

Perception and Law Enforcement

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Introduction

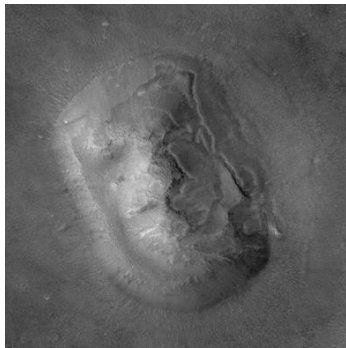
Since the beginning, perception has been used by everyone. When man first said I am naked, I need clothing. The perception was I am naked. Without understanding why things are the way they appear man was fearful of the world around him.

Superstitions overwhelmed man and his thoughts. It was an effort to explain the unexplainable. This is the perception of man and his surroundings. Early man worshiped nature in an attempt to change what was happening. At one time, it was believed that a man lived in the moon. This was based on the face seen on the moon. More resonantly, many believed there was or had been life on Mars, because of a photo taken as a satellite



passed Mars showing a face on the surface (face on mars).

This raised a large stir among people and the scientific community. It was not until some time later when a new photo was taken by a passing satellite, that the face on Mars proved to be a mountain and the face was formed by shadows cast across the surface of



the mountain (face on mars). The attempt to understand how things are perceived goes back before the Egyptians were building pyramids.

Modern man has devoted an extensive amount of time to studying perception and how it affects man. As the understanding of perception increases, the mystery that caused many superstitions is solved and man is no longer fearful. There are two forms of perception, internal and external (Philosophy of perception). Internal is how we see ourselves. External is how we see the world around us. As Law Enforcement Officers, we must understand perception, both internal and external. There are many studies of the different areas of perception. I will look mostly at visual perception.

I have 21 years of Law Enforcement service with the White County Sheriff Department in Searcy Arkansas. My career began in the fall of 1987 as an Auxiliary Deputy. On Dec. 2nd 1988 I was hired as a full time jailer. In June of 1990, my life changed when I was transferred to patrol. In August of 2005, I received my Senior Certificate. In patrol, while working motor vehicle accidents, I used perception to determine how an accident occurred. It was not until later that I began to consider perception as how others looked at me. One day I was talking to the Honorable Judge Bill Mills, of the first division of White County Circuit Court, about a Bailiff's duty during a jury trial. He made a statement that forever changed how I viewed the way others see me and how I viewed myself. The statement went something like this; "It is not what you do as a bailiff that can cause a miss trial, but what others perceive you did." You must do nothing that others perceive as influencing a jury. From that day, I began to view how others looked at what I did. The purpose of this paper is to increase the Law Enforcement officers understanding of perception and how it affects police work. To begin we must understand how perception is defined.

Definitions of Perception

I am listing a few of the definitions of perception. By understanding how perception is defined, we can better understand it as it applies to Law Enforcement.

Perception is defined as how one views or interprets things, and the angle from which people view things (2007).

Perception noun

The process, act, or faculty of perceiving. The effect or product of perceiving.

Psychology. Recognition and interpretation of sensory stimuli based chiefly on memory. The neurological processes by which such recognition and interpretation are affected. Insight, intuition, or knowledge gained by perceiving.

The capacity for such insight. (dictionary perception)

Definition of perception: Process by which people translate sensory impressions into a coherent and unified view of the world around them. Though necessarily based on incomplete and unverified (or unreliable) information, perception is 'the reality' and guides human behavior in general (businessdictionary).

Perception Definition

per·cep·tion (pər sep'ʃhən) noun

1. (a) The act of perceiving or the ability to perceive; mental grasp of objects, qualities, etc. by means of the senses; awareness; comprehension

(b) insight or intuition, or the faculty for these

2. The understanding, knowledge, etc. gotten by perceiving, or a specific idea,

concept, impression, etc. so formed

Etymology: L *perceptio* < pp. of *percipere*: see [perceive](#) (perception noun)

To help with understanding the definition of perception I will include a definition of perceive. Perceiving or perceive are used in the definition of perception.

Perceive (pəɹ-sēv')

tr.v., -ceived, -ceiv·ing, -ceives.

To become aware of directly through any of the senses, especially sight or hearing.

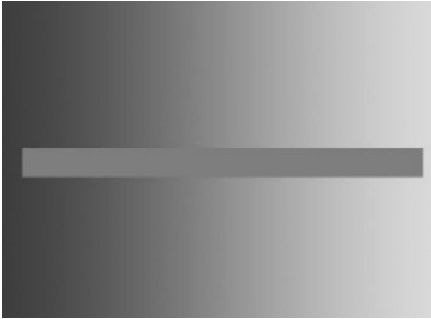
To achieve understanding of; apprehend. See synonyms at [see](#)¹. (dictionary perceive)

To summarize the definitions of perception I would say, perception is how one views or interprets the world around them. This includes the angle of view, all the senses, sight, sound, taste, hearing, touch. Including your insight, intuition, or knowledge gained from the experiences of life. From this definition, you can see how perception is such an important part of Law Enforcement. The next area of discussion will be how vision can effect your perception.

The Visual Effect

Since perception can be such a large part of our life and there are many types of perception, I am only going to look at visual perception and the Law Enforcement Officer. Vision is how we see the world and thus interpret what we see, although hearing, sound, smell, taste, and touch effect how we interpret what we see. If you see an apple, you expect it to taste like an apple. You know this because when you saw an apple and ate it, you experienced the apple. With this, you have to agree that the first apple you ate, you had no perception of what to expect. A person with no taste buds will not have the same experience as you and therefore perception of the apple. Just as the person who is color blind will not perceive the apple the same as you. Perception is based on each individual view of the world around them. What you see is not always what someone else sees. Your history, including culture and experience, will affect your view of life; this in turn will effect your perception. As a Law Enforcement Officer, you will many times have to look at a scene from the perspective of the witness. To understand this you will have to ask questions of the person's background, or history. You will need to actually put yourself in the shoes of the witness and stand where they were, and when they were witnessing the incident. In doing this, you may just see the story in the same eyes of the witness.

When the witness says the car was a certain color. The color is based on the light and comparison to the background it was viewed. An example of this is the gray horizontal bar in the picture on the following page.



(Horizontal Bar)

The gray bar is all one color. The light to dark gray color is caused by the background going from dark gray to light gray. If you do not believe me, cover the background and you will see. Even though you now know the bar is one color, no matter how many times you look at the picture you will still perceive it as light to dark gray. Your perception has not changed even though you have gained the knowledge that the gray bar is all one color. Take a red shirt and lay it on the floor. Now turn off the light. You will see the shirt, which is red, will appear to be black or dark blue. Hence, the reason a witness may give the wrong color of a car. The location, lighting and background are important to the perception of the witness. A quite famous picture is the two faced vase

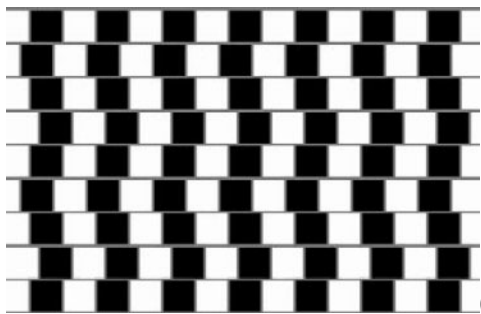


(optical illusions). Look at the picture close and you will see the

picture is of a real vase. Many times this will be a drawing of a vase. The effect is the same. When you see the vase, you can also see two faces looking towards each other. The background forms the faces. If you were to look at a picture of the vase sitting on a

table in a room, you would most likely not see the two faces. This is why the picture is always cropped in close. The perspective of the vase is taken close-up to give the effect desired. Just as a witness close to a crime will see things different from a witness a greater distance away, both will be telling a true story of how they perceived the crime. They are just viewed from different perspectives.

Sometimes a witness statement can be so crazy that it is just not believable. The witness may not be credible or it may be that the witness is seeing things in a different way



(Angle Biases). The picture at the left looks like a bunch of bent lines separated by black squares. The lines in fact are not bent but are straight and parallel. The illusion of bending lines is caused by the position of the black squares being offset from each other. Once again, if you do not believe me, place a piece of paper up against each line. The perception of a witness is based on comparison. If you hold the paper against the picture, you will perceive a straight line.

The eyes are independent of each other and what you see is a combination of both eyes. Your perception is based on the brain's ability to interpret what each eye is seeing and merge them into one view. To help you see this, below is a dot and a cross. You will have no problem seeing this.



(The Blind Spot)

Now close your right eye and look at the black dot with your left eye. Slowly move your

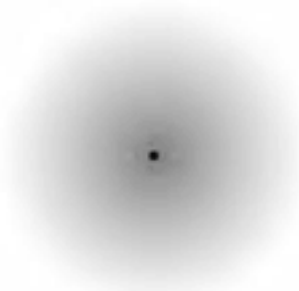
head toward the page or away from the page. At one point, the cross will disappear. The perception that the cross disappears is your blind spot. Each eye has a blind spot. By using both eyes, each eye fills in for the blind spot and you see both the cross and the dot. One can see from this why two witnesses standing in close proximity to each other can have two different stories. One of the witnesses had a blind spot blocking the full view.

A good example is when investigating an automobile accident and you are told by one of the drivers, I did not see the car. I looked before I pulled out and just did not see the car. The driver of the other car may even tell you he or she looked right at me and then pulled out in front of me. This is usually caused by the window post blocking one eyes vision. If the cross above were a car, you would have pulled into the intersection and bam. Where did that car come from?

Another perception is you are driving on a long straight road in the heat of the summer. You see water on the road ahead. When you get to the area, there is no water. However, on down the road you still see water on the road. The heat rising from the road makes it appear as if there is water on the road, if you were in an airplane flying above the road, you would never see any water. The angle you are at gives you a different perception. If the driver of the car was to communicate, to the pilot of the plane, that there was water on the road, the pilot would be unable to find the water.

A form of perception many officers experience is tunnel vision. Take a little time to stare at the dot in the center of the gray haze on the next page. Concentrate on the black dot. You will soon see the effect of tunnel vision.

Keep staring at the black dot. After a while the gray haze around it will appear to shrink.



(Writing tools)

As you stare at the black dot, the gray haze gets smaller and smaller. This is an example of tunnel vision. The perception that the gray haze is getting smaller is caused by narrowing the field of vision for both the left and right eye (Writing tools). You may notice as you start to read, after staring at the black dot, that there was a light spot on the page. Almost like a small flashlight was shining on the page. This is a reverse image of the gray circle.

A witness or you as an Officer can develop tunnel vision. This is most common during a pursuit by an Officer. As a young Deputy, I remember responding to a disturbance call. When I was getting close to the address, I turned a corner and swung a little wide. It was not until a day or two later I learned there was a small child on a bicycle at that corner. I barely missed the child and never knew it. I had tunnel vision and to this day still do not remember seeing the child. If I had hit the child, I do not know how I would have lived with that. It would have altered my career in Law

Enforcement, most likely ending it. Training will help to overcome tunnel vision in a Law Enforcement Officer.

A witness to a crime most likely will have no training about tunnel vision. Because of this, the witness may not see the whole picture, but only a small part of it. The saying I cannot see the forest for all of the trees applies here. The perception is of a small area of the entire crime. Keep these in mind when talking to witnesses. The background colors, lighting, angle of view, blind spots, and tunnel vision can effect the perception of a witness or suspect. Putting yourself in their position either physically or mentally will often give you a completely new perspective on a case.

Bringing It All Together

As you read this paper, you have developed a perception of me. You may not know me and yet you have developed a vision in your mind of me. Each one reading will have a different vision based on experiences and the perception of the past you have. When you first meet someone, it is only a mater of seconds before you develop a perception of who he or she is. You first impression is your perception of the other person. This will go as far as just seeing someone in the distance and never meeting him or her face to face, you will think of him or her as smart, dumb, rich, or poor. Moreover, this is all based on how they are dressed, the way they stand, walk, talk, or even the beauty of the face. Your perception of them is based only on what you have seen or have done in the past. Everyone knows how dumb blonds are.

I tell you I am looking at a thin round copper metal object about the size of a

thumbnail, with a face on it. What is the object? Most everyone will say a penny. The perception you have is based on your experiences. The object is actually a collector coin with no value.

The way we see things or in this case perceive things is based on a totality of our experiences. When you see an object, you identify it by your past experiences. This is the perception of identifying the object. As one of the definitions for perception stated, the neurological processes by which such recognition and interpretation are affected. Therefore, if by your experience you have not seen the object before, or a form of the object. It is possible that you will not recognize it.

Camouflage is an attempt to take advantage of this. By camouflage, an object that you would normally recognize is now not recognized. Your perception of the camouflaged object, or as the definition states; the neurological processes by which such recognition and interpretation is affected, is causing you to be unable to recognize the object. In addition, your brain tells you nothing is there.

To help bring all of this in focus lets look at a possible hold up report and the investigation. There is a hold up at the local convenience store. A report filed by the patrol officer says he has identified two witnesses. However, both have different stories. The first says he did not see anyone in the store. He was sitting in his car when the clerk came running out yelling he had been robbed. The second says there were three men. One held the clerk at gunpoint while the other two took his money. They ran out of the store and around back, one of them was carrying a white bag. When you go to the scene, you learn that the second witness was putting gas in his vehicle at pump number four. The first witness was sitting in his car, parked on the side of the building. There is a

large glass front all the way around the front and side of the convenience store. The first witness had a clear view inside the store and could not have missed the hold up. You cannot make sense of the two different stories. Someone is lying, and you think it is the second witness. He is friends with the clerk in the convenience store. Looks like an inside job to take the money. The second witness is saying there were three men, one with a gun. It is clear the clerk hid the money and is splitting the money with the second witness. Now all you have to do is prove it.

However, the next day you come back at the time the hold up occurred. You pull your car up on the side of the building and park. Then you see it, or in this case do not see it. There is a large glare on the convenience store's window from the sun, which is behind you. As you sit in the car, you can only see a small part of the store inside. Now you know why the first witness did not see the two men and the man with the gun. Looks like the second witness may be telling the truth. Now you will need to start to look at this case in a different light. Perception is everything, and you must consider it when working any crime scene.

As Law Enforcement Officers, we must not only think of how a witness views an incident but also look at how others see us. The perception others have of how you are performing your job will affect the way others treat you. Citizens will many times file a complaint on an Officer because of the perception the officer is not performing his or her job. You have to appear professional and look like you know what you are doing. It is not good enough to have the knowledge to perform the job if you are perceived as being incompetent. When testifying in court in front of a Judge or Jury, the perception of you will definitely be reflected in the outcome of the case. Keep in mind as you work that

just as you are sizing up your suspect, your suspect is sizing you up. The perception the suspect has of you has to instill respect of you.

Conclusion

As Law Enforcement Officers, we have to begin training the young officers about perception. As I told you earlier, I barely missed hitting a child early in my career. Every officer should be trained to overcome tunnel vision. The Law Enforcement profession needs to teach officers to view each case with perception in mind. The average citizen does not see life the same as a seasoned officer. What is the first thing a seasoned officer sees when pulling in behind a vehicle? Answer, the license plate. The average citizen when reporting a crime cannot tell you what the license plate looked like or if the vehicle even had one. Many officers do not understand why a citizen would not see something as obvious as the license plate.

The Law Enforcement Officers perception is everyone looks at life the same as he or she does. Because of this, it causes frustration for the officer when a witness cannot state the facts that are needed, and appear obvious to the officer the witness should know. You have to remember not everyone sees the world the same as you. This is the whole point of this paper on perception and Law Enforcement.

The perception others have of you as an officer will have an affect on you. I remember reading a book about twenty years ago. I do not know the name now, but I remember the book was about interviewing several men on death row across the country that had killed police officers. The story I remember most, was about a man who killed a police officer while on a vehicle traffic stop. The inmate was pulled over for a traffic

violation by a police officer and received a ticket for the violation. A few Counties later he was pulled over again for a traffic violation. On this traffic stop, he shot and killed the Police Officer as the Officer approached his car. When he was asked why he killed the second officer and not the first. He replied, because he deserved to die.

When the first officer approached the inmate on a traffic stop, the officer was dressed sharp, he had his boots polished and walked with authority. The second officer was dressed slouchy and walked with out paying attention to what he was doing. The man on death row allowed one officer live but killed the other because his perception of one was he deserved to die. I never forgot that statement. I tried to always look my best and perform in a professional manor on all traffic stops.

When working accident scenes use the perception of the driver to figure how the accident occurred. By walking through an accident scene visually, trying to see what occurred, you can better work accidents. Perception applies to all aspects of Law Enforcement.

I have only discussed the effects of visual perception and the effects on Law Enforcement, mostly as viewed by witness statements. What a witness tells you is based on perception at the time of the incident. The history, including culture and experience, will affect ones view of life. This in turn will effect perception. Putting yourself in the witness's shoes, so to speak, can give new insight to the case. Always think of what the witness's perception was at the time of the incident, you may just find it will solve your case or at the least explain things a little more.

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