CHAPTER THREE

The Hollywood movie *Catch Me If You Can* (starring Leonardo DiCaprio) is based on the true story of Frank W. Abagnale Jr., a con man, forger, imposter, and escape artist who was the youngest person to ever be on the FBI’s most-wanted list. In his short but lucrative career, Abagnale co-piloted a Pan Am jet, masqueraded as the supervising resident of a hospital, practiced law without a license, and even posed as an FBI agent, in the meantime cashing over $2.5 million in forged checks. His exploits came to an end when a flight attendant recognized his face from an Interpol poster. After serving a five-year prison sentence, Abagnale was paroled and joined the FBI, helping officials catch other con men who use the same tricks he had once used.

Abagnale’s success as a con artist hinged on his ability to manipulate the impressions other people formed of his character, qualifications, and abilities. Impressions like these arise from social perception. **Social perception** is the study of how we form impressions of other people and how these impressions affect the way we act toward them.

Figure 3.1 shows that three factors influence our first impressions. The first factor involves the person’s physical features. People have long assumed that physical qualities provide a window into a person’s personality, and the first section of this chapter reviews evidence relevant to this assumption. The second factor involves nonverbal behaviors. In the second section of this chapter you will see that the way people stand, move, and sound influences the inferences we draw about their personality and character. You will also learn that these inferences are not always accurate and that people can misinterpret nonverbal cues. The third factor, cognitive processes, also guides our impressions of other people. Schemas (see Chapter 2) and expectancies act as interpretive filters and impose meaning on the perceptions that reach us. In the third section of this chapter, you will discover how cognitive processes shape your

![A Model of the Social Perception Process](image)

**FIGURE 3.1**
A Model of the Social Perception Process

The model shows that our impressions of others are influenced by three factors: physical features (e.g., facial attractiveness and emotional expression); nonverbal behaviors (e.g., posture, movements, and tone of voice); and cognitive processes (e.g., prior knowledge, schemas, and expectancies). The model also shows that once they form, first impressions guide our behavior.