Perception: A Cognitive Sociological Approach
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ABSTRACT
Many sociological theories make some reference to sight, yet there exist very few sustained sociological examinations of perception. In this chapter I highlight the perceptual dimension of the social construction of reality by analyzing perception as a process of “socio-mental filtration.” Building on theories of social construction – most notably those using the concepts of “frame,” “paradigm” and “schema” – in which social expectations are the organizing force of experience, I focus on the question of how perception happens. A fundamental effect of expectations on experience is to enact some form of selective attention (whether mental or perceptual), which is most evocatively captured by the metaphor of a filter. Drawing on my research on the perception of male and female bodies, I argue that filter analysis allows scholars to develop a concrete analysis of the social organization of perception and to more effectively account for some of the “hard problems” of social constructionist theory, such as the body.

PERCEPTUAL DIVERSITY

There is always more than one way to perceive something. People from different cultures, for example, may see and smell identical sets of sensory stimuli differently. Bronislaw Malinowski observed in 1929 that the Trobriand Islanders usually perceived children as resembling their father, even when he saw stronger physical resemblances to the mother (Malinowski 1929: 204). James Bagby (1957) similarly demonstrated that people from Mexico and people from the United States perceive different things when receiving identical sensory stimuli. When presented with two different images simultaneously, one depicting a scene from U.S. American culture (such as a baseball game) and one depicting a comparable scene from Mexican culture (such as a bullfight), participants tended to see the scene from their own culture. Further, Ayabe-Kanamura et al. (1998) compared perceptions of everyday odors by Japanese and Germans and found significant differences between the two populations on all measures, including such basic aspects of odor perception as stimulus intensity.

Such perceptual diversity is not just cross-cultural, however. Different historical periods are also associated with perceptual variation. Donald Lowe and Thomas Laqueur both maintain that people saw very different things when looking at the human body in different historical eras (Lowe 1982: 85;
Laqueur 1990). Thomas Kuhn similarly argues that scientists perceive the same materials differently under different historical “paradigms”:

[A]fter the assimilation of Franklin’s paradigm, the electrician looking at a Leyden jar saw something different from what he had seen before. The device had become a condenser, for which neither the jar shape nor glass was required […]. Lavoisier […] saw oxygen where Priestly had seen desophlostated air and where others had seen nothing at all. (Kuhn 1962: 117)

Perception of the same sensory information also varies within the same culture and the same historical period. Gender, race, class, occupations, disabilities, and even hobbies can all entail distinct perceptual conventions and forms of perceptual expertise. Studies of eyewitness accounts, for instance, have found that males and females tend to notice different aspects of a scene and thereby remember somewhat different details (Powers et al. 1979). An extensive array of research has also demonstrated that people are much better at recognizing faces of their own race or ethnic group (Meissner and Brigham 2001). In the case of occupations, C. Wright Mills (1963: 460) argues that “different technical elites possess different perceptual capacities,” an assertion underscored by N.R. Hanson’s (1965: 17) observation that “[t]he infant and the layman can see: they are not blind. But they cannot see what the physicist sees; they are blind to what he sees.” Ludwik Fleck (1979: 92) similarly maintains that scientific training includes visual socialization through which scientists gain a “readiness for directed perception.” Furthermore, Pierre Bourdieu (1984: 44) has argued that class position is attended by “perceptual schemes” which structure aesthetic judgments about art, among other things: “When faced with […] works of art, people […] apply to them the perceptual schemes of their own ethos.”

Meanwhile Oliver Sacks (1989) has noted that only deaf researchers are able to visually perceive the difference between the sign for “chair” and the sign for “sit” as the complexity of the linguistic use of space by deaf people is “overwhelming for the ‘normal’ eye, which cannot see, let alone understand, the sheer intricacy of its spatial patterns” (87). In his ethnography of recreational mushroom hunters, Gary
Alan Fine (1998: 102, 113) likewise found that mushroomers can perceive amazing amounts of sensory detail invisible to the uninitiated, who lack the relevant “template for looking.”

**TOWARD A SOCIOLOGY OF PERCEPTION**

Each of the diverse perceptual communities alluded to above gives rise to different perceptual patterns that are neither individual and idiosyncratic nor universally human. Rather, these patterns are the result of “perceptual socialization” (see Zerubavel 1997: 32-33), constituting a distinctly sociological dimension of perception. Distinct from both individualist and universalist understandings of perception, the sociology of perception focuses on analyzing those aspects of perception associated with membership in different “perceptual communities,” namely *perceptual conventions, perceptual traditions, perceptual rules, perceptual norms*, and processes of *perceptual enculturation*. In the broadest terms, the sociology of perception emphasizes that perception is a culturally constructed process, and seeks to identify the psychosocial dynamics involved in the perception and identification of sensory stimuli.

This overarching aim can be approached in a number of different ways. One strategy is to systematically capture and catalog varying perceptions of the same object, analyzing the differing structures of attention involved in different ways of seeing (or hearing, smelling, tasting or touching) the same thing. Another area of research that falls under a sociology of perception is documenting historical shifts in conventions of perception and the primacy of different senses. A third important area of inquiry is to investigate the ways that perceptual processes are enlisted in other processes of social construction (of reality, of race, of gender, of aesthetic judgment, and so on). These projects do not of course exhaust the concerns of a sociology of perception, which can include any work that aims to answer the question of how perception works as a sociological matter.

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1 On the socio-cultural dimension of perception, particularly the idea of “optical communities,” see Zerubavel 1997: 23-34.
2 See, for instance, Jay (1993), Lowe (1982), and Tuan (1979).
Among the most important reasons to develop a sociology of perception is that it challenges the normally taken-for-granted view that our perceptions are “unfiltered and veridical” (Fiske and Taylor 1991: 99), free of socio-cultural “distortions.” Before turning to the sociology of perception, then, it is helpful to more fully define this “common sense” view. The modern, western assumption – dominant at least since the enlightenment – is that sensory perception, particularly visual perception, is a passive “input process” in which sensory stimuli simply “overwhelm the viewer” (Burnett 2004: 32-34). In this understanding, which Rod Michalko (1998: 142) calls “sensual finality,” perception does not involve thinking or interpretation but is a matter of direct sensory perception; sensory stimuli are the only influence. As Georgina Kleege (1999: 96) puts it, “we apparently believe that the brain stays out of it” (see also, Jay 1990: 62). We believe that what we perceive is an exact reflection of empirical reality, a direct “point-by-point correspondence” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 7) without selection or distortion. Despite the many examples of different perceptual communities, then, we are typically unaware of socio-cultural influences on perception. Although they are less often studied than sight, this point applies equally to the socio-cultural influences on perception via touch, hearing, taste and smell. This is the first reason to develop a sociology of perception. The dominant, taken-for-granted folk theory of sensory perception does not acknowledge perceptual diversity or its epistemological implications.

Another important reason to foreground a sociology of perception is that perception is a powerful but understudied dimension of the social construction of reality – which is arguably the paradigmatic perspective of the discipline. For instance, in The Social Construction of Reality Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966: 140) make the claim that conversation is the most important vehicle of reality maintenance; perception, on the other hand, does not receive any explicit acknowledgement as playing a role in the social construction of reality (even though it is integral to conversation!). There is no entry in the index under “perception,” “vision,” “visual,” “sensory,” or “senses.” Yet many passages, such as the one below, seem to demand an analysis of the social construction of perception:
The reality of everyday life is taken for granted as reality. It does not require additional verification over and beyond its simple presence. It is simply there, as self-evident and compelling facticity. I know that it is real. (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 23)

How do we gain this “sense” that reality is “simply there” without need for additional verification? How do we come to experience it as “real”? It is through perception that information enters our minds in the first place. As such, subconscious cultural influences at the level of perception undergird this broadly shared analytic perspective, as well as a number of sociological sub-fields such as the sociology of knowledge. As Eviatar Zerubavel has said in relation to cognitive sociology,

A good way to begin exploring the mind would be to examine the actual process by which the world “enters” it in the first place. The first step toward establishing a comprehensive sociology of the mind, therefore, would be to develop a sociology of perception. (Zerubavel 1997: 23)

Sensory perception is a mostly unacknowledged but uniquely powerful dimension of the social construction of reality. This sensory sub-structure of social construction is one of the key sociological dimensions of perception I aim to capture here.

Despite the very limited number of works that sail under the banner of “the sociology of perception”3 – taking the social construction of perception as their central object of analysis – one can find references to sensory perception throughout classical and contemporary sociology. For instance, perception plays a central (if sometimes implicit) role in much of Erving Goffman’s (1963) thinking, for instance the concept of “civil inattention,” and in Harold Garfinkel’s ([1964] 1967: 35-75) work on “background” knowledge. Georg Simmel ([1908] 1924: 356-361) offers one of the more extended discussions of the sociological importance of the senses in the section of Soziologie called “Sociology of the Senses: Visual Interaction” in which he makes the argument that vision plays a unique sociological role because “[t]he union and interaction of individuals is based upon mutual glances” (p. 358). Other

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sociologists who have explicitly argued for the centrality of perception to sociological inquiry include Arthur Child (1950), who claims that perception buttresses the sociology of knowledge, Largey and Watson (1972), who explore the social definitions of individuals, groups and settings in terms of odors, and Donald Lowe (1982), who offers that perception is the link between the content of thought and the structure of society. Given this long history of nods to the role of perception in social life – not to mention the outright statements of its sociological significance – the topic seems ripe for an extended treatment that not only emphasizes the importance of a sociology of perception, which has been at least partially established, but explores how perception functions as a sociological matter.

Toward this end, I rely on a cognitive sociological approach, emphasizing the link between perception and cognition and highlighting the socio-cultural organization of both. Although there is some debate surrounding the timing and the extent to which the different senses are penetrated by cognition and culture,4 there is broad agreement that cognition shapes what we perceive at some level prior to conscious meaningful perception. As Harry Lawless (1997: 168) put it, olfactory perception is not just a matter of “how well the nose is working” but also “how well the brain that is hooked to the nose is working.” It is important to maintain a distinction between sensory stimuli and what we consciously perceive (Kuhn [1962] 1996: 192-193; Matthen 2005: 2). What human beings see, feel, taste, touch and smell is not the world, but a version of the world their brains have concocted. In the words of neuroscientist John Maunsell, “People imagine that they’re seeing what’s really there, but they’re not” (Brownlee and Watson 1997: 50). One of the most powerful concepts cognitive sociology provides for an analysis of perception is “attention.” Following Goffman’s ideas in Frame Analysis, the cognitive sociological use of “attention” and “disattention” highlights the mental fences with which we typically frame social reality, regarding most things as “out of frame” and unworthy of our attention (see

Goffman 1974: 201–246; Zerubavel 1997: 37; Brekhus 2007: 458). Defined in this way, attention can refer to the mental act of selectively focusing our awareness, but it can also refer to selective sensory attention – registering only selected details among the technically available stimuli while disattending the rest. Such selective sensory attention is a key process underlying the social construction of perception (and, by extension, the social construction of reality), and the one I focus on here. In the next section I demonstrate that the notion of socially directed selective attention is at the heart of many of the most prominent theories of social construction.

**EXPECTATIONS, SELECTIVE ATTENTION AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION**


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5 It is important to break the assumption, characteristic of some scientific research on perception, that cultural influences and cognitive processes shaping perception are necessarily accessible to consciousness. For instance, selective attention – the cognitive process most central to my analysis – is sometimes defined as the result of an actor’s intentions, i.e. the conscious focusing of attention involved in the purposeful execution of visually guided action (see van der Heijden 2004). I am specifically describing subconscious socio-cognitive processes of selective attention that structure perception.
To answer this question, one might begin by turning to findings in social psychology about cognitive processing biases, such as “expectation effects” (Jones 1990: 82, 84) and “confirmatory hypothesis testing” (Taylor et al. 2000: 56-57), which lead us to unconsciously reject or ignore information that challenges our expectations. At the same time, also without realizing it, we selectively seek out information that confirms our expectations; expected information is not only more easily noticed, but also processed faster. This point is powerfully illustrated in Kuhn’s description of an experiment in which participants did not perceive changes made to a deck of playing cards, seeing instead the numbers and suits they expected:

Until taught by prolonged exposure that the universe contained anomalous cards, they saw only the types of cards for which previous experience had equipped them. Yet once experience had provided the requisite additional categories, they were able to see all anomalous cards on the first inspection […]. What a man sees depends both upon what he looks at and also upon what his previous visual-conceptual experience has taught him to see. (Kuhn [1962] 1996: 112-113)

Thus material congruent with our expectations is typically readily perceived and remembered (Levine and Murphy 1958: 95), whereas unexpected occurrences and details may remain unnoticed.

It is important to emphasize that the expectations that I am concerned with here are specifically social expectations. This emphasis follows Garfinkel’s ([1964] 1967: 37) concept of “background expectancies,” or “expectancies that lend commonplace scenes their familiar, life-as-usual character,” which for Garfinkel emerge from and reproduce “the stable social structures of everyday activities.” Although expectations based on individual experience also produce expectation effects, it is the influence of social expectations on perception that is most relevant to the sociology of perception and the social construction of reality.

The expectation effects produced by social expectations reflect an unmistakably social logic; they are organized to produce particular socially shared and socially expected meanings. Social expectations create a state of “perceptual readiness” (Bruner 1958: 92-93) to quickly recognize particular socially relevant cues and thus to “experience events in certain consistent and selective ways.”
(Bruner 1958: 85, emphasis added). In other words, one of the key effects of social expectations is to enact and organize selective attention. We seek out and register those details that are consistent with our expectations, while overlooking other details that are equally perceptible and “real.” Returning to Kuhn’s description of the playing card experiment, note that the research subjects selectively disattended the anomalous, unexpected suits, seeing only the details that confirmed their expectations.

The following examples, which address four of the major concepts scholars have developed to describe the social construction of reality (“frame,” “schema,” “perspective,” and “thought style”), further illustrate the centrality of selective attention. Goffman ([1974] 1986: 493) refers to framing as the “cognitive organization” of the world, and the basis for this “organization” can be understood as a process of selective attention. To frame is fundamentally to determine which details are “in frame” and which can be disregarded as “out of frame.” Consider in this light the following description in which Goffman emphasizes the importance of “disattending” irrelevant events: “A significant feature of any strip of activity is the capacity of its participants to ‘disattend’ competing events – both in fact and in appearance – here using disattend to refer to the withdrawal of all attention and awareness” (Goffman [1974] 1986: 202).

When Frederic Bartlett (1932) reintroduced the term “schema” (originally introduced by Kant [[1781] 1998: 273] to signify procedural rules for applying concepts to sense impressions) it was to emphasize a slightly different form of selective attention. His argument was that memory is selective, as opposed to the storage and retrieval of all available information. More recently, David Morgan and Michael Schwalbe (1990: 156) described schemata as “knowledge structures” which determine “what aspects of the social environment are taken into account, how they are interpreted, and how we react […]” Cerulo (2002: 8) offers another definition that similarly highlights selective attention: “schemata […] allow the brain to exclude the specific details of a new experience and retain only the generalities
that liken the event to other experiences in one’s past. […] Discrepant features […] are adjusted or omitted so that the information conforms to the schema in use.”

A number of other theories of social construction make comparable references to attention and disattention. Tamotsu Shibutani (1962: 131) describes “perspectives” in terms of selective attention, explaining that “people with dissimilar perspectives define identical situations differently, responding selectively to diverse aspects of their environment.” Ludwik Fleck (1979: 93) likewise recounts that the expectations of their particular “thought style” led bacteriologists to disattend bacterial cultures that were either very fresh or very old as “not even worth examining.” “As a result,” he explains, “all secondary changes in the cultures […] escaped attention. […] The thought style, developed in this particular way, made possible the perception of many forms as well as the establishment of many applicable facts. But it also rendered the recognition of other forms and other facts impossible.”

Note that in many of these examples, the authors explicitly emphasize the role of selective visual attention. Although I have been speaking broadly about perception, many of the theories I am drawing on are distinctly “occularcentric” (see Jay 1993), discussing only the role of visual perception in the social construction of reality and ignoring or downplaying the other senses. For instance, Goffman ([1974] 1986: 146) underscores the uniquely powerful role of visual perception (over other forms of sensory perception) in framing in the following passage: “What is heard, felt or smelled attracts the eye, and it is the seeing of the source of these stimuli that allows for a quick identification and definition – a quick framing of what has occurred.” Likewise, in Thomas Kuhn’s theory of scientific revolutions, paradigm shifts are fundamentally about the reorganization of visual stimuli; where earlier scientists saw one thing, adherents of a new paradigm literally see something else. In his words, “led by a new paradigm, scientists adopt new instruments and look in new places. Even more important, during revolutions scientists see new and different things when looking with familiar instruments in places they have looked before” (Kuhn [1962] 1996: 111). Visual perception is a critical reality-defining force –
particularly given our higher level of faith in the veracity of visual perception over the other senses\(^6\) – but it also seems important to consider the role of the other senses in the social construction of reality. For instance, in Kuhn’s theory, under different paradigms do the scientists not smell and hear “new and different things” as well as seeing them? Without denying the powerful role of visual perception, I would like to suggest that a similar process of selective attention is present in hearing (and perhaps in touch, taste and smell as well), and that these other forms of selective sensory attention also play an important role in the social construction of reality.

Mary Douglas ([1971] 1978: 298-299) highlights the role of selective attention in hearing when she notes that “[t]he body is not always under perfect control. A screening process divests uncontrolled noises of meaning. The small hiccoughs, sneezes, heavy breathing and throat-clearing can and must be screened out as irrelevant noise.” William Ainsworth and Steven Greenberg (2006) similarly point out that hearing is necessarily selective, particularly in noisy environments where “[…] a truly faithful representation of the spectrum could actually serve to hinder the ability to understand due to the presence of background noise or competing speech” (4). They further highlight the importance of selective attention in hearing when they emphasize that “perhaps the most remarkable quality of speech is its multiplicity” (5). Indeed the multitude of irrelevant differences in pitch, stress and intonation must be filtered out of different people’s speech to recognize the meaningful commonalities. While vision may be the primary reality-defining sense – at least among the sighted – it is important to bear in mind that selective sensory attention in general plays a role in the social construction of reality and is ripe for a comprehensive analysis.

**SOCIAL FILTER ANALYSIS**

\(^6\) Many English sayings reflect this faith in vision: “I saw it with my own eyes;” “sight unseen;” “seeing is believing;” “a picture is worth a thousand words.” Seeing is believed to be unique among the senses in terms of its ability to provide the undisputable truth. Sayings that capture this association between vision and enlightenment and understanding are to “have vision,” to “see the light,” and to “see things as they really are” (Kleege 1999: 22; see also, Jay 1993: 2, 587 and Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 48).
Among the concepts that scholars have used to describe social construction, the filter stands out as the most useful metaphor for an analysis of the social construction of perception, although it is also among the least fully theorized. Because of the mental image it evokes, the metaphor of a filter is uniquely evocative of the social dialectic of attention and disattention underlying perception (DeGloma and Friedman 2005). I specifically have in mind a mental “strainer” through which visual stimuli must pass before they are consciously perceived. Filters in general function to allow selected elements to pass through a set of holes, while blocking others. For instance, filters are added to cameras to allow different amounts of light (or only certain kinds of light) to pass through, and other filters remove toxic elements from water. Although the size, shape and number of openings vary, all filters perform this function of “straining” or “sifting.” Applied to perception, filters block the passage of certain pieces of sensory information while allowing others to pass through. Thinking in terms of filters thus usefully directs our analytical focus to these questions about which features or details pass through and are attended and, perhaps more importantly, which are blocked by the filter and thus remain unnoticed.

In calling attention to which details are attended – and which blocked – the metaphor of a filter also raises the question of why we attend the details we attend and ignore those we ignore. In conceiving of perception as a process of filtration, certain details are deemed “relevant” (those that are allowed to pass through the strainer to our attention) while others are deemed “irrelevant” and ignored. Thinking with the filter metaphor thus encourages the identification and analysis of the underlying logic – the “rules of relevance” – structuring this process of sensory selection. According to Goffman, the meaning of any encounter depends on what he calls the “rules of irrelevance.” In his words,

[t]he character of an encounter is based in part upon rulings as to properties of the situation that should be considered irrelevant, out of frame, or not happening. To adhere to these rules is to play fair. Irrelevant visible events will not be attended; irrelevant private concerns will be kept out of mind. An effortless unawareness will be involved, and if this is not possible then an active turning-away or suppression of attention will occur. (Goffman 1961: 25)
As Goffman makes clear, our attention is carefully organized so as to produce particular, socially expected meanings. Filter analysis helps us to recognize not only that many of the technically available sensory stimuli remain unnoticed, trapped as they are by our “socio-mental filters” and blocked from our attention, but also that there is an unmistakably social logic to that process of selection; it is structured to create particular socially shared and socially expected meanings.

Thinking about social construction in terms of filtration has the further advantage, alluded to above, of providing a method to pinpoint the social organization of any given experience or perception by raising the simple question of what is attended to and what is ignored. This emphasis on identifying the disattended is particularly valuable for constructionist analysis, as what remains unnoticed are the evidence and details that would support other perceptions and categorizations and other social worlds.

Yet another potential benefit of using the metaphor of a filter is that it may provide a common language with cognitive science. According to Janine Mendola (2003: 40), some visual neurobiologists have used the term “filter” to refer to neurons since the 1960s because neurons “break down visual scenes by extracting particular features from small regions of space.” Experimental psychologist Donald Broadbent (1958) likewise proposed that the information flowing in from the senses is reduced through a “selective filter” prior to processing by the perceptual categorization system. More recent studies in cognitive science that emphasize selective attention include Wang et al. (2007), who recently studied the neural correlates of selective attention using electroencephalogram (EEG) recordings, and Wakefield et al. (2002: 430), whose research strongly suggests that blind children outperform sighted children on certain odor and sound perception and recognition tasks not because of an enhanced sense of smell or hearing but because of improved selective attention to relevant cues and disattention of irrelevant sensory “white noise.” If it is the case that a process of filtration is taking place at the level of the brain and in the social organization of perceptual processes (and also, arguably, in memory and cognition), this common form may provide a useful basis for exploring the similarities and differences among these
different levels of filters as well as an opportunity to reflect on the implications of the mirroring of biological and cultural processes (see Cerulo 2006: 236).

In the preceding sections I have made a number of claims about perception, social construction and the metaphor of a filter: that sensory attention and disattention are among the primary mechanisms of social construction; that the metaphor of a filter is particularly well-suited to capture these social dynamics of selective attention and thus to illustrate in concrete terms how social construction is functioning in any specific case; that the analytic emphasis on what is normatively disattended that is facilitated by the metaphor of a filter can buttress a constructionist standpoint. While up to this point I have focused on introducing the theoretical perspective of the sociology of perception and the conceptual system of filter analysis, in the next section I will flesh out my claims by using the metaphor of a social filter to analyze the visual (and, to a lesser extent, aural) perception of male and female bodies. While sex is certainly not the only example of socio-optical construction,7 this “case study” is a particularly powerful example because sex and the body more broadly have historically proven to be a stumbling block for constructionist theory. In taking on one of the “hard cases” of social construction, the unique insights facilitated by filter analysis are all the more apparent.

SEX DIFFERENCE AS SOCIO-OPTICAL FILTER

A number of gender scholars have previously described seeing maleness and femaleness in terms that are evocative of a socio-mental filter in their pointed emphasis on attention and disattention. For instance, consider the following passage in which Kessler and McKenna describe the gender attribution process:

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7 Sex is not even the only example of the socio-optical construction of the body, which also applies to race, for instance, as well as any other categorical perception of the body.
The attributor contributes to the accentuation of gender cues by selective perception. For example, members of our culture may look for facial hair, while in other cultures this might not be considered something to inspect. In learning to look for facial hair, the attributor perceives in greater detail signs of facial hair than would be the case if facial hair were not a cue. (Kessler and McKenna 1978: 157)

In Kessler and McKenna’s theory, one of the key mental processes underlying sex attribution is thus a socio-mental filtration of the body. Again, in their words: “certain differences take on importance, while others are seen as irrelevant […] and] may be ignored” (156). Judith Butler (2004: 42) similarly refers to a “grid of legibility” that “defines the parameters of what will and will not appear within the domain of the social.” And Linda Nicholson highlights socio-mental dynamics of attention and disattention when she describes perceptions of sex differences as a lens that “misses much”:

Like a lens that only illuminates certain aspects of what we see by shadowing others, these visions kept from sight the many contexts that we as women and men deviate from the generalizations these analyses generated. (Nicholson 1994: 98)

My own research includes interviews with thirty-seven transgender people about sex attribution, and many of their accounts are equally compatible with the idea of seeing sex as a process of selective attention. In the following descriptions, for instance, note the way that the perceiver disattends – “filters out” – the inevitable bodily ambiguities:

Things don’t have to be completely perfect, but you need to have a certain percentage of things looking like a female side in order to be passable. […] Like there are plenty of biologically born women who have big shoulders or are like 6 foot 5, but they have other things where it kind of cancels out. People don’t see this woman and say, ‘ooh, that’s a guy in a dress’ or something.

It’s a balance; it weighs one way or another […] I read once that for every male attribute you need to have two other feminine attributes […] to tip the balance in the other direction.

According to some research, transgender people may be uniquely aware of the disattention required for unproblematic categorization because, as Jacob Hale argues, they do not fit into the available categories – or fit only by denying ambiguous or contradictory (according to the available categories) aspects of themselves (Hale 1998: 115). To some extent, however, this is true of everyone.
Human bodies are all classified into a small number of simplistic social categories which cannot accommodate their overlapping and excessive fleshy materiality (Shilling 2003: 60). In part by building on this insight about the excessiveness of bodies in relation to the categories with which we make them meaningful, filter analysis can help us to conceptualize sex and the body more broadly in a manner compatible with social construction.

As we have seen, the primary process that filter analysis illuminates is selective attention. The most simple, generic statement of the point is this: When we see bodies, we do not take in all of the technically available information; we note certain details while ignoring others. The first point to establish, then, is that visually perceiving bodies involves selective attention. Consider in this light the following examples in which members of one social group see details of the human body to which non-members are blind. Practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine, for instance, see different “maps” of the body than western doctors. Dermatologists can differentiate between healthy and dangerous moles that look identical to an untrained observer. One can continue in this vein virtually indefinitely: podiatrists notice feet, orthodontists notice jaw alignment, dancers notice leg alignment, and so on.

Each of the distinctions alluded to above are based on subcultural conventions of attention and focusing. However, norms of attention operate much more broadly as well. While I frequently do not register someone’s eye color, for instance, I virtually always notice whether they are male or female. Likewise it is not unusual for me to say “I remember him as taller” – or heavier, or fairer – whereas it is highly unlikely that I would say “I remember him as female.” The norm of selectively attending to those details of bodies that provide information about sex differences is no less conventional than the other distinctly subcultural norms governing seeing bodies. This normative attention to sex differences is clearly not the only way we see bodies (as the above-referenced examples of subcultural norms of perception make clear). However, while not monolithic, selective attention to sex differences is a
hegemonic perceptual norm, since, as countless gender scholars have shown, gender is culturally “omnirelevant” (West and Zimmerman 1987: 136).

This hegemonic, omnirelevant perceptual filter directs our attention to certain body parts, such as breasts and facial hair, but not others (consider elbows and earlobes). It is important to emphasize that these patterns of selective attention reflect social salience at least as much as biological salience. It is not simply that certain body parts are more available for us to inspect and it is those empirically salient details that we attend. Although some details may in fact be more visually prominent, that alone cannot account for what we notice. Breasts and facial hair are no more empirically salient than elbows and earlobes. At times, in fact, social norms of attention direct us to seek out and attend physical details that are far from obvious and to ignore those that are technically more salient. Consider, for instance, that we notice small differences in male and female eyebrows rather than focusing on the much larger similarities. We similarly attend to small differences in the texture of “male” and “female” skin and body hair rather than the empirically greater similarities.

The social “rules of relevance” governing seeing “male” and “female” bodies thus direct our attention not to the parts of human bodies that are the largest (or otherwise empirically prominent) but to the sex differentiated parts. On one level this is stating the obvious: Seeing sex requires us to note sex differences. But thinking about the process in terms of filtration and relevance reminds us that in focusing on sex differentiated details we are simultaneously filtering out the rest of the body. Stated differently, when we see people as male or female we are not seeing all of human bodies. Rather, we are looking for and recognizing select features that are predefined by our expectations as relevant.

One further question that is raised by analyzing the visual perception of sex as a process of filtration is whether it is only sex seen that is a selective portrait of the available sensory stimuli or whether other senses also function as filters. In an effort to answer this question I interviewed twenty-eight blind people to learn how maleness and femaleness are perceived when they are not seen. I found
that many of my blind respondents did describe hearing sex, touching sex, and smelling sex as a process of selectively seeking out learned relevant cues:

You get used to picking up the scents […] For instance, if you touch someone’s arm and they have a short sleeved shirt on they might have hair – or more hair, […] different texture hair if it’s a guy or a girl. […] It’s so many little touch cues.

I can usually pick up on one's gender by little cues they make with their voice, or other alerting sounds like sounds of a girls skirt brushing against her leg as she walks, a man's heavy boots hitting the ground, or even their cell phone ring sometimes.

Based on these descriptions, blind people, like the sighted, selectively perceive those cues they have previously learned are “relevant” for sex attribution.

One of the most important results of emphasizing the perceptual dimension of the social construction of sex – and specifically rethinking sex difference as a product of socio-mental filtration – is that the body can become a valuable resource for social theories of gender instead of a threat. In emphasizing the selectivity of our perceptions, drawing attention in the process to the many non-dichotomous aspects of the body, filter analysis can serve to anchor the idea that dichotomized gender roles are socially constructed and have no basis in biological difference. To argue that gender differences have no basis in biological sex differences is not to say that no sex differences exist: Certain virtually categorical physical differences – for instance, pregnancy, lactation, and genitals – separate males and females. It is my point that these sex differences are only some (even, arguably, a small proportion) of the potential similarities and differences among human bodies. When we consider sex differences in this larger context, the argument for a biological basis for gender differences seems unsubstantiated, based as it is on a selective view of human biology. As Karin Knorr-Cetina explains, “selections can be called into question precisely because they are selections: that is, precisely because they involve the possibility of alternative selections” (Knorr-Cetina 1981: 6).
This formulation raises the question of what we are not selecting when we perceive sex, and exemplifies the potential power of what Chris Shilling (2003) calls the “irreducibility” of bodies to social classifications (see also, Connell 1995: 56-60). As Shilling puts it, “bodies are classified into simplistic social categories […] which ignore overlaps in, and stress differences between, human bodies” (p. 60). Attending specifically to this misfit between bodies and the categories we use to describe them highlights the socially constructed character of the categories. If we can, to borrow Lucal’s (1999: 795) words, “provide visible evidence of the nonmutual exclusivity of the categories,” bodies might become a resource for social constructionist analysis, rather than a stumbling block. In this way, bodies can actually offer a powerful critique of biological determinism.

CONCLUSION

The broad question that has motivated this chapter is “how does perception work as a sociological matter?” Drawing on a cognitive sociological framework, I have identified selective attention as a key social process in perception and the social construction of reality and proposed filter analysis as a conceptual framework for the sociology of perception. Among its other advantages, analysis via the metaphor of a filter allows us to pinpoint how the perceptual dimension of social construction works and to identify the perceptual processes that underlie other processes of social construction (of sex, of race, of reality). Filter analysis also facilitates a more productive conceptualization of the relationship between social construction and material reality.

Although my primary example was the social construction of sexed bodies, filter analysis is an equally viable conceptual tool for an analysis of the social construction of other forms of material reality. For example, consider our perceptions of “nature.” As Whitfield and Stoddart put it, the “landscape impinges on our conscious minds […] as the filtered, modified and analogized version with which our senses provides us” (Whitfield and Stoddart 1984: 7, emphasis added). In the past, the
metaphor of “construction” has seemed to have inappropriate connotations when applied to matter, to objects and bodies, because of the implication that matter is created ex nihilo (Mol 2002: 32). If some form of materiality is irreducible to the social (Shilling 2003: 10, 60, 182), this raises questions about the limits and legitimacy of the construction metaphor. Thinking about social construction as a process of filtration avoids such threats to the idea of social construction. Filter analysis specifically directs our attention to the excessiveness of bodies and matter more broadly in relation to the social categories through which we perceive them, and it is this excessive “perceptual residue” – those details that are “filtered out” of any given perception of reality – that provides a promising new way to think about the social construction of the material world.

References


