

Eight Ways Your Perception of Reality Is Skewed [excerpted]

A new book explains the sometimes-unconscious forces that shape what we see, feel, and think.

By [Jill Suttie](#) | September 3, 2020

Seeing is believing. To some extent, that's true, of course: Our eyes allow us to see what's around us, helping us navigate our world. But it turns out sight is much more complicated than that, according to the new book [Perception: How Our Bodies Shape Our Minds](#), by University of Virginia psychologist Dennis Proffitt and Drake Baer. What we perceive in any given moment is not only determined by sensory input, but by our personal physical abilities, energy levels, feelings, social identities, and more. "It's common sense to believe we experience the world as it objectively is," the authors write. "Even though our naive intuitions are that we see the world as it is, we do not." Things that seem true and universal are often just our own unique experience of the world.

1. Our energy and abilities impact our perspective

Several studies by Proffitt and others show that our physical bodies and our ability to move influence how we view our surroundings. For example, researchers have found that if you are obese or tired, [distances look farther](#) to you. People wearing heavy backpacks [see steeper hills](#) in front of them than those without backpacks.

2. Our body awareness affects our decisions

In [one experiment](#), researchers studied hedge fund managers who have to make quick decisions about stock trading under intense pressure. Their strange finding? Managers who could more accurately count their own heartbeats without touching their bodies were more successful traders.

3. Being hungry (or not) changes our choices

Our body's energy levels also impact decision-making. In [one experiment](#), participants who drank a sugary drink made better decisions and delayed immediate gratification longer than people who gulped down a sweet-tasting drink without glucose. Similarly, when judges make parole decisions just before their lunch breaks or the end of their day, they [tend to deny parole](#). That's because a decision to grant parole requires more careful consideration—and, so, more energy.

4. Easy-to-read statements seem more true

Our beliefs about the world also depend on seemingly irrelevant influences. In [one experiment](#), when researchers asked participants to determine the truth of a statement—like "Lima is in Peru"—written in different colors, participants agreed more with easy-to-read statements than

less easy-to-read ones. Likewise, statements made in a rhyming scheme—like “Woes unite foes”—[were considered truer](#) than statements without a rhyming scheme—like “Woes unite enemies.”

5. Our feelings affect our political views

It’s probably not surprising that our feelings affect our perceptions and thoughts. Still, even for someone like me who knows this research well, *Perception* held some surprises. In one study cited in the book, researchers [found](#) that people who are more easily disgusted—when imagining things like a garbage pail filled with maggots or a piece of chocolate cake in the shape of dog poo—tend to be more conservative politically. And they tend to [have stronger negative feelings](#) about people who support sexual freedoms they disagree with—like gay rights or the right to an abortion.

6. Feeling bad makes things seem harder

Anyone who’s ever felt sad or depressed knows it’s hard to face the world when you’re down. But it’s interesting to note that these feelings also change our sensory perceptions. For example, people listening to melancholic music tend to [think a hill looks steeper](#) than people listening to happy music.

7. Having other people around make things seem easier

The presence of other people affects our perception in difficult situations, too. Holding hands with someone while experiencing a painful event [can lessen](#) the pain. Anticipating having to carry a heavy load with someone else (as opposed to alone) [makes it appear](#) lighter, and just thinking about a friend can make [hills seem less steep](#).

8. Our political beliefs affect our math skills

Another fascinating finding is how our group affiliations, like the political party we belong to, affect our perceptions. For example, in [one study](#), people were asked to solve math equations to verify the truth of a research finding—like whether a vaccine is effective or whether banning guns saves lives. As predicted, people with greater math skills were able to figure out the answers more easily—but only when the result of the calculation didn’t contradict their political beliefs. If it did, everyone’s math was worse: They solved the problem correctly 25 to 45 percent less often.

All in all, reading about this research should humble us. Clearly, many forces below our conscious awareness affect our perceptions, thoughts, and decisions, and errors abound. Becoming cognizant of those influences could keep us from making costly misjudgments or creating unnecessary conflicts with others who see things differently. The ultimate benefit of that? Hopefully, having a little humility might help *all* of us to act with less hubris and be more open to other points of view.