

Introduction

Hello! This book reveals psychological patterns of *neurotypical* (NT) humans, from an autistic perspective. I wrote it to help you understand them. You might read it if you are autistic (or Asperger's) and have to work harder to understand why people do what they do, or you might read it if you are neurotypical and want to understand an autistic person in your life, or you might read it because you are interested in new ways of looking at personalities and behavior.

A large majority of people are neurotypical. The word "neurotypical" (or NT) is not derogatory or complimentary - it is neutral. The label is not normally used by people to describe themselves, but is often used from an autistic perspective to name those people who are not labeled as autistic, ADD, ADHD, or any other specific neurological condition.

I've spent the last 42 years living among and studying these curious creatures. It has been a difficult life, and actually not one that I would have chosen. I will restrict my autobiography to a single paragraph, so that I don't lose my readers too early

on. I first arrived on Earth through the labors of my mother, who gave me milk, and, later, piano lessons. I went to preschool with Andrea, and I remember there was a vague mass of other children whose names didn't interest me. I learned to play sonatinas, make tri-fold display boards for science fair projects, and several other things that resulted in childhood honors. I made tree forts with my friend Sarah. My inner life was only open to a select few including her and my cousin Emily. My parents went along with my androgynous ways and my demands for order, and they never started talking about making them proud until it was far too late. Other people, of whom I had limited use, were strangely offended at my unexamined assumption that I was great, and I felt they kept getting in the way of its fruition. I was lost and depressed during the first seven years of my eternal adolescence, punctuated by brief and deep friendships like Melissa with whom meaning flowed out into the world around us, and by my trip to Africa where I was nearly comatose on the outside but was secretly ecstatic. Believing mutual love was unlikely, I married my first "girlfriend" after a reasoned cost-benefit analysis, and had one daughter. I had retained my girlhood innocence and a save-the-world idealism that fueled a series of philanthropic projects and efforts to belong, all of which upset someone's apple cart and ended with me being ejected back into anonymity. I was weak, defenseless, and apparently dangerous. All of this was before I found out they were neurotypical and I was not. I'm now married again and live fairly peacefully with a wife, daughter and stepdaughter.

The 62 patterns in this book will explain what I've learned from my observations, colored as they are by

my involvement in the subjects of my study. It will show how and why NTs live in complex competitive social structures, why they have elaborate mating rituals, how they display feelings for intentional effect, and it will reveal many more fascinating abilities of the species.

It is organized from the ground up: the physical and perceptive functions first, then the inner workings of the mind, then building to the NT's relationships and roles in the wider world. It also contains the script of a play whose ten scenes provide some examples of the patterns.

My hope is that you will be able to get the patterns fixed in your mind through my explanations, plus from the dialog in the play, then as you go about your life, you will recognize the patterns in the people around you. In the past I have seen NTs negatively as just a weak-minded herd of clones who waste all their time pointlessly talking about nothing, but I've begun to see them more positively as a result of understanding their "wiring." This book might help you see what they are doing in a more forgiving and deeper way, and help you understand why the time they spend doing those NT things is not actually a waste. After reading the book, you might be somewhere (a place you've been before) and see people interacting (like they have before) but you may see it in a new light. You might recognize a pattern from the book, and you might stop seeing the NTs as being so pointless or mystifying.

If you get lost in the abstractions of the 62 patterns, you might skip ahead to the last section, "What's an autie to do," which has personal advice on topics such as loneliness and authenticity. This

kind of autistic-oriented advice is rare to nonexistent in self help books, and I hope that this unique section of the book will be helpful to you.

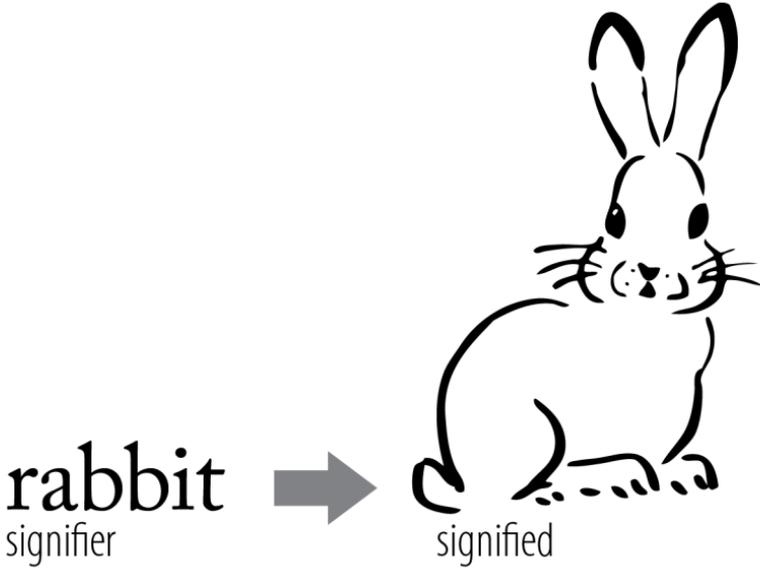
Language and culture

Before we get into the explanation of NTs, we must first define some terms related to language and culture. NTs are all about culture; culture is an extension of language, and so we begin with clarity about language.

Linguists refer to “**signs**” as the most general concept that includes words, gestures, icons, and other cultural symbols. In this book we will not get into linguistics in much detail, and will just use the term “**symbol**” for all of those concepts. Thus, a word is a symbol, a cheer or other non-word sound is a symbol, and a hand gesture or intentional pose is a symbol. We will also include cultural patterns as symbols, such as styles of dress, events, architectural styles, sports, political views, and anything else that can be named and has a culturally specific meaning. By culturally specific, we mean something that means or could mean something else in a different culture. For example, in one culture, turning a dinner cup upside down could mean you don’t want any more drink, but in another culture it could mean you are insulting the cook. So,

the act of turning a cup upside down is a culturally significant symbol.

A symbol has two sides: the signifier and the signified. The **signifier** is the word or other shortcut that refers to the **signified**, which is the meaning or the thing represented by the word. “Rabbit” is a word (signifier) pointing to all actual rabbits (signifieds).

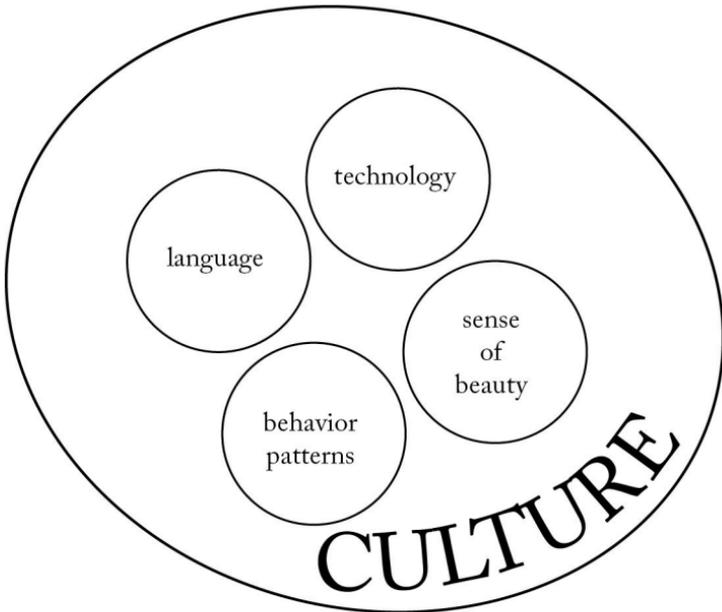


A symbol consists of a signifier and a signified.

There is a difference between symbols in the cultural sense and the names of natural things. A pine cone, for example, existed before people named it and is thus not a symbol in that sense. But people also have associations and expectations about pine cones. Displaying a pine cone on the counter in a post office could mean something, so in that sense it is also a cultural symbol. There are very **concrete symbols** such as the names of plants, and more **abstract symbols** such as words describing

parliamentary procedure or the display of a pine cone.

Culture can be defined as all the symbols that a group of people share, including but not limited to words.



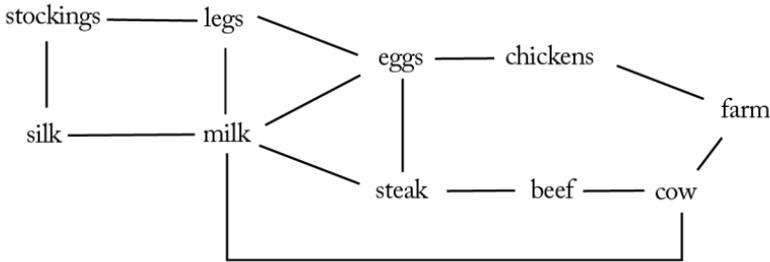
Some components of culture.

Semantics is the area of linguistics dealing with meaning. Linguists divide the study of language into phonology (units of sound), morphology (structure of words), lexicology (words), syntax (grammar), semantics (meaning), and pragmatics (context), among others.

The **symbolic web** is the mental representation of all known symbols and their connections. It is like a memorized dictionary, except instead of being

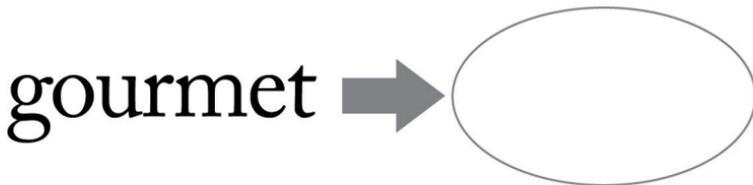
arranged alphabetically, it is arranged organically as a web of connections between symbols.

Associations are mental connections that form the symbolic web. Associations can be based on words that have sounds in common (milk and silk, panda and pan), symbols that you learned at the same time in your life, symbols relating to a person or place that is important to you, symbols having related meanings (ink and pen), or symbols having related contexts (steak and eggs).



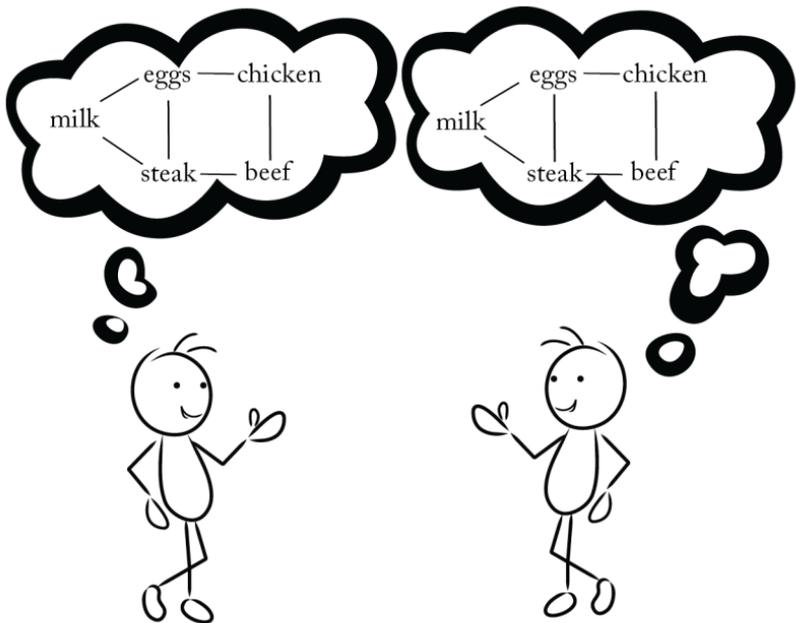
One tiny part of a symbolic web.

Some symbols have no clear signified; they are semantically starved, which is to say they don't mean much in any literal sense, but they are still symbols in the symbolic web. These are referred to later in the book as **free-floating cultural symbols**, such as "Victorian" and "gourmet." Their main purpose is to be associated with other symbols, rather than to refer to any real thing in the world.



Free-floating symbol.

In communication, only the symbols can cross the boundary between one person's mind and another's. The signified (what they mean) cannot cross the boundary. Each person has to build their associations independently and tie together the symbols with what they perceive to exist. Through years of communication, people living in the same environment will come know nearly the same set of symbols, and will have similar associations among them. That is, they will share the same culture. Having the same culture means having similar symbolic webs. But the meaning (signified) of abstract and free-floating symbols may be understood quite differently by different people.



People sharing the same symbolic web share the same culture.

Patterns of Perception

NT perception is restricted by their use of language and cultural symbols. (That last sentence is quite possibly the most important one in the book, although it may not be clear yet.) After the first scene of the play, we'll dive into the list of NT patterns, starting with patterns of perception.

Scene 1 of The Lockstep Tragedy

We introduce a theatrical play at this point in the book. You will see that the book switches back and forth between a work of fiction (the play) and a work of non-fiction (the explanation of NT patterns). They are interleaved so that one scene of the play is given, which demonstrates some of the NT patterns, then those patterns are explained. There are ten scenes. The sequence of the patterns is important, as each pattern builds on the prior ones, and the play had to be devised to follow that sequence. The play is also meant to be a play in its own right, with a story line, conflict, and resolution; however, it would probably not make a very compelling stage production because

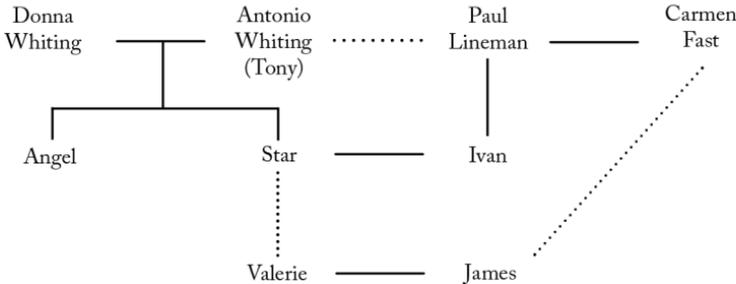
it is intentionally constrained by the need to expose the sequence of patterns.

One aspect of great literature that fascinates me is the way characters are bound to their particular fates, which are a result of their particular psychological blind spots and story lines. A psychological story line is like “I get no respect” or “I can’t” or even “I’ve always depended on the kindness of strangers.” I’ve tried to show these kinds of fates in this play, and the idea of “lockstep” is exactly that. The lockstep pattern is one of the patterns later in the book that explains the inability of groups of people to adapt.

If you study personality typing systems, you may notice that the nine main characters are all based on different types. This is really the central irony of an autistic’s quest to understand NTs: They are all different, yet they move in herds. They have a common language and common rules, but they often misunderstand each other, splinter into subgroups, and often break their own rules.

Here are the characters: **Antonio Whiting** is a heavy, jovial American sports fan who gets his steak done the way he wants his steak done. His wife **Donna** runs the household and dresses impeccably, even for housework. She and the two daughters are not at all thin, all with black straight hair. The older daughter is **Star**, a reserved, plain and peaceful girl who might be seen holding something special or pressing it tightly against her. Star is pregnant. The younger is **Angel**, who is generally seen with her hair over her face, watching. Star’s friend **Valerie** is a cheerleader in life. Antonio’s friend **Paul** is usually nearly smiling, and might be caught putting things back where they go while whistling. Paul’s son **Ivan**

(who is also Star's fiance) is a quiet one who is often seen looking inquisitive or lost, and is drawn to Star like a magnet. Paul's girlfriend is **Carmen**, who is wiry with curly dyed hair and bold makeup, and has a puppy's boundless and undirected energy. Carmen employs **James**, a factual and efficiently-moving post-adolescent who rarely removes his baseball cap.



Map of the characters.

Solid lines are familial or love relationships.

Paul and Antonio are friends, Star and Valerie are friends, and James works for Carmen.

It is summer. Donna Whiting is driving with her daughters Star and Angel, to the flower shop to finalize the flowers for Star's wedding. Traffic is stopped. Trucks are blocking the driving lanes. Windows are rolled down. Amidst horns and yelling, real estate speculator Carmen Fast is overheard arguing against a group of people in the road, who are protesting against a construction project.

ANGEL: What's the problem?

DONNA: It's just gridlock with all those trucks in the way. We can't move. The blondie in that SUV is signaling but the foreman there is apparently too busy handling that beagle to - wait, there's a cop. [police squawk] [to herself, as if speaking to the police] I see you mean for me to go around, sir, but I'd hit

the dog. [to herself] This is no place for townhouses, and I've already given my opinion on that til I'm blue in the face.

CARMEN: [on the sidewalk, yelling to a man] But this is what will make it *vibrant* - The townhouses bring new opportunities. It's happening all over the country! You're literally standing in the way of progress. Maybe you can block this one truck, but *this* [motioning to the whole construction site] is the future. I've decided I'm getting in on the action myself - and you can't stop me. You can't stop the future!

DONNA: That one there with the red highlights [pointing to Carmen] was the one who talked my head off that one time about "progress." [car moving slowly now] I'm thinking she may be the same one Ivan's dad is with now. I don't know.

STAR: I agree with the guy. They should just leave this neighborhood alone. Watch out, mom. I'm scared for the dog.

DONNA: [driving - to police] Thank you sir. [to Star] I like that song - turn it up. We tried to stop all this - now look what a mess they are making.

The play will continue in pieces later in the book. As we go through the patterns, keep in mind that all NTs do not fit neatly into all the patterns. Everyone really is unique.

Pattern 1. Desensitization

The nearly universal pattern of desensitization means that people begin life as highly sensitive

beings, then gradually learn to restrict the senses as they grow up. They cut back on detailed observation, emotional observation, and emotional response to stimuli. A desensitized NT adult can walk by blaring speakers, sirens, blinking lights and other strong stimuli without anxiety or pain.

In general, people understand that their babies are very sensitive and take in everything unfiltered, so they try not to subject babies to sharp emotional displays, loud noises, or blinking lights. But they expect that the level of sensitivity will go down with time. In addition to sensory desensitization, the emotions are also dulled; people can develop shells to protect them from nuanced emotions.

The desensitizing process happens mainly in the brain and not in the sense organs. That is, the eyes and ears still have the same ability to sense, but the brain learns to restrict the information. The conversion of actual raw perception into symbols protects the recipient from the full force of it; the world is seen through a glass darkly. It is as if people are like a pilot who only “feels” the outside rushing air indirectly by checking an airspeed dial in the cockpit. It is no longer a direct experience.

People experiencing desensitization can attempt to counter the pattern by turning up the volume in life, such as through loud music or contact sports. They also intentionally dull the senses with alcohol.

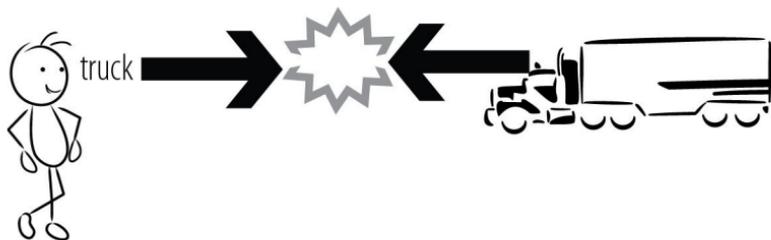
In the play, Donna and the people on the sidewalk are shown as desensitized because they can discuss things and notice things while in the presence of traffic, horns, yelling, and music. All those strong stimuli don't interfere with their perception, thinking, and communicating.

Are you sad about this? I am. The dark glass shell seems like it would be a prison, preventing direct childlike interaction with the world. But this protection is the basis for the NT's great cultural abilities, which are shown in many of the patterns later on.

Pattern 2. Symbolic filtering

The NT brain learns to categorize and direct incoming signals. NT's "catch" what comes at them; this deadens the impact. The act of deadening or filtering stimuli is called "symbolic filtering" (a term developed for this book). Symbolic filtering converts real world stimuli into an internal symbolic representation of the real world. When the external world is taken in as words, it is physically painless.

Because symbols are in the mind, the act of perception can be visualized as a collision between the internal symbolic structure coming out, and the real world coming in. The clash, or "catch," reduces the actual complexity of the stimulus by converting it into words. Perceiving is as much projecting outward as receiving inward.



The catch.

In this illustration, the viewer projects "truck" outwards when she sees the truck. In a sense, she is

making the big collection of metal and glass and plastic details into a single thing. In reality, it is thousands of parts; it is only a “truck” in the mind.

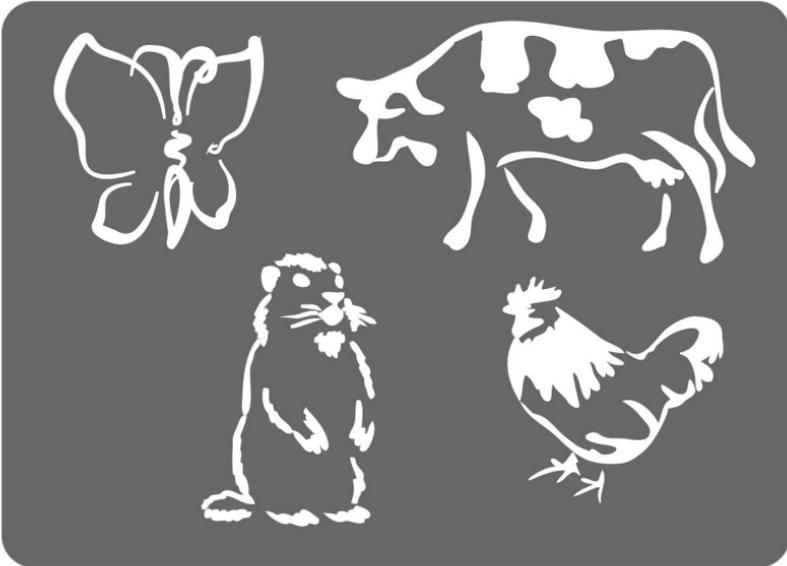
Another way to visualize symbolic filtering is a stencil. A beaver is pictured below, who will be play the lead role in this explanatory analogy.

Here is a photo of an actual beaver:



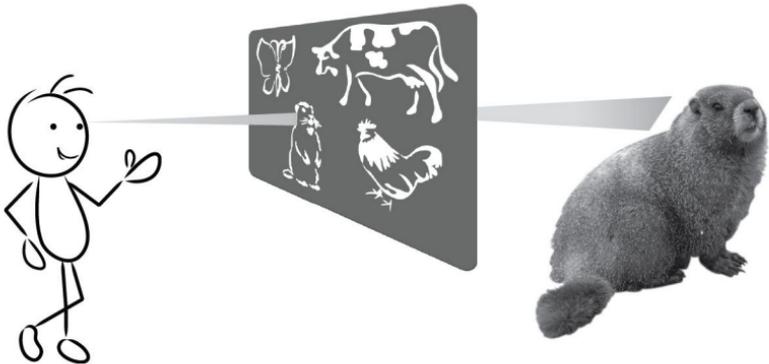
A photo of an actual beaver.

Here is a stencil with holes for various things that might be seen.



A stencil that includes a representation of a beaver.

The stencil is really in the mind, but can feel like it is outside the mind. The beaver image only fits through one hole, which is marked with the symbol “beaver.” A myriad of rays of light from the beaver hits the stencil, but only the word “beaver” comes out the other side. This is just an analogy to help show how language works. It’s a massive reduction and simplification of the data. You can think of the stencil as the mind projecting its symbolic web outwards, where it crashes into the sensory stimuli coming in, and neutralizes it.

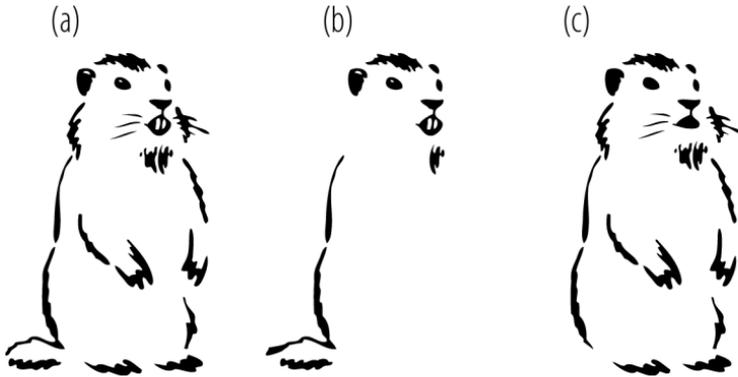


The stencil analogy in action.

In order to use stencils that have a pattern for all possible things that may be seen, each thing has to be reduced to its “cultural sine qua non,” or minimal symbolic essence. *Sine qua non* (Latin) means the aspect without which, it is nothing. For example, a beaver is only a beaver because of its unique flat tail and its upper teeth. In American culture, an animal without that tail and teeth could not be a beaver, so the aspects of the tail and the teeth are the sine qua non of the beaver. Other cultures might define it differently. Because of this phenomenon of

perception, the photo could be reduced to simple cartoon drawings and still be perceived as a beaver.

In the sequence of beaver drawings below, drawings a and b encompass the sine qua non of beaverhood, because they both show the tail and upper teeth.



*A full drawing of a beaver (a),
and two reductions of that full drawing (b and c).*

Although drawing c has in fact more details of the beaver's shape than drawing b, it lacks the essential tail and teeth, and would not be as easily perceived as a beaver. I've found since I don't filter as much as NTs, that I can't identify animals very well, particularly cartoon drawings. I can see the detailed features, but can't automatically match it with a name.

All actual objects are filtered by the NT's senses into a symbol of the object. Even complex emotional states of other people are filtered into simpler symbols, protecting the recipient from the nuanced, raw feelings.

When symbolic filtering is in full force, things have to be believed to be seen. Incoming stimuli that can't

be trapped by the symbolic web might simply be dropped from perception altogether. Using the stencil analogy, if there is no pre-conceived hole for the incoming stimulus to fit through, it can't be seen.

In the play, the things that Donna notices and names include an SUV, a beagle, and red highlights in someone's hair. She had to already know what these things are in order to name them quickly. When designating the foreman, she had to notice something about his uniform, possessions, or air of authority to be sure he was the foreman as opposed to some other position. She did this without stopping to think; the person's image just fit through her premade "foreman" stencil, so it was just as if she effortlessly "saw" the word "foreman."

Consider the power of symbolic filtering. All things are effortlessly compacted into their singular essence. This reduction opens up so many possibilities for the NT to manipulate and communicate these tiny, singular, data points.

Pattern 3. Multi-focus

The multi-focus pattern is active when a person is highly *efficient* at incorporating environmental data - so long as it falls within the expected cultural semantics. An NT can go into a room and instantly pick up a large number of data points, and evaluate them all. During a conversation, an NT can simultaneously *hear* and process the meaning of the words, *feel* the intent and other unspoken messages in the words, *read* the facial expressions and gestures, and *notice* other things that may be happening.

How can NTs be so powerful? There are two reasons they can do this: One is that their desensitization allows them to balance their attention without being distracted by any one overwhelming stimulus. Second, they reduce the size of the incoming data through symbolic filtering, so they only process the symbols, not the whole. Like the cockpit who is checking the airspeed dial (not actually feeling the air), they only bring in the minute essentials.

The statement above is qualified by "... that falls within the expected cultural semantics." If they go into a room where the interactions are scripted by a very foreign culture, they cannot efficiently incorporate the environment.

In the play, Donna demonstrates multi-focus because she can pick up on many things at the same time - the conversation in progress, the foreman, the dog, the trucks, the other drivers, and the police man.

Pattern 4. Sensory integration

Many NTs exhibit strong sensory integration, which is the simultaneous working together of all the senses, muscles, and associated thoughts, into one whole. The integration of all the parts balances their roles and prevents any one function from going into an overload mode.

Integration allows the person to see *all* of something complex, such as a face. Because of symbolic filtering, the parts of the face are converted into symbols (blue eyes, brown curly hair, etc.), and many of those symbols can be collected at once. NTs

will often have a conscious and verbal self-knowledge of the multiple aspects. For example, seeing a familiar person at a distance, an NT might say “Is that Sandy? She has long blonde hair, glasses, and is tall, so it must be Sandy.” The balanced totality of the aspects aids in recognition and recall.

Detailed ways that strong sensory integration shows itself include neat handwriting and being able to learn a dance by watching someone else do it (even if the model is facing a different direction).

Strong sensory integration is likely connected to the way NT’s often learn new things in a holistic, or all-at-once kind of way, rather than as a collection of separate details. (This idea is developed later on in the forest-first learning pattern.)

By contrast, people with weaker sensory integration may allow one sense to overload, and may need a way to physically mask the strong stimulus, such as running away or self stimulation.

In the play, Donna shows strong sensory integration because she can drive and avoid a dog while at the same time having two conversations and listening to music. She does not get any of these signals crossed.

Recap

To summarize the patterns of perception, the NT’s perception is both pushing out and taking in. The symbolic web is projected out from the mind onto the environment like a stencil sheet, and stimuli come in only when they fit through one of the stencils; this converts the stimulus into a symbol. Other parts of the environment that don’t fit the symbolic web are

not admitted. This also deadens the impact; the person is desensitized to the raw environment. Because they take in bits of information in symbolic form, NTs can process a lot of it efficiently, while also acting on it.

Patterns of Belief and Learning

This chapter looks at how the internal symbolic web is built and maintained.

This book won't distinguish much between knowledge, beliefs, propositions, concepts, and values - it's all just what goes on in the mind. The term "**belief**" will indicate all of this generally. When we talk about beliefs, we don't always mean that they are taken to be true; they might be better named "postulated beliefs" or things that exist in the mind and could be believed or disbelieved. Or, they may be preferences or ideas that a person has an alliance with.

The next scene of the play illustrates ways NTs think about things symbolically.

Scene 2 of The Lockstep Tragedy

In a flower shop. Willie, five, is holding an unusual animal with white fur. His mother is the saleswoman. Donna, Star and Angel enter.

STAR: Look, Angel! [*pointing to the animal*]

ANGEL: What is that?

WILLIE: This is Cinnamon. Do you want to hold her?

STAR: But I don't know what it is.

WILLIE: [*holding up the animal*] It's Cinnamon. If you hold her for a while, you'll get to know her.

DONNA: Come and leave him alone now. I wish you would be more grateful for my help. You need to get more lilies for the front walk.

STAR: [*to Willie*] Sorry, I need to go. [*to Donna*] Lilies? Misty didn't have any lilies. Her wedding was all red. It's all red and purple this year. [*wandering*] How about these peonies? Peonies are great. Or I know, I'll just have poinsettias.

DONNA: Star child, poinsettias really! What do you want people to think? You're right about peonies though. But the wedding is Saturday and we can't change everything!

ANGEL: You people are lame-o's. I'm getting black roses for my wedding. Ones that draw blood.

DONNA: You'll need a lot of help at your wedding, Angel. I'm sure you can do better than that.

SALESWOMAN: Ms. Whiting, I wanted to show you our *designer bouquet*, which is here. It's one of our