

Oct 2005

The Master Gunz Speaks: On Perception

By Pat Bond McLane, Master Gunnery Sergeant (Retired), United States Marine Corps

The phrase “my perception is my reality” takes on new meaning when put into the perspective of Bruner and Goodman. What they describe is elementary, yet very deep, and something taken for granted, ironically, based on one’s own perception. Humans, and possibly animals, often do think they know something, when in actuality we only perceive it to be because it is routinely occurring and we are continually reacting. It is no wonder that early psychologists felt their early work on perception was only the beginning.

Webster defines perception as “the act of perceiving or the ability to perceive; mental grasp of objects, qualities, etc, by means of the senses; insight or intuition; understanding, knowledge; concept, impression.” When we read the definition of perception the depth of what is intricately involved in one’s perception is not self apparent. It’s been made easy for us, when it really goes to the core of our being, and is all encompassing. We don’t see where perception can be measured. I wonder what Weber, Fechner, Wundt, Titchener and others would think when told “that such perceptual phenomena are as scientifically measurable in terms of appropriate metrics as much more hallowed phenomena as flicker fusion, constancy, or tonal attributes,” (Bruner).

There are two types of perception determiners: autochthonous and behavioral. Autochthonous determiners “reflect directly the characteristics electrochemical properties as sensory end organs and nervous tissue,” (Bruner). Included in this grouping would be sight, touch, taste, hearing, and smell. These factors can be individually measured on a number scale. Behavioral determiners are those functions that lead us to have our perception. They include our attitudes (feelings), our social needs, our individual personality quirks, as well as our physiological needs. Additionally, our social norms, customary conduct, and social skills of communicating and interacting play a pivotal role in our behavior. Behavior can be measured through sensory conditioning. Look at Pavlov’s salivating dog; consider blinking of the eyes or facial gestures.

Additionally, two other factors to be considered are “perceptual compromise” and “perceptual equivocality,” (Bruner), what one is willing to accept and what one finds palatable to the emotions. When we see something we register it in our mind’s eye. Based on the autochthonous and behavioral determiners, we make judgments. I term these “decisions” for our mind’s eye as perceptual judgments, or our perception, based on an agreement between what we feel is agreeable and equal for our own self. It is “what is presented by autochthonous processes and what is selected by behavioral ones” (Bruner). One place these judgments/perceptions get tested is on the witness stand. How many nights a week do we see someone on the witness stand being proven wrong? Yet that person’s perception is that person’s reality.

I never realized the value and need to look into the depths of perception. It is not as easy as one might be led to believe. It reminds me of peeling an onion and discovering what lies below the next layer. Such is so with the phenomenon of perception. Our perception is what we allow it to be through the use of sense and how we are conditioned, as well as how we feel and what we accept for appropriate behavior.