Modern-Day Ramifications

Selective perception is constantly present in everyday life. It's paved the way for conspiracy theories, polemic news programs, and amped-up advertising. The idea that reinforcing ideology is the only way to convince people of anything has shifted the paradigm and often results in messaging shortcuts. In an

age where people are surrounded by information, they only understand what they want to—they see the world in black and white.