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Forming Judgements of Others

At 9.30 on a bright October morning, Peter Swartz is ushered into an office for an interview. He looks smart in his new suit, immaculate shirt and tie and his highly polished shoes. The research director who comes to greet him is dressed in jeans, a T-shirt and wears his hair long. Unfortunately for Peter, the research director has great confidence in his own ability to size up applicants as they walk through the door. At a glance the research director knows that Peter is too conventional and too materialistically orientated for the vacancy.

Peter is not alarmed at the outcome of his first interview because later that day he has another interview for a very similar job.

The research director at the second interview also has the gift of being able to size up applicants as they walk through the door. Fortunately for Peter, the second research director wears a suit and tie and at a glance he knows that Peter will be a reliable, go ahead, well-motivated employee.

On his first day in his new job the research director lunches with Peter in the works canteen. The operatives on a nearby table conclude that he is the latest addition to the management team and that he looks just as ruthless and manipulative as the other managers in the company. Just before they finish their lunch, Peter is introduced to the union representative, and the research director makes a tactful exit. Another shift of operatives enter the canteen and, seeing Peter talking to the union representative, they conclude that he seems a sociable and friendly new operative who has radical political views.

Peter Swartz works hard and is also very lucky. Within
three months he produces a breakthrough in one of the company’s major development projects — computer recognition of handwritten documents. Peter basked in the glory of his breakthrough for several years and no one noticed that his subsequent work was wasteful and unproductive.

The story of Peter Swartz emphasizes how the judgements which we make about one another alter the course of our lives; it also shows the many subjective factors which influence these decisions. This chapter describes these subjective influences in more detail and explains the basis of social perception.

The process of perception

Perception is the process by which we become aware of, and make meaning out of, the world around us. It is concerned with how we get and deal with information. At first sight it may appear that this is not a particularly complex process. We simply open our eyes and look (or, if we listen, we hear). It is, however, not quite so simple. Consider a trivial example. We look at a rectangular surface such as the top of a table or desk. We ‘see’ a rectangle despite the fact that the actual image on the retina of our eye is rarely rectangular. One reason for this is because we ‘know’ it is a rectangle and automatically interpret it as one. Our past experience is one of many influences on our present perception. Other evidence on the complexity of perception is provided by the fact that different witnesses of the same event will often give completely different accounts of it — all apparently quite honest descriptions of what they ‘heard and saw’ — and often it is impossible to establish exactly ‘what happened’ in events such as accidents. The fact that all our information about the world and all our communication is based on our perception makes it important to have some understanding of this process.

Factors in perception

There are a number of factors which determine what, and how, we perceive.