



# INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

CMST 210 Dutton

# Interpersonal Communication Textbook

## CMST 210

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This book is a clone of of “[A Primer on Communication Studies \(v. 1.0\)](#)”

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# Chapter 1: Introduction to Communication Studies

By its very nature communication is not a skill we are born with. If lucky, we are born with the senses necessary to learn to use the communication skills we can learn. Our journey in interpersonal communication will be to take the senses that we have and learn better to use them. We will look into ourselves at a deep level. Only when individuals understand themselves better, can they improve their own communication skills.

In chapter one, you will have an opportunity to learn the fundamentals of communication. The very process of communication is complex even to explain,yet in real time occurs very quickly. As each section is explained, try to apply it to your own life and you will have more comprehensive learning experience.

## 1.1 Communication Forms

### Learning Objectives

1. Define communication.
2. List two forms of communication.
3. Distinguish among the two forms of communication.
4. Review the various career options for students who study communication.

Before we dive into the history of communication, it is important that we have a shared understanding of what we mean by the word communication. For our purposes in this book, we will define communication as the process of generating meaning by sending and receiving verbal and nonverbal symbols and signs that are influenced by multiple contexts. This definition builds

on other definitions of communication that have been rephrased and refined over many years. In fact, since the systematic study of communication began in colleges and universities a little over one hundred years ago, there have been more than 126 published definitions of communication.

## Forms of Communication

Forms of communication vary in terms of participants, channels used, and contexts. The five main forms of communication, all of which will be explored in much more detail in this book, are intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, public, and mass communication. This book is designed to introduce you to all these forms of communication. If you find one of these forms particularly interesting, you may be able to take additional courses that focus specifically on it. You may even be able to devise a course of study around one of these forms as a communication major. In the following we will discuss the similarities and differences among each form of communication, including its definition, level of intentionality, goals, and contexts.

## Intrapersonal Communication

Intrapersonal communication is communication with oneself using internal vocalization or reflective thinking. Like other forms of communication, intrapersonal communication is triggered by some internal or external stimulus. We may, for example, communicate with our self about what we want to eat due to the internal stimulus of hunger, or we may react intrapersonally to an event we witness. Unlike other forms of communication, intrapersonal communication takes place only inside our heads. The other forms of communication must be perceived by someone else to count as communication. So what is the point of intrapersonal communication if no one else even sees it?

Intrapersonal communication serves several social functions. Internal vocalization, or talking to ourselves, can help us achieve or maintain social adjustment. For example, a person may use self-talk to calm himself down in a stressful situation, or a shy person may remind herself to smile during a social event. Intrapersonal communication also helps build and maintain our self-concept. We form an understanding of who we are based on how other people communicate with us and how we process that communication intrapersonally. The shy person in the earlier example probably internalized shyness as a part of her self-concept because other people associated her communication behaviors with shyness and may have even labeled her “shy” before she had a firm grasp on what that meant. We will discuss self-concept much more in [Chapter 2 “Communication and Perception”](#), which focuses on perception. We also use intrapersonal communication or “self-talk” to let off steam, process emotions, think through something, or rehearse what we plan to say or do in the future. As with the other forms of communication, competent intrapersonal communication helps facilitate social interaction and can enhance our well-being. Conversely, the breakdown in the ability of a person to intrapersonally communicate is associated with mental illness.

Sometimes we intrapersonally communicate for the fun of it. I’m sure we have all had the experience of laughing aloud because we thought of something funny. We also communicate intrapersonally to pass time. I bet there is a lot of intrapersonal communication going on in

waiting rooms all over the world right now. In both of these cases, intrapersonal communication is usually unplanned and doesn't include a clearly defined goal. We can, however, engage in more intentional intrapersonal communication. In fact, deliberate self-reflection can help us become more competent communicators as we become more mindful of our own behaviors. For example, your internal voice may praise or scold you based on a thought or action.

Of the forms of communication, intrapersonal communication has received the least amount of formal study. It is rare to find courses devoted to the topic, and it is generally separated from the remaining four types of communication. The main distinction is that intrapersonal communication is not created with the intention that another person will perceive it. In all the other levels, the fact that the communicator anticipates consumption of their message is very important.

## **Interpersonal Communication**

Interpersonal communication is communication between people whose lives mutually influence one another. Interpersonal communication builds, maintains, and ends our relationships, and we spend more time engaged in interpersonal communication than the other forms of communication. Interpersonal communication occurs in various contexts and is addressed in subfields of study within communication studies such as intercultural communication, organizational communication, health communication, and computer-mediated communication. After all, interpersonal relationships exist in all those contexts.

Interpersonal communication can be planned or unplanned, but since it is interactive, it is usually more structured and influenced by social expectations than intrapersonal communication. Interpersonal communication is also more goal oriented than intrapersonal communication and fulfills instrumental and relational needs. In terms of instrumental needs, the goal may be as minor as greeting someone to fulfill a morning ritual or as major as conveying your desire to be in a committed relationship with someone. Interpersonal communication meets relational needs by communicating the uniqueness of a specific relationship. Since this form of communication deals so directly with our personal relationships and is the most common form of communication, instances of miscommunication and communication conflict most frequently occur here. Couples, bosses and employees, and family members all have to engage in complex interpersonal communication, and it doesn't always go well. In order to be a competent interpersonal communicator, you need conflict management skills and listening skills, among others, to maintain positive relationships.

### **“Getting Real”**

#### **What Can You Do with a Degree in Communication Studies?**

You're hopefully already beginning to see that communication studies is a diverse and vibrant field of study. The multiple subfields and concentrations within the field allow for exciting opportunities for study in academic contexts but can create confusion and uncertainty when a person considers what they might do for their career after studying communication. It's important to remember that not every college or university will have courses or concentrations in

all the areas discussed next. Look at the communication courses offered at your school to get an idea of where the communication department on your campus fits into the overall field of study. Some departments are more general, offering students a range of courses to provide a well-rounded understanding of communication. Many departments offer concentrations or specializations within the major such as public relations, rhetoric, interpersonal communication, electronic media production, corporate communication. If you are at a community college and plan on transferring to another school, your choice of school may be determined by the course offerings in the department and expertise of the school's communication faculty. It would be unfortunate for a student interested in public relations to end up in a department that focuses more on rhetoric or broadcasting, so doing your research ahead of time is key.

Since communication studies is a broad field, many students strategically choose a concentration and/or a minor that will give them an advantage in the job market. Specialization can definitely be an advantage, but don't forget about the general skills you gain as a communication major. This book, for example, should help you build communication competence and skills in interpersonal communication, intercultural communication, group communication, and public speaking, among others. You can also use your school's career services office to help you learn how to "sell" yourself as a communication major and how to translate what you've learned in your classes into useful information to include on your resume or in a job interview.

The main career areas that communication majors go into are business, public relations / advertising, media, nonprofit, government/law, and education. Within each of these areas there are multiple career paths, potential employers, and useful strategies for success. For [more detailed information](#).

- Business. Sales, customer service, management, real estate, human resources, training and development.
  - Public relations / advertising. Public relations, advertising/marketing, public opinion research, development, event coordination.
  - Media. Editing, copywriting, publishing, producing, directing, media sales, broadcasting.
  - Nonprofit. Administration, grant writing, fund-raising, public relations, volunteer coordination.
  - Government/law. City or town management, community affairs, lobbying, conflict negotiation / mediation.
  - Education. High school speech teacher, forensics/debate coach, administration and student support services, graduate school to further communication study.
1. Which of the areas listed above are you most interested in studying in school or pursuing as a career? Why?
  2. What aspect(s) of communication studies does/do the department at your school specialize in? What concentrations/courses are offered?
  3. Whether or not you are or plan to become a communication major, how do you think you could use what you have learned and will learn in this class to "sell" yourself on the job market?

## Key Takeaways

- Communication is the process of generating meaning by sending and receiving symbolic cues that are influenced by multiple contexts.
- Intrapersonal communication is communication with oneself and occurs only inside our heads.
- Interpersonal communication is communication between people whose lives mutually influence one another and typically occurs in dyads, which means in pairs.

## Exercises

1. Come up with your own definition of communication. How does it differ from the definition in the book? Why did you choose to define communication the way you did?
2. Over the course of a day, keep track of the forms of communication that you use. Make a pie chart of how much time you think you spend, on an average day, engaging in each form of communication (intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, public, and mass).

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[What Can I Do with This Major? “Communication Studies,”](#) accessed May 18, 2012.

# 1.2 The Communication Process

## Learning Objectives

1. Identify and define the components of the transmission model of communication.

2. Identify and define the components of the interaction model of communication.
3. Identify and define the components of the transaction model of communication.
4. Compare and contrast the three models of communication.
5. Use the transaction model of communication to analyze a recent communication encounter.

Communication is a complex process, and it is difficult to determine where or with whom a communication encounter starts and ends. Models of communication simplify the process by providing a visual representation of the various aspects of a communication encounter. Some models explain communication in more detail than others, but even the most complex model still doesn't recreate what we experience in even a moment of a communication encounter. Models still serve a valuable purpose for students of communication because they allow us to see specific concepts and steps within the process of communication, define communication, and apply communication concepts. When you become aware of how communication functions, you can think more deliberately through your communication encounters, which can help you better prepare for future communication and learn from your previous communication. The three models of communication we will discuss are the transmission, interaction, and transaction models.

Although these models of communication differ, they contain some common elements. The first two models we will discuss, the transmission model and the interaction model, include the following parts: participants, messages, encoding, decoding, and channels. In communication models, the participants are the senders and/or receivers of messages in a communication encounter. The message is the verbal or nonverbal content being conveyed from sender to receiver. For example, when you say "Hello!" to your friend, you are sending a message of greeting that will be received by your friend.



The internal cognitive process that allows participants to send, receive, and understand messages is the encoding and decoding process. Encoding is the process of turning thoughts into communication. As we will learn later, the level of conscious thought that goes into encoding messages varies. Decoding is the process of turning communication into thoughts. For example, you may realize you're hungry and encode the following message to send to your roommate: "I'm hungry. Do you want to get pizza tonight?" As your roommate receives the message, he decodes your communication and turns it back into thoughts in order to make meaning out of it. Of course, we don't just communicate verbally—we have various options, or channels for communication. Encoded messages are sent through a channel, or a sensory route on which a message travels, to the receiver for decoding. While communication can be sent and received using any sensory route (sight, smell, touch, taste, or sound), most communication occurs through visual (sight) and/or auditory (sound) channels. If your roommate has headphones on and is engrossed in a video game, you may need to get his attention by waving your hands before you can ask him about dinner.

## **Transmission Model of Communication**

The transmission model of communication describes communication as a linear, one-way process in which a sender intentionally transmits a message to a receiver. This model focuses on the sender and message within a communication encounter. Although the receiver is included in the model, this role is viewed as more of a target or end point rather than part of an ongoing process. We are left to presume that the receiver either successfully receives and understands the message or does not. The scholars who designed this model extended on a linear model proposed by Aristotle centuries before that included a speaker, message, and hearer. They were also influenced by the advent and spread of new communication technologies of the time such as telegraphy and radio, and you can probably see these technical influences within the model.

Think of how a radio message is sent from a person in the radio studio to you listening in your car. The sender is the radio announcer who encodes a verbal message that is transmitted by a radio tower through electromagnetic waves (the channel) and eventually reaches your (the receiver's) ears via an antenna and speakers in order to be decoded. The radio announcer doesn't really know if you receive his or her message or not, but if the equipment is working and the channel is free of static, then there is a good chance that the message was successfully received.

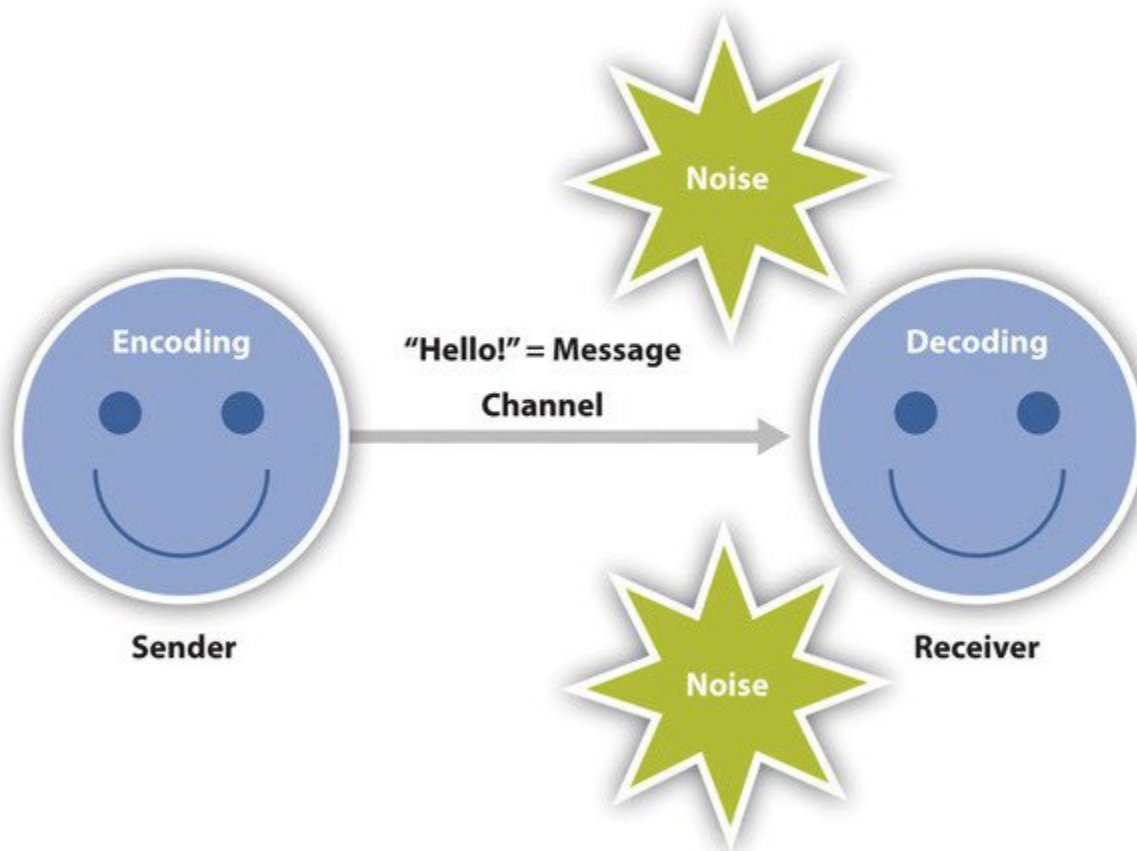


Figure 1.1 The Transmission Model of Communication

Since this model is sender and message focused, responsibility is put on the sender to help ensure the message is successfully conveyed. This model emphasizes clarity and effectiveness, but it also acknowledges that there are barriers to effective communication. Noise is anything that interferes with a message being sent between participants in a communication encounter. Even if a speaker sends a clear message, noise may interfere with a message being accurately received and decoded. The transmission model of communication accounts for environmental and semantic noise. Environmental noise is any physical noise present in a communication encounter. Other people talking in a crowded diner could interfere with your ability to transmit a message and have it successfully decoded. While environmental noise interferes with the transmission of the message, semantic noise refers to noise that occurs in the encoding and decoding process when participants do not understand a symbol. To use a technical example, FM antennae can't decode AM radio signals and vice versa. Likewise, most French speakers can't

decode Swedish and vice versa. Semantic noise can also interfere in communication between people speaking the same language because many words have multiple or unfamiliar meanings.

Although the transmission model may seem simple or even underdeveloped to us today, the creation of this model allowed scholars to examine the communication process in new ways, which eventually led to more complex models and theories of communication that we will discuss more later. This model is not quite rich enough to capture dynamic face-to-face interactions, but there are instances in which communication is one-way and linear, especially computer-mediated communication (CMC). As the following “Getting Plugged In” box explains, CMC is integrated into many aspects of our lives now and has opened up new ways of communicating and brought some new challenges. Think of text messaging for example. The transmission model of communication is well suited for describing the act of text messaging since the sender isn’t sure that the meaning was effectively conveyed or that the message was received at all. Noise can also interfere with the transmission of a text. If you use an abbreviation the receiver doesn’t know or the phone autocorrects to something completely different than you meant, then semantic noise has interfered with the message transmission. I enjoy bargain hunting at thrift stores, so I just recently sent a text to a friend asking if she wanted to go thrifting over the weekend. After she replied with “What?!?” I reviewed my text and saw that my “smart” phone had autocorrected *thrifting* to *thrusting*! You have likely experienced similar problems with text messaging, and a quick Google search for examples of text messages made funny or embarrassing by the autocorrect feature proves that many others do, too.

“Getting Plugged In”

### **Computer-Mediated Communication**

When the first computers were created around World War II and the first e-mails exchanged in the early 1960s, we took the first steps toward a future filled with computer-mediated communication (CMC). Crispin Thurlow, Laura Lengel, and Alice Tomic, *Computer Mediated Communication: Social Interaction and the Internet* (London: Sage, 2004), 14. Those early steps turned into huge strides in the late 1980s and early 1990s when personal computers started becoming regular features in offices, classrooms, and homes. I remember getting our first home computer, a Tandy from Radio Shack, in the early 1990s and then getting our first Internet connection at home in about 1995. I set up my first e-mail account in 1996 and remember how novel and exciting it was to send and receive e-mails. I wasn’t imagining a time when I would get dozens of e-mails a day, much less be able to check them on my cell phone! Many of you reading this book probably can’t remember a time without CMC. If that’s the case, then you’re what some scholars have called “digital natives.” When you take a moment to think about how, over the past twenty years, CMC has changed the way we teach and learn, communicate at work, stay in touch with friends, initiate romantic relationships, search for jobs, manage our money, get our news, and participate in our democracy, it really is amazing to think that all that used to take place without computers. But the increasing use of CMC has also raised some questions and concerns, even among those of you who are digital natives. Almost half of the students in my latest communication research class wanted to do their final research projects on something related to social media. Many of them were interested in studying the effects of CMC on our personal lives and relationships. This desire to study and question CMC may stem from an

anxiety that people have about the seeming loss or devaluing of face-to-face (FtF) communication. Aside from concerns about the digital cocoons that many of us find ourselves in, CMC has also raised concerns about privacy, cyberbullying, and lack of civility in online interactions. We will continue to explore many of these issues in the “Getting Plugged In” feature box included in each chapter, but the following questions will help you begin to see the influence that CMC has in your daily communication.

1. In a typical day, what types of CMC do you use?
2. What are some ways that CMC reduces stress in your life? What are some ways that CMC increases stress in your life? Overall, do you think CMC adds to or reduces your stress more?
3. Do you think we, as a society, have less value for FtF communication than we used to? Why or why not?

## **Interaction Model of Communication**

The interaction model of communication describes communication as a process in which participants alternate positions as sender and receiver and generate meaning by sending messages and receiving feedback within physical and psychological contexts. Rather than illustrating communication as a linear, one-way process, the interaction model incorporates feedback, which makes communication a more interactive, two-way process. Feedback includes messages sent in response to other messages. For example, your instructor may respond to a point you raise during class discussion or you may point to the sofa when your roommate asks you where the remote control is. The inclusion of a feedback loop also leads to a more complex understanding of the roles of participants in a communication encounter. Rather than having one sender, one message, and one receiver, this model has two sender-receivers who exchange messages. Each participant alternates roles as sender and receiver in order to keep a communication encounter going. Although this seems like a perceptible and deliberate process, we alternate between the roles of sender and receiver very quickly and often without conscious thought.

The interaction model is also less message focused and more interaction focused. While the transmission model focused on how a message was transmitted and whether or not it was received, the interaction model is more concerned with the communication process itself. In fact, this model acknowledges that there are so many messages being sent at one time that many of them may not even be received. Some messages are also unintentionally sent. Therefore, communication isn't judged effective or ineffective in this model based on whether or not a single message was successfully transmitted and received.

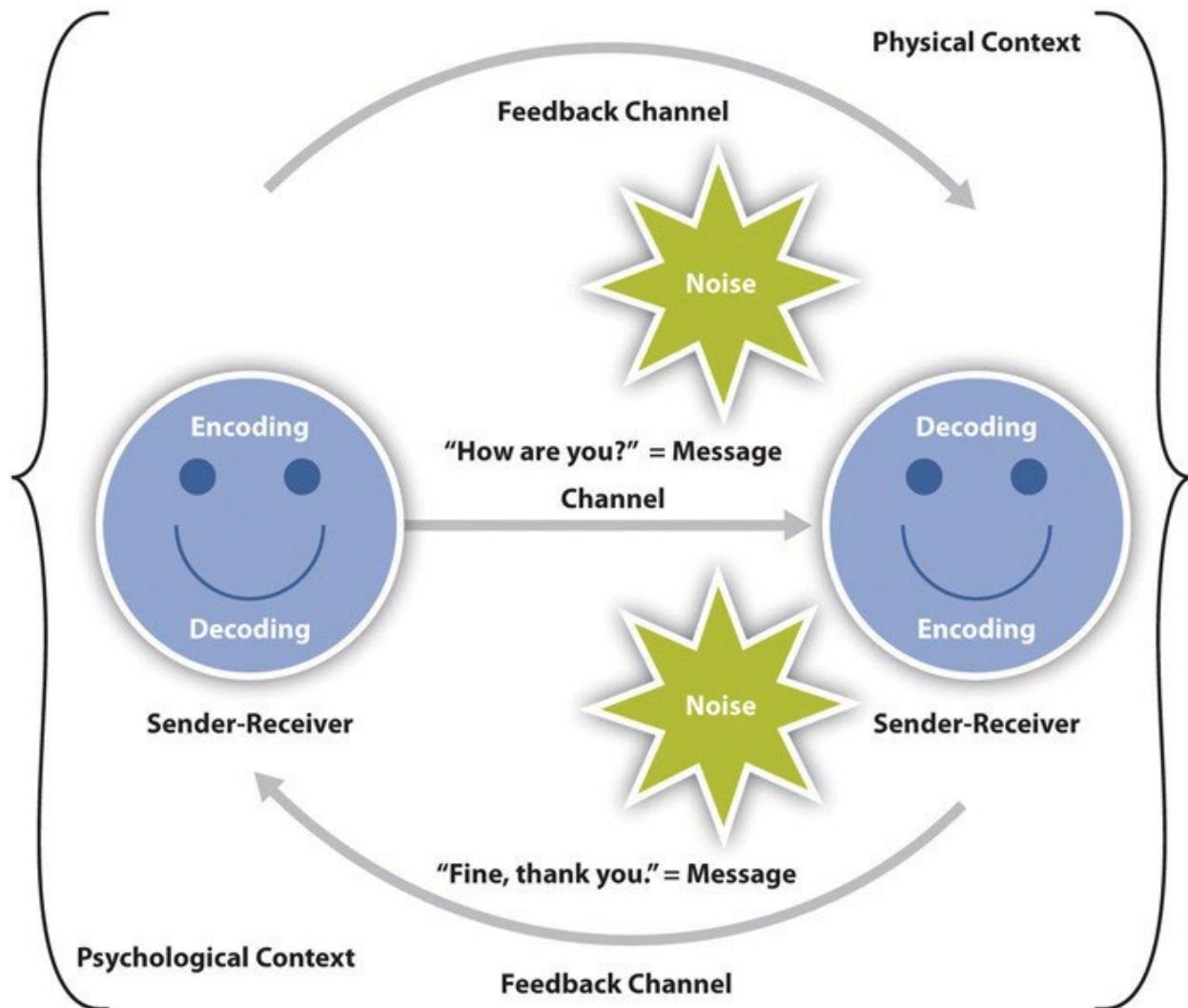


Figure 1.2 The Interaction Model of Communication

The interaction model takes physical and psychological context into account. Physical context includes the environmental factors in a communication encounter. The size, layout, temperature, and lighting of a space influence our communication. Imagine the different physical contexts in which job interviews take place and how that may affect your communication. I have had job interviews on a sofa in a comfortable office, sitting around a large conference table, and even once in an auditorium where I was positioned on the stage facing about twenty potential colleagues seated in the audience. I've also been walked around campus to interview with various people in temperatures below zero degrees. Although I was a little chilly when I got to each separate interview, it wasn't too difficult to warm up and go on with the interview. During a job interview in Puerto Rico, however, walking around outside wearing a suit in near 90 degree temperatures created a sweating situation that wasn't pleasant to try to communicate through. Whether it's the size of the room, the temperature, or other environmental factors, it's important to consider the role that physical context plays in our communication.

Psychological context includes the mental and emotional factors in a communication encounter. Stress, anxiety, and emotions are just some examples of psychological influences that can affect

our communication. I recently found out some troubling news a few hours before a big public presentation. It was challenging to try to communicate because the psychological noise triggered by the stressful news kept intruding into my other thoughts. Seemingly positive psychological states, like experiencing the emotion of love, can also affect communication. During the initial stages of a romantic relationship individuals may be so “love struck” that they don’t see incompatible personality traits or don’t negatively evaluate behaviors they might otherwise find off-putting. Feedback and context help make the interaction model a more useful illustration of the communication process, but the transaction model views communication as a powerful tool that shapes our realities beyond individual communication encounters.

## **Transaction Model of Communication**

As the study of communication progressed, models expanded to account for more of the communication process. Many scholars view communication as more than a process that is used to carry on conversations and convey meaning. We don’t send messages like computers, and we don’t neatly alternate between the roles of sender and receiver as an interaction unfolds. We also can’t consciously decide to stop communicating, because communication is more than sending and receiving messages. The transaction model differs from the transmission and interaction models in significant ways, including the conceptualization of communication, the role of sender and receiver, and the role of context.

To review, each model incorporates a different understanding of what communication is and what communication does. The transmission model views communication as a thing, like an information packet, that is sent from one place to another. From this view, communication is defined as sending and receiving messages. The interaction model views communication as an interaction in which a message is sent and then followed by a reaction (feedback), which is then followed by another reaction, and so on. From this view, communication is defined as producing conversations and interactions within physical and psychological contexts. The transaction model views communication as integrated into our social realities in such a way that it helps us not only understand them but also create and change them.

The transaction model of communication describes communication as a process in which communicators generate social realities within social, relational, and cultural contexts. In this model, we don’t just communicate to exchange messages; we communicate to create relationships, form intercultural alliances, shape our self-concepts, and engage with others in dialogue to create communities. In short, we don’t communicate about our realities; communication helps to construct our realities.

The roles of sender and receiver in the transaction model of communication differ significantly from the other models. Instead of labeling participants as senders and receivers, the people in a communication encounter are referred to as communicators. Unlike the interaction model, which suggests that participants alternate positions as sender and receiver, the transaction model suggests that we are simultaneously senders and receivers. For example, on a first date, as you send verbal messages about your interests and background, your date reacts nonverbally. You don’t wait until you are done sending your verbal message to start receiving and decoding the nonverbal messages of your date. Instead, you are simultaneously sending your verbal message

and receiving your date's nonverbal messages. This is an important addition to the model because it allows us to understand how we are able to adapt our communication—for example, a verbal message—in the middle of sending it based on the communication we are simultaneously receiving from our communication partner.

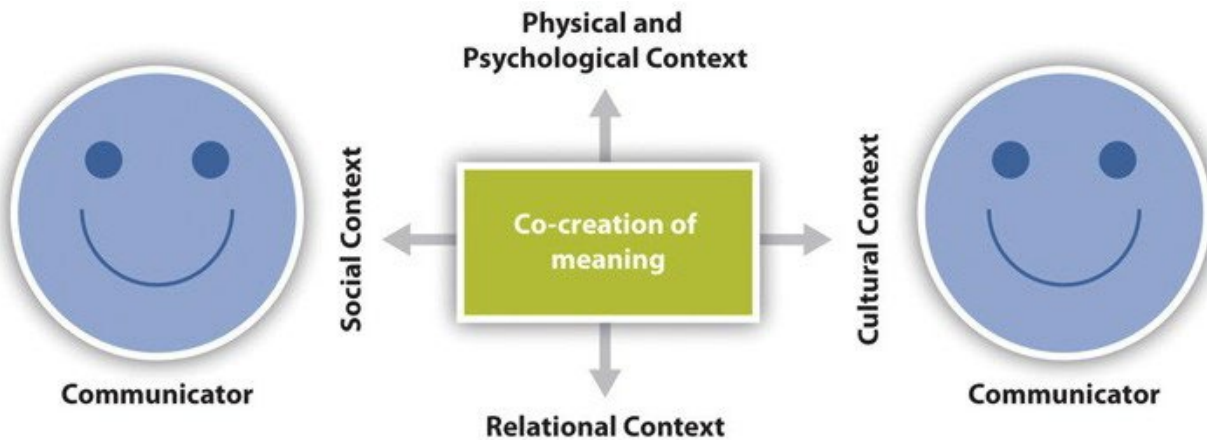


Figure 1.3 The Transactional Model of Communication

The transaction model also includes a more complex understanding of context. The interaction model portrays context as physical and psychological influences that enhance or impede communication. While these contexts are important, they focus on message transmission and reception. Since the transaction model of communication views communication as a force that shapes our realities before and after specific interactions occur, it must account for contextual influences outside of a single interaction. To do this, the transaction model considers how social, relational, and cultural contexts frame and influence our communication encounters.

Social context refers to the stated rules or unstated norms that guide communication. As we are socialized into our various communities, we learn rules and implicitly pick up on norms for communicating. Some common rules that influence social contexts include don't lie to people, don't interrupt people, don't pass people in line, greet people when they greet you, thank people when they pay you a compliment, and so on. Parents and teachers often explicitly convey these rules to their children or students. Rules may be stated over and over, and there may be punishment for not following them.

Norms are social conventions that we pick up on through observation, practice, and trial and error. We may not even know we are breaking a social norm until we notice people looking at us strangely or someone corrects or teases us. For example, as a new employee you may over- or underdress for the company's holiday party because you don't know the norm for formality. Although there probably isn't a stated rule about how to dress at the holiday party, you will notice your error without someone having to point it out, and you will likely not deviate from the norm again in order to save yourself any potential embarrassment. Even though breaking social norms doesn't result in the formal punishment that might be a consequence of breaking a social rule, the social awkwardness we feel when we violate social norms is usually enough to teach us that these norms are powerful even though they aren't made explicit like rules. Norms even have the power to override social rules in some situations. To go back to the examples of common

social rules mentioned before, we may break the rule about not lying if the lie is meant to save someone from feeling hurt. We often interrupt close friends when we're having an exciting conversation, but we wouldn't be as likely to interrupt a professor while they are lecturing. Since norms and rules vary among people and cultures, relational and cultural contexts are also included in the transaction model in order to help us understand the multiple contexts that influence our communication.

Relational context includes the previous interpersonal history and type of relationship we have with a person. We communicate differently with someone we just met versus someone we've known for a long time. Initial interactions with people tend to be more highly scripted and governed by established norms and rules, but when we have an established relational context, we may be able to bend or break social norms and rules more easily. For example, you would likely follow social norms of politeness and attentiveness and might spend the whole day cleaning the house for the first time you invite your new neighbors to visit. Once the neighbors are in your house, you may also make them the center of your attention during their visit. If you end up becoming friends with your neighbors and establishing a relational context, you might not think as much about having everything cleaned and prepared or even giving them your whole attention during later visits. Since communication norms and rules also vary based on the type of relationship people have, relationship type is also included in relational context. For example, there are certain communication rules and norms that apply to a supervisor-supervisee relationship that don't apply to a brother-sister relationship and vice versa. Just as social norms and relational history influence how we communicate, so does culture.

Cultural context includes various aspects of identities such as race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and ability. We will learn more about these identities in Chapter 2 "Communication and Perception", but for now it is important for us to understand that whether we are aware of it or not, we all have multiple cultural identities that influence our communication. Some people, especially those with identities that have been historically marginalized, are regularly aware of how their cultural identities influence their communication and influence how others communicate with them. Conversely, people with identities that are dominant or in the majority may rarely, if ever, think about the role their cultural identities play in their communication.

When cultural context comes to the forefront of a communication encounter, it can be difficult to manage. Since intercultural communication creates uncertainty, it can deter people from communicating across cultures or lead people to view intercultural communication as negative. But if you avoid communicating across cultural identities, you will likely not get more comfortable or competent as a communicator. Difference, as we will learn in Chapter 8 "Culture and Communication", isn't a bad thing. In fact, intercultural communication has the potential to enrich various aspects of our lives. In order to communicate well within various cultural contexts, it is important to keep an open mind and avoid making assumptions about others' cultural identities. While you may be able to identify some aspects of the cultural context within a communication encounter, there may also be cultural influences that you can't see. A competent communicator shouldn't assume to know all the cultural contexts a person brings to an encounter, since not all cultural identities are visible. As with the other contexts, it requires

skill to adapt to shifting contexts, and the best way to develop these skills is through practice and reflection.

### Key Takeaways

- Communication models are not complex enough to truly capture all that takes place in a communication encounter, but they can help us examine the various steps in the process in order to better understand our communication and the communication of others.
- The transmission model of communication describes communication as a one-way, linear process in which a sender encodes a message and transmits it through a channel to a receiver who decodes it. The transmission of the message may be disrupted by environmental or semantic noise. This model is usually too simple to capture FtF interactions but can be usefully applied to computer-mediated communication.
- The interaction model of communication describes communication as a two-way process in which participants alternate positions as sender and receiver and generate meaning by sending and receiving feedback within physical and psychological contexts. This model captures the interactive aspects of communication but still doesn't account for how communication constructs our realities and is influenced by social and cultural contexts.
- The transaction model of communication describes communication as a process in which communicators generate social realities within social, relational, and cultural contexts. This model includes participants who are simultaneously senders and receivers and accounts for how communication constructs our realities, relationships, and communities.

### Exercises

1. Getting integrated: How might knowing the various components of the communication process help you in your academic life, your professional life, and your civic life?
2. What communication situations does the transmission model best represent? The interaction model? The transaction model?
3. Use the transaction model of communication to analyze a recent communication encounter you had. Sketch out the communication encounter and make sure to label each part of the model (communicators; message; channel; feedback; and physical, psychological, social, relational, and cultural contexts).

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# 1.3 Communication Principles

## Learning Objectives

- Discuss how communication is integrated in various aspects of your life.
- Explain how communication meets physical, instrumental, relational, and identity needs.
- Explain how the notion of a “process” fits into communication.
- Discuss the ways in which communication is guided by culture and context.

Taking this course will change how you view communication. Most people admit that communication is important, but it’s often in the back of our minds or viewed as something that “just happens.” Putting communication at the front of your mind and becoming more aware of how you communicate can be informative and have many positive effects. When I first started studying communication as an undergraduate, I began seeing the concepts we learned in class in my everyday life. When I worked in groups, I was able to apply what I had learned about group communication to improve my performance and overall experience. I also noticed interpersonal concepts and theories as I communicated within various relationships. Whether I was analyzing mediated messages or considering the ethical implications of a decision before I made it, studying communication allowed me to see more of what was going on around me, which allowed me to more actively and competently participate in various communication contexts. In this section, as we learn the principles of communication, I encourage you to take note of aspects

of communication that you haven't thought about before and begin to apply the principles of communication to various parts of your life.

## **Communication Is Integrated into All Parts of Our Lives**

This book is meant to help people see the value of communication in the real world and in our real lives. When I say real, I don't mean to imply that there is some part of our world or lives that is not real. Since communication is such a practical field of study, I use the word real to emphasize that what you're reading in this book isn't just about theories and vocabulary or passing a test and giving a good speech. I also don't mean to imply that there is a divide between the classroom and the real world. The "real world" is whatever we are experiencing at any given moment. In order to explore how communication is integrated into all parts of our lives, I have divided up our lives into four spheres: academic, professional, personal, and civic. The boundaries and borders between these spheres are not solid, and there is much overlap. After all, much of what goes on in a classroom is present in a professional environment, and the classroom has long been seen as a place to prepare students to become active and responsible citizens in their civic lives. The philosophy behind this approach is called integrative learning, which encourages students to reflect on how the content they are learning connects to other classes they have taken or are taking, their professional goals, and their civic responsibilities.

### **Academic**

It's probably not difficult to get you, as students in a communication class, to see the relevance of communication to your academic lives. At least during this semester, studying communication is important to earn a good grade in the class, right? Beyond the relevance to your grade in this class, I challenge you to try to make explicit connections between this course and courses you have taken before and are currently taking. Then, when you leave this class, I want you to connect the content in future classes back to what you learned here. If you can begin to see these connections now, you can build on the foundational communication skills you learn in here to become a more competent communicator, which will undoubtedly also benefit you as a student.

Aside from wanting to earn a good grade in this class, you may also be genuinely interested in becoming a better communicator. If that's the case, you are in luck because research shows that even people who have poor communication skills can improve a wide range of verbal, nonverbal, and interpersonal communication skills by taking introductory communication courses. Communication skills are also tied to academic success. Poor listening skills were shown to contribute significantly to failure in a person's first year of college. Also, students who take a communication course report more confidence in their communication abilities, and these students have higher grade point averages and are less likely to drop out of school. Much of what we do in a classroom—whether it is the interpersonal interactions with our classmates and professor, individual or group presentations, or listening—is discussed in this textbook and can be used to build or add to a foundation of good communication skills and knowledge that can carry through to other contexts.

## **Professional**

The National Association of Colleges and Employers has found that employers most desire good communication skills in the college graduates they may hire. Desired communication skills vary from career to career, but again, this textbook provides a foundation onto which you can build communication skills specific to your major or field of study. Research has shown that introductory communication courses provide important skills necessary for functioning in entry-level jobs, including listening, writing, motivating/persuading, interpersonal skills, informational interviewing, and small-group problem solving. Interpersonal communication skills are also highly sought after by potential employers, consistently ranking in the top ten in national surveys. Poor listening skills, lack of conciseness, and inability to give constructive feedback have been identified as potential communication challenges in professional contexts. Employers appreciate good listening skills and the ability to communicate concisely because efficiency and clarity are often directly tied to productivity and success in terms of profit or task/project completion. Despite the well-documented need for communication skills in the professional world, many students still resist taking communication classes. Perhaps people think they already have good communication skills or can improve their skills on their own. While either of these may be true for some, studying communication can only help. In such a competitive job market, being able to document that you have received communication instruction and training from communication professionals (the faculty in your communication department) can give you the edge needed to stand out from other applicants or employees.

## **Personal**

While many students know from personal experience and from the prevalence of communication counseling on television talk shows and in self-help books that communication forms, maintains, and ends our interpersonal relationships, they do not know the extent to which that occurs. I am certain that when we get to the interpersonal communication chapters in this textbook that you will be intrigued and maybe even excited by the relevance and practicality of the concepts and theories discussed there. My students often remark that they already know from experience much of what's discussed in the interpersonal unit of the course. While we do learn from experience, until we learn specific vocabulary and develop foundational knowledge of communication concepts and theories, we do not have the tools needed to make sense of these experiences. Just having a vocabulary to name the communication phenomena in our lives increases our ability to consciously alter our communication to achieve our goals, avoid miscommunication, and analyze and learn from our inevitable mistakes. Once we get further into the book, I am sure the personal implications of communication will become very clear.

## **Communication Meets Needs**

You hopefully now see that communication is far more than the transmission of information. The exchange of messages and information is important for many reasons, but it is not enough to meet the various needs we have as human beings. While the content of our communication may help us achieve certain physical and instrumental needs, it also feeds into our identities and relationships in ways that far exceed the content of what we say.

## Physical Needs

Physical needs include needs that keep our bodies and minds functioning. Communication, which we most often associate with our brain, mouth, eyes, and ears, actually has many more connections to and effects on our physical body and well-being. At the most basic level, communication can alert others that our physical needs are not being met. Even babies cry when they are hungry or sick to alert their caregiver of these physical needs. Asking a friend if you can stay at their house because you got evicted or kicked out of your own place will help you meet your physical need for shelter. There are also strong ties between the social function of communication and our physical and psychological health. Human beings are social creatures, which makes communication important for our survival. In fact, prolonged isolation has been shown to severely damage a human. Aside from surviving, communication skills can also help us thrive. People with good interpersonal communication skills are better able to adapt to stress and have less depression and anxiety. Communication can also be therapeutic, which can lessen or prevent physical problems. A research study found that spouses of suicide or accidental death victims who did not communicate about the death with their friends were more likely to have health problems such as weight change and headaches than those who did talk with friends. Satisfying physical needs is essential for our physical functioning and survival. But, in order to socially function and thrive, we must also meet instrumental, relational, and identity needs.

## Instrumental Needs

Instrumental needs include needs that help us get things done in our day-to-day lives and achieve short- and long-term goals. We all have short- and long-term goals that we work on every day. Fulfilling these goals is an ongoing communicative task, which means we spend much of our time communicating for instrumental needs. Some common instrumental needs include influencing others, getting information we need, or getting support. In short, communication that meets our instrumental needs helps us “get things done.”

To meet instrumental needs, we often use communication strategically. Politicians, parents, bosses, and friends use communication to influence others in order to accomplish goals and meet needs. There is a research area within communication that examines compliance-gaining communication, or communication aimed at getting people to do something or act in a particular way. Compliance gaining and communicating for instrumental needs is different from coercion, which forces or manipulates people into doing what you want. In Section 1.3 “Communication Principles”, we will discuss communication ethics and learn that open communication, free from constraint and pressure, is an important part of an ethical society. Compliance-gaining communication is different from persuasion, which we will discuss in more detail in Chapter 11 “Informative and Persuasive Speaking”. While research on persuasion typically focuses on public speaking and how a speaker persuades a group, compliance-gaining research focuses on our daily interpersonal interactions. Researchers have identified many tactics that people typically use in compliance-gaining communication. As you read through the following list, I am sure many of these tactics will be familiar to you.

## Common Tactics Used for Compliance Gaining

- Offering rewards. Seeks compliance in a positive way, by promising returns, rewards, or generally positive outcomes.
- Threatening punishment. Seeks compliance in a negative way, by threatening negative consequences such as loss of privileges, grounding, or legal action.
- Using expertise. Seeks compliance by implying that one person “knows better” than the other based on experience, age, education, or intelligence.
- Liking. Seeks compliance by acting friendly and helpful to get the other person into a good mood before asking them to do something.
- Debt. Seeks compliance by calling in past favors and indicating that one person “owes” the other.
- Altruism. Seeks compliance by claiming that one person only wants “what is best” for the other and he or she is looking out for the other person’s “best interests.”
- Esteem. Seeks compliance by claiming that other people will think more highly of the person if he or she complies or think less of the person if he or she does not comply.

## Relational Needs

Relational needs include needs that help us maintain social bonds and interpersonal relationships. Communicating to fill our instrumental needs helps us function on many levels, but communicating for relational needs helps us achieve the social relating that is an essential part of being human. Communication meets our relational needs by giving us a tool through which to develop, maintain, and end relationships. In order to develop a relationship, we may use nonverbal communication to assess whether someone is interested in talking to us or not, then use verbal communication to strike up a conversation. Then, through the mutual process of self-disclosure, a relationship forms over time. Once formed, we need to maintain a relationship, so we use communication to express our continued liking of someone. We can verbally say things like “You’re such a great friend” or engage in behaviors that communicate our investment in the relationship, like organizing a birthday party. Although our relationships vary in terms of closeness and intimacy, all individuals have relational needs and all relationships require maintenance. Finally, communication or the lack of it helps us end relationships. We may communicate our deteriorating commitment to a relationship by avoiding communication with someone, verbally criticizing him or her, or explicitly ending a relationship. From spending time together, to checking in with relational partners by text, social media, or face-to-face, to celebrating accomplishments, to providing support during difficult times, communication forms the building blocks of our relationships. Communicating for relational needs isn’t always positive though. Some people’s “relational needs” are negative, unethical, or even illegal. Although we may feel the “need” to be passive aggressive or controlling, these communicative patterns are not positive and can hurt our relationships. In Chapter 6 “Interpersonal Communication Processes” and Chapter 7 “Communication in Relationships”, we will explore the “dark side” of communication in more detail.

## Identity Needs

Identity needs include our need to present ourselves to others and be thought of in particular and desired ways. What adjectives would you use to describe yourself? Are you funny, smart, loyal, or quirky? Your answer isn't just based on who you think you are, since much of how we think of ourselves is based on our communication with other people. Our identity changes as we progress through life, but communication is the primary means of establishing our identity and fulfilling our identity needs. Communication allows us to present ourselves to others in particular ways. Just as many companies, celebrities, and politicians create a public image, we desire to present different faces in different contexts. The influential scholar Erving Goffman compared self-presentation to a performance and suggested we all perform different roles in different contexts.. Indeed, competent communicators can successfully manage how others perceive them by adapting to situations and contexts. A parent may perform the role of stern head of household, supportive shoulder to cry on, or hip and culturally aware friend based on the situation they are in with their child. A newly hired employee may initially perform the role of motivated and agreeable coworker but later perform more leadership behaviors after being promoted. We will learn more about the different faces we present to the world and how we develop our self-concepts through interactions with others in Chapter 2 “Communication and Perception”.

## Communication Is a Process

Communication is a process that involves an interchange of verbal and/or nonverbal messages within a continuous and dynamic sequence of events. When we refer to communication as a process, we imply that it doesn't have a distinct beginning and end or follow a predetermined sequence of events. It can be difficult to trace the origin of a communication encounter, since communication doesn't always follow a neat and discernible format, which makes studying communication interactions or phenomena difficult. Any time we pull one part of the process out for study or closer examination, we artificially “freeze” the process in order to examine it, which is not something that is possible when communicating in real life. But sometimes scholars want to isolate a particular stage in the process in order to gain insight by studying, for example, feedback or eye contact. Doing that changes the very process itself, and by the time you have examined a particular stage or component of the process, the entire process may have changed. These snapshots are useful for scholarly interrogation of the communication process, and they can also help us evaluate our own communication practices, troubleshoot a problematic encounter we had, or slow things down to account for various contexts before we engage in communication.

We have already learned, in the transaction model of communication, that we communicate using multiple channels and send and receive messages simultaneously. There are also messages and other stimuli around us that we never actually perceive because we can only attend to so much information at one time. The dynamic nature of communication allows us to examine some principles of communication that are related to its processual nature. Next, we will learn that communication messages vary in terms of their level of conscious thought and intention, communication is irreversible, and communication is unrepeatable.

Some scholars have put forth definitions of communication stating that messages must be intended for others to perceive them in order for a message to “count” as communication. This narrow definition only includes messages that are tailored or at least targeted to a particular person or group and excludes any communication that is involuntary. Since intrapersonal communication happens in our heads and isn’t intended for others to perceive, it wouldn’t be considered communication. But imagine the following scenario: You and I are riding on a bus and you are sitting across from me. As I sit thinking about a stressful week ahead, I wrinkle up my forehead, shake my head, and put my head in my hands. Upon seeing this you think, “That guy must be pretty stressed out.” In this scenario, did communication take place? If I really didn’t intend for anyone to see the nonverbal communication that went along with my intrapersonal communication, then this definition would say no. But even though words weren’t exchanged, you still generated meaning from the communication I was unintentionally sending. As a communication scholar, I do not take such a narrow definition of communication. Based on the definition of communication from the beginning of this chapter, the scenario we just discussed would count as communication, but the scenario illustrates the point that communication messages are sent both intentionally and unintentionally.

Communication messages also vary in terms of the amount of conscious thought that goes into their creation. In general, we can say that intentional communication usually includes more conscious thought and unintentional communication usually includes less. For example, some communication is reactionary and almost completely involuntary. We often scream when we are frightened, say “ouch!” when we stub our toe, and stare blankly when we are bored. This isn’t the richest type of communication, but it is communication. Some of our interactions are slightly more substantial and include more conscious thought but are still very routine. For example, we say “excuse me” when we need to get past someone, say “thank you” when someone holds the door for us, or say “what’s up?” to our neighbor we pass every day in the hall. The reactionary and routine types of communication just discussed are common, but the messages most studied by communication scholars are considered constructed communication. These messages include more conscious thought and intention than reactionary or routine messages and often go beyond information exchange to also meet relational and identity needs. As we will learn later on, a higher degree of conscious thought and intention doesn’t necessarily mean the communication will be effective, understood, or ethical. In addition, ethical communicators cannot avoid responsibility for the effects of what they say by claiming they didn’t “intend” for their communication to cause an undesired effect. Communication has short- and long-term effects, which illustrates the next principle we will discuss—communication is irreversible.

The dynamic nature of the communication process also means that communication is irreversible. After an initial interaction has gone wrong, characters in sitcoms and romantic comedies often use the line “Can we just start over?” As handy as it would be to be able to turn the clock back and “redo” a failed or embarrassing communication encounter, it is impossible. Miscommunication can occur regardless of the degree of conscious thought and intention put into a message. For example, if David tells a joke that offends his coworker Beth, then he can’t just say, “Oh, forget I said that,” or “I didn’t intend for it to be offensive.” The message has been sent and it can’t be taken back. I’m sure we have all wished we could take something back that we have said. Conversely, when communication goes well, we often wish we could recreate it. However, in addition to communication being irreversible, it is also unrepeatable.

If you try to recreate a good job interview experience by asking the same questions and telling the same stories about yourself, you can't expect the same results. Even trying to repeat a communication encounter with the same person won't feel the same or lead to the same results. We have already learned the influence that contexts have on communication, and those contexts change frequently. Even if the words and actions stay the same, the physical, psychological, social, relational, and cultural contexts will vary and ultimately change the communication encounter. Have you ever tried to recount a funny or interesting experience to a friend who doesn't really seem that impressed? These "I guess you had to be there" moments illustrate the fact that communication is unrepeatable.

## **Communication Is Guided by Culture and Context**

As we learned earlier, context is a dynamic component of the communication process. Culture and context also influence how we perceive and define communication. Western culture tends to put more value on senders than receivers and on the content rather than the context of a message. These cultural values are reflected in our definitions and models of communication. As we will learn in later chapters, cultures vary in terms of having a more individualistic or more collectivistic cultural orientation. The United States is considered an individualistic culture, where emphasis is put on individual expression and success. Japan is considered a collectivistic culture, where emphasis is put on group cohesion and harmony. These are strong cultural values that are embedded in how we learn to communicate. In many collectivistic cultures, there is more emphasis placed on silence and nonverbal context. Whether in the United States, Japan, or another country, people are socialized from birth to communicate in culturally specific ways that vary by context. In this section we will discuss how communication is learned, the rules and norms that influence how we communicate, and the ethical implications of communication.

### **Communication Is Learned**

Most people are born with the capacity and ability to communicate, but everyone communicates differently. This is because communication is learned rather than innate. As we have already seen, communication patterns are relative to the context and culture in which one is communicating, and many cultures have distinct languages consisting of symbols.

A key principle of communication is that it is symbolic. Communication is symbolic in that the words that make up our language systems do not directly correspond to something in reality. Instead, they stand in for or symbolize something. The fact that communication varies so much among people, contexts, and cultures illustrates the principle that meaning is not inherent in the words we use. For example, let's say you go to France on vacation and see the word *poisson* on the menu. Unless you know how to read French, you will not know that the symbol is the same as the English symbol fish. Those two words don't look the same at all, yet they symbolize the same object. If you went by how the word looks alone, you might think that the French word for fish is more like the English word *poison* and avoid choosing that for your dinner. Putting a picture of a fish on a menu would definitely help a foreign tourist understand what they are ordering, since the picture is an actual representation of the object rather than a symbol for it.

All symbolic communication is learned, negotiated, and dynamic. We know that the letters b-o-o-k refer to a bound object with multiple written pages. We also know that the letters t-r-u-c-k refer to a vehicle with a bed in the back for hauling things. But if we learned in school that the letters t-r-u-c-k referred to a bound object with written pages and b-o-o-k referred to a vehicle with a bed in the back, then that would make just as much sense, because the letters don't actually refer to the object and the word itself only has the meaning that we assign to it. We will learn more, in Chapter 3 "Verbal Communication", about how language works, but communication is more than the words we use.

We are all socialized into different languages, but we also speak different "languages" based on the situation we are in. For example, in some cultures it is considered inappropriate to talk about family or health issues in public, but it wouldn't be odd to overhear people in a small town grocery store in the United States talking about their children or their upcoming surgery. There are some communication patterns shared by very large numbers of people and some that are particular to a dyad—best friends, for example, who have their own inside terminology and expressions that wouldn't make sense to anyone else. These examples aren't on the same scale as differing languages, but they still indicate that communication is learned. They also illustrate how rules and norms influence how we communicate.

## **Rules and Norms**

Earlier we learned about the transaction model of communication and the powerful influence that social context and the roles and norms associated with social context have on our communication. Whether verbal or nonverbal, mediated or interpersonal, our communication is guided by rules and norms.

Phatic communion is an instructive example of how we communicate under the influence of rules and norms. Phatic communion refers to scripted and routine verbal interactions that are intended to establish social bonds rather than actually exchange meaning. When you pass your professor in the hall, the exchange may go as follows:

Student: "Hey, how are you?"  
Professor: "Fine, how are you?"  
Student: "Fine."

What is the point of this interaction? It surely isn't to actually inquire as to each other's well-being. We have similar phatic interactions when we make comments on the weather or the fact that it's Monday. We often joke about phatic communion because we see that is pointless, at least on the surface. The student and professor might as well just pass each other in the hall and say the following to each other:

Student: "Generic greeting question."  
Professor: "Generic greeting response and question."  
Student: "Generic response."

This is an example of communication messages that don't really require a high level of conscious thought or convey much actual content or generate much meaning. So if phatic communion is so "pointless," why do we do it?

The term phatic communion derives from the Greek word *phatos*, which means "spoken," and the word communion, which means "connection or bond." As we discussed earlier, communication helps us meet our relational needs. In addition to finding communion through food or religion, we also find communion through our words. But the degree to which and in what circumstances we engage in phatic communion is also influenced by norms and rules. Generally, US Americans find silence in social interactions awkward, which is one sociocultural norm that leads to phatic communion, because we fill the silence with pointless words to meet the social norm. It is also a norm to greet people when you encounter them, especially if you know them. We all know not to unload our physical and mental burdens on the person who asks, "How are you?" or go through our "to do" list with the person who asks, "What's up?" Instead, we conform to social norms through this routine type of verbal exchange.

Phatic communion, like most aspects of communication we will learn about, is culturally relative as well. While most cultures engage in phatic communion, the topics of and occasions for phatic communion vary. Scripts for greetings in the United States are common, but scripts for leaving may be more common in another culture. Asking about someone's well-being may be acceptable phatic communion in one culture, and asking about the health of someone's family may be more common in another.

### Key Takeaways

- Getting integrated: Increasing your knowledge of communication and improving your communication skills can positively affect your academic, professional, personal, and civic lives.
- In terms of academics, research shows that students who study communication and improve their communication skills are less likely to drop out of school and are more likely to have high grade point averages.
- Professionally, employers desire employees with good communication skills, and employees who have good listening skills are more likely to get promoted.
- Personally, communication skills help us maintain satisfying relationships.
- Communication helps us with civic engagement and allows us to participate in and contribute to our communities.
- Communication meets our physical needs by helping us maintain physical and psychological well-being; our instrumental needs by helping us achieve short- and long-term goals; our relational needs by helping us initiate, maintain, and terminate relationships; and our identity needs by allowing us to present ourselves to others in particular ways.
- Communication is a process that includes messages that vary in terms of conscious thought and intention. Communication is also irreversible and unrepeatable.
- Communication is guided by culture and context.
- We learn to communicate using systems that vary based on culture and language.
- Rules and norms influence the routines and rituals within our communication.

- Communication ethics varies by culture and context and involves the negotiation of and reflection on our actions regarding what we think is right and wrong.

## Exercises

1. Identify some physical, instrumental, relational, and identity needs that communication helps you meet in a given day.
2. We learned in this section that communication is irreversible and unrepeatable. Identify a situation in which you wished you could reverse communication. Identify a situation in which you wished you could repeat communication. Even though it's impossible to reverse or repeat communication, what lessons can be learned from these two situations you identified that you can apply to future communication?
3. What types of phatic communion do you engage in? How are they connected to context and/or social rules and norms?

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# Chapter 2: Communication and Perception

Think back to the first day of classes. Did you plan ahead for what you were going to wear? Did you get the typical school supplies together? Did you try to find your classrooms ahead of time or look for the syllabus online? Did you look up your professors on an online professor evaluation site? Based on your answers to these questions, I could form an impression of who you are as a student. But would that perception be accurate? Would it match up with how you see yourself as a student? And perception, of course, is a two-way street. You also formed impressions about your professors based on their appearance, dress, organization, intelligence, and approachability. As a professor who teaches others how to teach, I instruct my student-teachers to really take the first day of class seriously. The impressions that both teacher and student make on the first day help set the tone for the rest of the semester.

As we go through our daily lives we perceive all sorts of people and objects, and we often make sense of these perceptions by using previous experiences to help filter and organize the information we take in. Sometimes we encounter new or contradictory information that changes the way we think about a person, group, or object. The perceptions that we make of others and that others make of us affect how we communicate and act. In this chapter, we will learn about the perception process, how we perceive others, how we perceive and present ourselves, and how we can improve our perceptions.

## 2.1 Perception Process

### Learning Objectives

1. Define perception.
2. Discuss how salience influences the selection of perceptual information.
3. Explain the ways in which we organize perceptual information.
4. Discuss the role of schemata in the interpretation of perceptual information.

Perception is the process of selecting, organizing, and interpreting information. This process, which is shown in Figure 2.1 “The Perception Process”, includes the perception of select stimuli that pass through our perceptual filters, are organized into our existing structures and patterns, and are then interpreted based on previous experiences. Although perception is a largely cognitive and psychological process, how we perceive the people and objects around us affects our communication. We respond differently to an object or person that we perceive favorably than we do to something we find unfavorable. But how do we filter through the mass amounts of incoming information, organize it, and make meaning from what makes it through our perceptual filters and into our social realities?

## Selecting Information

We take in information through all five of our senses, but our perceptual field (the world around us) includes so many stimuli that it is impossible for our brains to process and make sense of it all. So, as information comes in through our senses, various factors influence what actually continues on through the perception process. Selecting is the first part of the perception process, in which we focus our attention on certain incoming sensory information. Think about how, out of many other possible stimuli to pay attention to, you may hear a familiar voice in the hallway, see a pair of shoes you want to buy from across the mall, or smell something cooking for dinner when you get home from work. We quickly cut through and push to the background all kinds of sights, smells, sounds, and other stimuli, but how do we decide what to select and what to leave out?

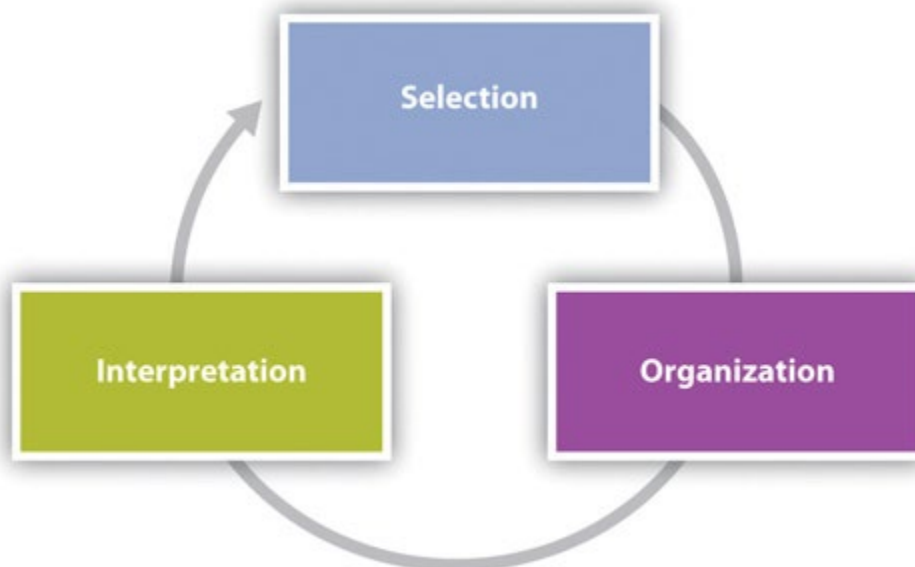


Figure 2.1 The Perception Process

We tend to pay attention to information that is salient. Salience is the degree to which something attracts our attention in a particular context. The thing attracting our attention can be abstract, like a concept, or concrete, like an object. For example, a person's identity as a Native American may become salient when they are protesting at the Columbus Day parade in Denver, Colorado. Or a bright flashlight shining in your face while camping at night is sure to be salient. The degree of salience depends on three features. We tend to find salient things that are visually or aurally stimulating and things that meet our needs or interests. Lastly, expectations affect what we find salient.

## Visual and Aural Stimulation

It is probably not surprising to learn that visually and/or aurally stimulating things become salient in our perceptual field and get our attention. Creatures ranging from fish to hummingbirds are attracted to things like silver spinners on fishing poles or red and yellow bird feeders. Having

our senses stimulated isn't always a positive thing though. Think about the couple that won't stop talking during the movie or the upstairs neighbor whose subwoofer shakes your ceiling at night. In short, stimuli can be attention-getting in a productive or distracting way. As communicators, we can use this knowledge to our benefit by minimizing distractions when we have something important to say. It's probably better to have a serious conversation with a significant other in a quiet place rather than a crowded food court. As we will learn later in Chapter 12 "Public Speaking in Various Contexts", altering the rate, volume, and pitch of your voice, known as vocal variety, can help keep your audience engaged, as can gestures and movement. Conversely, nonverbal adaptors, or nervous movements we do to relieve anxiety like pacing or twirling our hair, can be distracting. Aside from minimizing distractions and delivering our messages enthusiastically, the content of our communication also affects salience.

## Needs and Interests

We tend to pay attention to information that we perceive to meet our needs or interests in some way. This type of selective attention can help us meet instrumental needs and get things done. When you need to speak with a financial aid officer about your scholarships and loans, you sit in the waiting room and listen for your name to be called. Paying close attention to whose name is called means you can be ready to start your meeting and hopefully get your business handled. When we don't think certain messages meet our needs, stimuli that would normally get our attention may be completely lost. Imagine you are in the grocery store and you hear someone say your name. You turn around, only to hear that person say, "Finally! I said your name three times. I thought you forgot who I was!" A few seconds before, when you were focused on figuring out which kind of orange juice to get, you were attending to the various pulp options to the point that you tuned other stimuli out, even something as familiar as the sound of someone calling your name. Again, as communicators, especially in persuasive contexts, we can use this to our advantage by making it clear how our message or proposition meets the needs of our audience members. Whether a sign helps us find the nearest gas station, the sound of a ringtone helps us find our missing cell phone, or a speaker tells us how avoiding processed foods will improve our health, we select and attend to information that meets our needs.

We also find salient information that interests us. Of course, many times, stimuli that meet our needs are also interesting, but it's worth discussing these two items separately because sometimes we find things interesting that don't necessarily meet our needs. I'm sure we've all gotten sucked into a television show, video game, or random project and paid attention to that at the expense of something that actually meets our needs like cleaning or spending time with a significant other. Paying attention to things that interest us but don't meet specific needs seems like the basic formula for procrastination that we are all familiar with.

In many cases we know what interests us and we automatically gravitate toward stimuli that match up with that. For example, as you filter through radio stations, you likely already have an idea of what kind of music interests you and will stop on a station playing something in that genre while skipping right past stations playing something you aren't interested in. Because of this tendency, we often have to end up being forced into or accidentally experiencing something new in order to create or discover new interests. For example, you may not realize you are interested in Asian history until you are required to take such a course and have an engaging

professor who sparks that interest in you. Or you may accidentally stumble on a new area of interest when you take a class you wouldn't otherwise because it fits into your schedule. As communicators, you can take advantage of this perceptual tendency by adapting your topic and content to the interests of your audience.

## Expectations

The relationship between salience and expectations is a little more complex. Basically, we can find expected things salient and find things that are unexpected salient. While this may sound confusing, a couple examples should illustrate this point. If you are expecting a package to be delivered, you might pick up on the slightest noise of a truck engine or someone's footsteps approaching your front door. Since we expect something to happen, we may be extra tuned in to clues that it is coming. In terms of the unexpected, if you have a shy and soft-spoken friend who you overhear raising the volume and pitch of his voice while talking to another friend, you may pick up on that and assume that something out of the ordinary is going on. For something unexpected to become salient, it has to reach a certain threshold of difference. If you walked into your regular class and there were one or two more students there than normal, you may not even notice. If you walked into your class and there was someone dressed up as a wizard, you would probably notice. So, if we expect to experience something out of the routine, like a package delivery, we will find stimuli related to that expectation salient. If we experience something that we weren't expecting and that is significantly different from our routine experiences, then we will likely find it salient. We can also apply this concept to our communication. I always encourage my students to include supporting material in their speeches that defies our expectations. You can help keep your audience engaged by employing good research skills to find such information.

There is a middle area where slight deviations from routine experiences may go unnoticed because we aren't expecting them. To go back to the earlier example, if you aren't expecting a package, and you regularly hear vehicle engines and sidewalk foot traffic outside your house, those pretty routine sounds wouldn't be as likely to catch your attention, even if it were slightly more or less traffic than expected. This is because our expectations are often based on previous experience and patterns we have observed and internalized, which allows our brains to go on "autopilot" sometimes and fill in things that are missing or overlook extra things. Look at the following sentence and read it aloud: Percpetoin is bsaed on pateetrns, maening we often raech a cocnlsuion witouht cosnidreing ecah indviidaul elmenet. This example illustrates a test of our expectation and an annoyance to every college student. We have all had the experience of getting a paper back with typos and spelling errors circled. This can be frustrating, especially if we actually took the time to proofread. When we first learned to read and write, we learned letter by letter. A teacher or parent would show us a card with *A-P-P-L-E* written on it, and we would sound it out. Over time, we learned the patterns of letters and sounds and could see combinations of letters and pronounce the word quickly. Since we know what to expect when we see a certain pattern of letters, and know what comes next in a sentence since we wrote the paper, we don't take the time to look at each letter as we proofread. This can lead us to overlook common typos and spelling errors, even if we proofread something multiple times. As a side note, I'll share two tips to help you avoid proofreading errors: First, have a friend proofread your paper. Since they didn't write it, they have fewer expectations regarding the content. Second, read your papers

backward. Since patterns of speech aren't the same in reverse you have to stop and focus on each word. Now that we know how we select stimuli, let's turn our attention to how we organize the information we receive.

## Organizing Information

Organizing is the second part of the perception process, in which we sort and categorize information that we perceive based on innate and learned cognitive patterns. Three ways we sort things into patterns are by using proximity, similarity, and difference. In terms of proximity, we tend to think that things that are close together go together. For example, have you ever been waiting to be helped in a business and the clerk assumes that you and the person standing beside you are together? The slightly awkward moment usually ends when you and the other person in line look at each other, then back at the clerk, and one of you explains that you are not together. Even though you may have never met that other person in your life, the clerk used a basic perceptual organizing cue to group you together because you were standing in proximity to one another.

We also group things together based on similarity. We tend to think similar-looking or similar-acting things belong together. I have two friends that I occasionally go out with, and we are all three males, around the same age, of the same race, with short hair and glasses. Aside from that, we don't really look alike, but on more than one occasion a server at a restaurant has assumed that we're brothers. Despite the fact that many of our other features are different, the salient features are organized based on similarity and the three of us are suddenly related.

We also organize information that we take in based on difference. In this case, we assume that the item that looks or acts different from the rest doesn't belong with the group. Perceptual errors involving people and assumptions of difference can be especially awkward, if not offensive. My friend's mother, who is Vietnamese American, was attending a conference at which another attendee assumed she was a hotel worker and asked her to throw something away for her. In this case, my friend's mother was a person of color at a convention with mostly white attendees, so an impression was formed based on the other person's perception of this difference.

These strategies for organizing information are so common that they are built into how we teach our children basic skills and how we function in our daily lives. I'm sure we all had to look at pictures in grade school and determine which things went together and which thing didn't belong. If you think of the literal act of organizing something, like your desk at home or work, we follow these same strategies. If you have a bunch of papers and mail on the top of your desk, you will likely sort papers into separate piles for separate classes or put bills in a separate place than personal mail. You may have one drawer for pens, pencils, and other supplies and another drawer for files. In this case you are grouping items based on similarities and differences. You may also group things based on proximity, for example, by putting financial items like your checkbook, a calculator, and your pay stubs in one area so you can update your budget efficiently. In summary, we simplify information and look for patterns to help us more efficiently communicate and get through life.

Simplification and categorizing based on patterns isn't necessarily a bad thing. In fact, without this capability we would likely not have the ability to speak, read, or engage in other complex cognitive/behavioral functions. Our brain innately categorizes and files information and experiences away for later retrieval, and different parts of the brain are responsible for different sensory experiences. In short, it is natural for things to group together in some ways. There are differences among people, and looking for patterns helps us in many practical ways. However, the judgments we place on various patterns and categories are not natural; they are learned and culturally and contextually relative. Our perceptual patterns do become unproductive and even unethical when the judgments we associate with certain patterns are based on stereotypical or prejudicial thinking.

We also organize interactions and interpersonal experiences based on our firsthand experiences. When two people experience the same encounter differently, misunderstandings and conflict may result. Punctuation refers to the structuring of information into a timeline to determine the cause (stimulus) and effect (response) of our communication interactions. Applying this concept to interpersonal conflict can help us see how the perception process extends beyond the individual to the interpersonal level. This concept also helps illustrate how organization and interpretation can happen together and how interpretation can influence how we organize information and vice versa.

Where does a conflict begin and end? The answer to this question depends on how the people involved in the conflict punctuate, or structure, their conflict experience. Punctuation differences can often escalate conflict, which can lead to a variety of relationship problems. For example, Linda and Joe are on a project team at work and have a deadline approaching. Linda has been working on the project over the weekend in anticipation of her meeting with Joe first thing Monday morning. She has had some questions along the way and has e-mailed Joe for clarification and input, but he hasn't responded. On Monday morning, Linda walks into the meeting room, sees Joe, and says, "I've been working on this project all weekend and needed your help. I e-mailed you three times! What were you doing?" Joe responds, "I had no idea you e-mailed me. I was gone all weekend on a camping trip." In this instance, the conflict started for Linda two days ago and has just started for Joe. So, for the two of them to most effectively manage this conflict, they need to communicate so that their punctuation, or where the conflict started for each one, is clear and matches up. In this example, Linda made an impression about Joe's level of commitment to the project based on an interpretation she made after selecting and organizing incoming information. Being aware of punctuation is an important part of perception checking, which we will discuss later. Let's now take a closer look at how interpretation plays into the perception process.

## **Interpreting Information**

Although selecting and organizing incoming stimuli happens very quickly, and sometimes without much conscious thought, interpretation can be a much more deliberate and conscious step in the perception process. Interpretation is the third part of the perception process, in which we assign meaning to our experiences using mental structures known as schemata. Schemata are like databases of stored, related information that we use to interpret new experiences. We all

have fairly complicated schemata that have developed over time as small units of information combine to make more meaningful complexes of information.

We have an overall schema about education and how to interpret experiences with teachers and classmates. This schema started developing before we even went to preschool based on things that parents, peers, and the media told us about school. For example, you learned that certain symbols and objects like an apple, a ruler, a calculator, and a notebook are associated with being a student or teacher. You learned new concepts like grades and recess, and you engaged in new practices like doing homework, studying, and taking tests. You also formed new relationships with teachers, administrators, and classmates. As you progressed through your education, your schema adapted to the changing environment. How smooth or troubling schema reevaluation and revision is varies from situation to situation and person to person. For example, some students adapt their schema relatively easily as they move from elementary, to middle, to high school, and on to college and are faced with new expectations for behavior and academic engagement. Other students don't adapt as easily, and holding onto their old schema creates problems as they try to interpret new information through old, incompatible schema. We've all been in a similar situation at some point in our lives, so we know that revising our schemata can be stressful and that such revision takes effort and usually involves some mistakes, disappointments, and frustrations. But being able to adapt our schemata is a sign of cognitive complexity, which is an important part of communication competence. So, even though the process may be challenging, it can also be a time for learning and growth.

It's important to be aware of schemata because our interpretations affect our behavior. For example, if you are doing a group project for class and you perceive a group member to be shy based on your schema of how shy people communicate, you may avoid giving him presentation responsibilities in your group project because you do not think shy people make good public speakers. Schemata also guide our interactions, providing a script for our behaviors. We know, in general, how to act and communicate in a waiting room, in a classroom, on a first date, and on a game show. Even a person who has never been on a game show can develop a schema for how to act in that environment by watching *The Price Is Right*, for example. People go to great lengths to make shirts with clever sayings or act enthusiastically in hopes of being picked to be a part of the studio audience and hopefully become a contestant on the show.

As we have seen, schemata are used to interpret others' behavior and form impressions about who they are as a person. To help this process along, we often solicit information from people to help us place them into a preexisting schema. In the United States and many other Western cultures, people's identities are often closely tied to what they do for a living. When we introduce others, or ourselves, occupation is usually one of the first things we mention. Think about how your communication with someone might differ if he or she were introduced to you as an artist versus a doctor. We make similar interpretations based on where people are from, their age, their race, and other social and cultural factors. We will learn more about how culture, gender, and other factors influence our perceptions as we continue through the chapter. In summary, we have schemata about individuals, groups, places, and things, and these schemata filter our perceptions before, during, and after interactions. As schemata are retrieved from memory, they are executed, like computer programs or apps on your smartphone, to help us interpret the world around us. Just like computer programs and apps must be regularly updated to

improve their functioning, competent communicators update and adapt their schemata as they have new experiences.

Examples “Getting Real”

### **Police Officers, Schemata, and Perception/Interpretation**

Prime-time cable and network television shows like the Law and Order franchise and Southland have long offered viewers a glimpse into the lives of law enforcement officers. COPS, the first and longest-running prime-time reality television show, and newer reality-themed and educational shows like The First 48 and Lockdown, offer a more realistic look into techniques used by law enforcement. Perception is a crucial part of an officer’s skill set. Specifically, during police-citizen encounters, where tensions may be high and time for decision making limited, officers rely on schemata developed through personal experience off the job and training and experience on the job. Richard M. Rozelle and James C. Baxter, “Impression Formation and Danger Recognition in Experienced Police Officers,” *Journal of Social Psychology* 96 (1975): 54. Moreover, police officers often have to make perceptions based on incomplete and sometimes unreliable information. So, how do police officers use perception to help them do their jobs?

Research has examined how police officers use perception to make judgments about personality traits, credibility, deception, and the presence or absence of a weapon, among others things, and just like you and me, officers use the same process of selection, organization, and interpretation. This research has found that officers, like us, rely on schema to help them make decisions under time and situational constraints. In terms of selection, expectations influence officer perception. At preshift meetings, officers are briefed on ongoing issues and “things to be on the lookout for,” which provides them with a set of expectations—for example, the make and model of a stolen car—that can guide their selection process. They must also be prepared for things that defy their expectations, which is not a job skill that many other professionals have to consider every day. They never know when a traffic stop could turn into a pursuit or a seemingly gentle person could turn violent. These expectations can then connect to organization strategies. For example, if an officer knows to be alert for a criminal suspect, they will actively organize incoming perceptual information into categories based on whether or not people look similar to or different from the suspect description. Proximity also plays into police work. If a person is in a car with a driver who has an unregistered handgun, the officer is likely to assume that the other person also has criminal intent. While these practices are not inherently bad, there are obvious problems that can develop when these patterns become rigid schema. Some research has shown that certain prejudices based on racial schema can lead to perceptual errors—in this case, police officers mistakenly perceiving a weapon in the possession of black suspects more often than white suspects. B. Keith Payne, “Prejudice and Perception: The Role of Automatic and Controlled Processes in Misperceiving a Weapon,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 81, no. 2 (2001): 181–92. Additionally, racial profiling (think of how profiles are similar to schemata) has become an issue that’s gotten much attention since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and the passage of immigration laws in states like Arizona and Alabama that have been critiqued as targeting migrant workers and other undocumented immigrants. As you can see, law

enforcement officers and civilians use the same perception process, but such a career brings with it responsibilities and challenges that highlight the imperfect nature of the perception process.

1. What communication skills do you think are key for a law enforcement officer to have in order to do their job effectively and why?
2. Describe an encounter that you have had with a law enforcement officer (if you haven't had a direct experience you can use a hypothetical or fictional example). What were your perceptions of the officer? What do you think his or her perceptions were of you? What schemata do you think contributed to each of your interpretations?
3. What perceptual errors create potential ethical challenges in law enforcement? For example, how should the organizing principles of proximity, similarity, and difference be employed?

### Key Takeaways

- Perception is the process of selecting, organizing, and interpreting information. This process affects our communication because we respond to stimuli differently, whether they are objects or persons, based on how we perceive them.
- Given the massive amounts of stimuli taken in by our senses, we only select a portion of the incoming information to organize and interpret. We select information based on salience. We tend to find salient things that are visually or aurally stimulating and things that meet our needs and interests. Expectations also influence what information we select.
- We organize information that we select into patterns based on proximity, similarity, and difference.
- We interpret information using schemata, which allow us to assign meaning to information based on accumulated knowledge and previous experience.

### Exercises

1. Take a moment to look around wherever you are right now. Take in the perceptual field around you. What is salient for you in this moment and why? Explain the degree of salience using the three reasons for salience discussed in this section.
2. As we organize information (sensory information, objects, and people) we simplify and categorize information into patterns. Identify some cases in which this aspect of the perception process is beneficial. Identify some cases in which it could be harmful or negative.
3. Getting integrated: Think about some of the schemata you have that help you make sense of the world around you. For each of the following contexts—academic, professional, personal, and civic—identify a schema that you commonly rely on or think you will rely on. For each schema you identified note a few ways that it has already been challenged or may be challenged in the future.

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## 2.2 Perceiving Others

### Learning Objectives

- Differentiate between internal and external attributions.
- Explain two common perceptual errors: the fundamental attribution error and the self-serving bias.
- Discuss how the primacy and recency effects relate to first and last impressions.
- Discuss how physical and environmental factors influence perception.
- Explain the horn and halo effects.
- Recognize the roles that culture and personality play in the perception of others.

Are you a good judge of character? How quickly can you “size someone up?” Interestingly, research shows that many people are surprisingly accurate at predicting how an interaction with someone will unfold based on initial impressions. Fascinating research has also been done on the ability of people to make a judgment about a person’s competence after as little as 100 milliseconds of exposure to politicians’ faces. Even more surprising is that people’s judgments of competence, after exposure to two candidates for senate elections, accurately predicted election outcomes. In short, after only minimal exposure to a candidate’s facial expressions, people made judgments about the person’s competence, and those candidates judged more competent were

people who actually won elections! As you read this section, keep in mind that these principles apply to how you perceive others and to how others perceive you. Just as others make impressions on us, we make impressions on others. We have already learned how the perception process works in terms of selecting, organizing, and interpreting. In this section, we will focus on how we perceive others, with specific attention to how we interpret our perceptions of others.

## **Attribution and Interpretation**

I'm sure you have a family member, friend, or coworker with whom you have ideological or political differences. When conversations and inevitable disagreements occur, you may view this person as "pushing your buttons" if you are invested in the issue being debated, or you may view the person as "on their soapbox" if you aren't invested. In either case, your existing perceptions of the other person are probably reinforced after your conversation and you may leave the conversation thinking, "She is never going to wake up and see how ignorant she is! I don't know why I even bother trying to talk to her!" Similar situations occur regularly, and there are some key psychological processes that play into how we perceive others' behaviors. By examining these processes, attribution in particular, we can see how our communication with others is affected by the explanations we create for others' behavior. In addition, we will learn some common errors that we make in the attribution process that regularly lead to conflict and misunderstanding.

### **Attribution**

In most interactions, we are constantly running an attribution script in our minds, which essentially tries to come up with explanations for what is happening. Why did my neighbor slam the door when she saw me walking down the hall? Why is my partner being extra nice to me today? Why did my officemate miss our project team meeting this morning? In general, we seek to attribute the cause of others' behaviors to internal or external factors. Internal attributions connect the cause of behaviors to personal aspects such as personality traits. External attributions connect the cause of behaviors to situational factors. Attributions are important to consider because our reactions to others' behaviors are strongly influenced by the explanations we reach. Imagine that Gloria and Jerry are dating. One day, Jerry gets frustrated and raises his voice to Gloria. She may find that behavior more offensive and even consider breaking up with him if she attributes the cause of the blow up to his personality, since personality traits are usually fairly stable and difficult to control or change.

Conversely, Gloria may be more forgiving if she attributes the cause of his behavior to situational factors beyond Jerry's control, since external factors are usually temporary. If she makes an internal attribution, Gloria may think, "Wow, this person is really a loose cannon. Who knows when he will lose it again?" If she makes an external attribution, she may think, "Jerry has been under a lot of pressure to meet deadlines at work and hasn't been getting much sleep. Once this project is over, I'm sure he'll be more relaxed." This process of attribution is ongoing, and, as with many aspects of perception, we are sometimes aware of the attributions we make, and sometimes they are automatic and/or unconscious. Attribution has received much scholarly attention because it is in this part of the perception process that some of the most common perceptual errors or biases occur.

One of the most common perceptual errors is the fundamental attribution error, which refers to our tendency to explain others' behaviors using internal rather than external attributions. For example, when I worked at an urban college in Denver, Colorado, I often had students come into class irritated, saying, "I got a parking ticket! I can't believe those people. Why don't they get a real job and stop ruining my life!" If you Google some clips from the reality television show *Parking Wars*, you will see the ire that people often direct at parking enforcement officers. In this case, illegally parked students attribute the cause of their situation to the malevolence of the parking officer, essentially saying they got a ticket because the officer was a mean/bad person, which is an internal attribution. Students were much less likely to acknowledge that the officer was just doing his or her job (an external attribution) and the ticket was a result of the student's decision to park illegally.

Perceptual errors can also be biased, and in the case of the self-serving bias, the error works out in our favor. Just as we tend to attribute others' behaviors to internal rather than external causes, we do the same for ourselves, especially when our behaviors have led to something successful or positive. When our behaviors lead to failure or something negative, we tend to attribute the cause to external factors. Thus the self-serving bias is a perceptual error through which we attribute the cause of our successes to internal personal factors while attributing our failures to external factors beyond our control. When we look at the fundamental attribution error and the self-serving bias together, we can see that we are likely to judge ourselves more favorably than another person, or at least less personally.

The professor-student relationship offers a good case example of how these concepts can play out. I have often heard students who earned an unsatisfactory grade on an assignment attribute that grade to the strictness, unfairness, or incompetence of their professor. I have also heard professors attribute a poor grade to the student's laziness, attitude, or intelligence. In both cases, the behavior is explained using an internal attribution and is an example of the fundamental attribution error. Students may further attribute their poor grade to their busy schedule or other external, situational factors rather than their lack of motivation, interest, or preparation (internal attributions). On the other hand, when students get a good grade on a paper, they will likely attribute that cause to their intelligence or hard work rather than an easy assignment or an "easy grading" professor. Both of these examples illustrate the self-serving bias. These psychological processes have implications for our communication because when we attribute causality to another person's personality, we tend to have a stronger emotional reaction and tend to assume that this personality characteristic is stable, which may lead us to avoid communication with the person or to react negatively. Now that you are aware of these common errors, you can monitor them more and engage in perception checking, which we will learn more about later, to verify your attributions.

## **Impressions and Interpretation**

As we perceive others, we make impressions about their personality, likeability, attractiveness, and other characteristics. Although much of our impressions are personal, what forms them is sometimes based more on circumstances than personal characteristics. All the information we take in isn't treated equally. How important are first impressions? Does the last thing you notice about a person stick with you longer because it's more recent? Do we tend to remember the

positive or negative things we notice about a person? This section will help answer these questions, as we explore how the timing of information and the content of the messages we receive can influence our perception.

## **First and Last Impressions**

The old saying “You never get a second chance to make a good impression” points to the fact that first impressions matter. The brain is a predictive organ in that it wants to know, based on previous experiences and patterns, what to expect next, and first impressions function to fill this need, allowing us to determine how we will proceed with an interaction after only a quick assessment of the person with whom we are interacting. Research shows that people are surprisingly good at making accurate first impressions about how an interaction will unfold and at identifying personality characteristics of people they do not know. Studies show that people are generally able to predict how another person will behave toward them based on an initial interaction. People’s accuracy and ability to predict interaction based on first impressions vary, but people with high accuracy are typically socially skilled and popular and have less loneliness, anxiety, and depression; more satisfying relationships; and more senior positions and higher salaries. So not only do first impressions matter, but having the ability to form accurate first impressions seems to correlate to many other positive characteristics.

First impressions are enduring because of the primacy effect, which leads us to place more value on the first information we receive about a person. So if we interpret the first information we receive from or about a person as positive, then a positive first impression will form and influence how we respond to that person as the interaction continues. Likewise, negative interpretations of information can lead us to form negative first impressions. If you sit down at a restaurant and servers walk by for several minutes and no one greets you, then you will likely interpret that negatively and not have a good impression of your server when he finally shows up. This may lead you to be short with the server, which may lead him to not be as attentive as he normally would. At this point, a series of negative interactions has set into motion a cycle that will be very difficult to reverse and make positive.

The recency effect leads us to put more weight on the most recent impression we have of a person’s communication over earlier impressions. Even a positive first impression can be tarnished by a negative final impression. Imagine that a professor has maintained a relatively high level of credibility with you over the course of the semester. She made a good first impression by being organized, approachable, and interesting during the first days of class. The rest of the semester went fairly well with no major conflicts. However, during the last week of the term, she didn’t have final papers graded and ready to turn back by the time she said she would, which left you with some uncertainty about how well you needed to do on the final exam to earn an A in the class. When you did get your paper back, on the last day of class, you saw that your grade was much lower than you expected. If this happened to you, what would you write on the instructor evaluation? Because of the recency effect, many students would likely give a disproportionate amount of value to the professor’s actions in the final week of the semester, negatively skewing the evaluation, which is supposed to be reflective of the entire semester. Even though the professor only returned one assignment late, that fact is very recent in students’ minds and can overshadow the positive impression that formed many weeks earlier.

## Physical and Environmental Influences on Perception

We make first impressions based on a variety of factors, including physical and environmental characteristics. In terms of physical characteristics, style of dress and grooming are important, especially in professional contexts. We have general schema regarding how to dress and groom for various situations ranging from formal, to business casual, to casual, to lounging around the house.

You would likely be able to offer some descriptors of how a person would look and act from the following categories: a goth person, a prep, a jock, a fashionista, a hipster. The schema associated with these various cliques or styles are formed through personal experience and through exposure to media representations of these groups. Different professions also have schema for appearance and dress. Imagine a doctor, mechanic, congressperson, exotic dancer, or mail carrier. Each group has clothing and personal styles that create and fit into general patterns. Of course, the mental picture we have of any of the examples above is not going to be representative of the whole group, meaning that stereotypical thinking often exists within our schema. We will learn more about the negative effects of stereotypical thinking later in the chapter, but it's important to understand how persuasive various physical perceptual influences can be.

Think about the harm that has been done when people pose as police or doctors to commit crimes or other acts of malice. Seeing someone in a white lab coat automatically leads us to see that person as an authority figure, and we fall into a scripted pattern of deferring to the “doctor” and not asking too many questions. The Milgram experiments offer a startling example of how powerful these influences are. In the experiments, participants followed instructions from a man in a white lab coat (who was actually an actor), who prompted them to deliver electric shocks to a person in another room every time the other person answered a memory question incorrectly. The experiment was actually about how people defer to authority figures instead of acting independently. Although no one was actually being shocked in the other room, many participants continued to “shock,” at very high levels of voltage, the other person even after that person supposedly being shocked complained of chest pains and became unresponsive.

Just as clothing and personal style help us form impressions of others, so do physical body features. The degree to which we perceive people to be attractive influences our attitudes about and communication with them. Facial attractiveness and body weight tend to be common features used in the perception of physical attractiveness. In general people find symmetrical faces and nonoverweight bodies attractive. People perceived as attractive are generally evaluated more positively and seen as more kind and competent than people evaluated as less attractive. Additionally, people rated as attractive receive more eye contact, more smiles, and closer proximity to others (people stand closer to them). Unlike clothing and personal style, these physical features are more difficult, if not impossible, to change.

Finally, the material objects and people that surround a person influence our perception. In the MTV show “Room Raiders”, contestants go into the bedrooms of three potential dates and choose the one they want to go on the date with based on the impressions made while examining each potential date's cleanliness, decorations, clothes, trophies and awards, books, music, and so

on. Research supports the reliability of such impressions, as people have been shown to make reasonably accurate judgments about a person's personality after viewing his or her office or bedroom. Although the artificial scenario set up in Room Raiders doesn't exactly match up with typical encounters, the link between environmental cues and perception is important enough for many companies to create policies about what can and can't be displayed in personal office spaces. It would seem odd for a bank manager to have an Animal House poster hanging in his office, and that would definitely influence customers' perceptions of the manager's personality and credibility. The arrangement of furniture also creates impressions. Walking into a meeting and sitting on one end of a long boardroom table is typically less inviting than sitting at a round table or on a sofa.

Although some physical and environmental features are easier to change than others, it is useful to become aware of how these factors, which aren't necessarily related to personality or verbal and nonverbal communication, shape our perceptions. These early impressions also affect how we interpret and perceive later encounters, which can be further explained through the halo and horn effects.

## **The Halo and Horn Effects**

We have a tendency to adapt information that conflicts with our earlier impressions in order to make it fit within the frame we have established. This is known as selective distortion, and it manifests in the halo and horn effects. The angelic halo and devilish horn are useful metaphors for the lasting effects of positive and negative impressions.

The halo effect occurs when initial positive perceptions lead us to view later interactions as positive. The horn effect occurs when initial negative perceptions lead us to view later interactions as negative. Since impressions are especially important when a person is navigating the job market, let's imagine how the horn and halo effects could play out for a recent college graduate looking to land her first real job. Nell has recently graduated with her degree in communication studies and is looking to start her career as a corporate trainer. If one of Nell's professors has a relationship with an executive at an area business, his positive verbal recommendation will likely result in a halo effect for Nell. Since the executive thinks highly of his friend the professor, and the professor thinks highly of Nell, then the executive will start his interaction with Nell with a positive impression and interpret her behaviors more positively than he would otherwise. The halo effect initiated by the professor's recommendation may even lead the executive to dismiss or overlook some negative behaviors. Let's say Nell doesn't have a third party to help make a connection and arrives late for her interview. That negative impression may create a horn effect that carries through the interview. Even if Nell presents as competent and friendly, the negative first impression could lead the executive to minimize or ignore those positive characteristics, and the company may not hire her.

## **Culture, Personality, and Perception**

Our cultural identities and our personalities affect our perceptions. Sometimes we are conscious of the effects and sometimes we are not. In either case, we have a tendency to favor others who exhibit cultural or personality traits that match up with our own. This tendency is so strong that is

often leads us to assume that people we like are more similar to us than they actually are. Knowing more about how these forces influence our perceptions can help us become more aware of and competent in regards to the impressions we form of others.

## Culture

Race, gender, sexual orientation, class, ability, nationality, and age all affect the perceptions that we make. The schemata through which we interpret what we perceive are influenced by our cultural identities. As we are socialized into various cultural identities, we internalize beliefs, attitudes, and values shared by others in our cultural group. Schemata held by members of a cultural identity group have similarities, but schemata held by different cultural groups may vary greatly. Unless we are exposed to various cultural groups and learn how others perceive us and the world around them, we will likely have a narrow or naïve view of the world and assume that others see things the way we do. Exposing yourself to and experiencing cultural differences in perspective doesn't mean that you have to change your schema to match another cultural group's. Instead, it may offer you a chance to better understand why and how your schemata were constructed the way they were.

As we have learned, perception starts with information that comes in through our senses. How we perceive even basic sensory information is influenced by our culture, as is illustrated in the following list:

- Sight. People in different cultures “read” art in different ways, differing in terms of where they start to look at an image and the types of information they perceive and process.
- Sound. “Atonal” music in some Asian cultures is unpleasing; it is uncomfortable to people who aren't taught that these combinations of sounds are pleasing.
- Touch. In some cultures it would be very offensive for a man to touch—even tap on the shoulder—a woman who isn't a relative.
- Taste. Tastes for foods vary greatly around the world. “Stinky tofu,” which is a favorite snack of people in Taipei, Taiwan's famous night market, would likely be very off-putting in terms of taste and smell to many foreign tourists.
- Smell. While US Americans spend considerable effort to mask natural body odor, which we typically find unpleasant, with soaps, sprays, and lotions, some other cultures would not find unpleasant or even notice what we consider “b.o.” Those same cultures may find a US American's “clean” (soapy, perfumed, deodorized) smell unpleasant.

Aside from differences in reactions to basic information we take in through our senses, there is also cultural variation in how we perceive more complicated constructs, like marriage, politics, and privacy. In May of 2012, French citizens elected a new president. François Hollande moved into the presidential palace with his partner of five years, Valerie Trierweiler. They are the first unmarried couple in the country's history to occupy the presidential palace. Even though new census statistics show that more unmarried couples are living together than ever before in the United States, many still disapprove of the practice, and it is hard to imagine a US president in a similar circumstance as France's Hollande. Other places like Saudi Arabia and the Vatican have strong cultural aversions to such a practice, which could present problems when France's first couple travels abroad.

As we've already learned, our brain processes information by putting it into categories and looking for predictability and patterns. The previous examples have covered how we do this with sensory information and with more abstract concepts like marriage and politics, but we also do this with people. When we categorize people, we generally view them as "like us" or "not like us." This simple us/them split affects subsequent interaction, including impressions and attributions. For example, we tend to view people we perceive to be like us as more trustworthy, friendly, and honest than people we perceive to be not like us. Marilynn B. Brewer, "The Psychology of Prejudice: Ingroup Love or Outgroup Hate?" *Journal of Social Issues* 55, no. 3 (1999): 429–44. We are also more likely to use internal attribution to explain negative behavior of people we perceive to be different from us. If a person of a different race cuts another driver off in traffic, the driver is even more likely to attribute that action to the other driver's internal qualities (thinking, for example, "He or she is inconsiderate and reckless!") than they would someone of their own race. Having such inflexible categories can have negative consequences, and later we will discuss how forcing people into rigid categories leads to stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination. Of course, race isn't the only marker of difference that influences our perceptions, and the problem with our rough categorization of people into "like us" and "not like us" categories is that these differences aren't really as easy to perceive as we think. We cannot always tell whether or not someone is culturally like us through visual cues. For some cultural identities, like sexual orientation and ability, our awareness of any differences may only come when the other person discloses their identity to us.

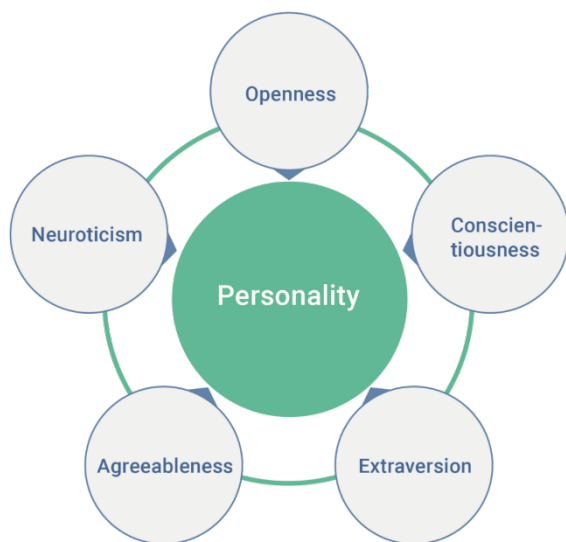
You no doubt frequently hear people talking and writing about the "vast differences" between men and women. Whether it's communication, athletic ability, expressing emotions, or perception, people will line up to say that women are one way and men are the other way. While it is true that gender affects our perception, the reason for this difference stems more from social norms than genetic, physical, or psychological differences between men and women. We are socialized to perceive differences between men and women, which leads us to exaggerate and amplify what differences there actually are. We basically see the stereotypes and differences we are told to see, which helps to create a reality in which gender differences are "obvious." However, numerous research studies have found that, especially in relation to multiple aspects of communication, men and women communicate much more similarly than differently. In summary, various cultural identities shape how we perceive others because beliefs, attitudes, and values of the cultural groups to which we belong are incorporated into our schema. Our personalities also present interesting perceptual advantages and challenges that we will now discuss.

## Personality

I occasionally have potential employers of students I have taught or supervised call me to do "employment verifications" during which they ask general questions about the applicant. While they may ask a few questions about intellectual ability or academic performance, they typically ask questions that try to create a personality profile of the applicant. They basically want to know what kind of leader, coworker, and person he or she is. This is a smart move on their part, because our personalities greatly influence how we see ourselves in the world and how we perceive and interact with others.

Personality refers to a person's general way of thinking, feeling, and behaving based on underlying motivations and impulses.. These underlying motivations and impulses form our personality traits. Personality traits are “underlying,” but they are fairly enduring once a person reaches adulthood. That is not to say that people's personalities do not change, but major changes in personality are not common unless they result from some form of trauma. Although personality scholars believe there are thousands of personalities, they all comprise some combination of the same few traits. Much research has been done on personality traits, and the “Big Five” that are most commonly discussed are extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness. These five traits appear to be representative of personalities across cultures, and you can read more about what each of these traits entails below. If you are interested in how you rank in terms of personality traits, there are many online tests you can take.

## The Big Five Personality Traits



“Wiki-grafik peats-de big five ENG.png” [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International](#)

**Extraversion.** Refers to a person's interest in interacting with others. People with high extraversion are sociable and often called “extroverts.” People with low extraversion are less sociable and are often called “introverts.”

- **Agreeableness.** Refers to a person's level of trustworthiness and friendliness. People with high agreeableness are cooperative and likable. People with low agreeableness are suspicious of others and sometimes aggressive, which makes it more difficult for people to find them pleasant to be around.
- **Conscientiousness.** Refers to a person's level of self-organization and motivation. People with high conscientiousness are methodical, motivated, and dependable. People with low conscientiousness are less focused, less careful, and less dependable.
- **Neuroticism.** Refers to a person's level of negative thoughts regarding himself or herself. People high in neuroticism are insecure and experience emotional distress and may be

perceived as unstable. People low in neuroticism are more relaxed, have less emotional swings, and are perceived as more stable.

- Openness. Refers to a person's willingness to consider new ideas and perspectives. People high in openness are creative and are perceived as open minded. People low in openness are more rigid and set in their thinking and are perceived as "set in their ways."

Scholarship related to personality serves many purposes, and some of them tie directly to perception. Corporations and television studios spend millions of dollars on developing personality profiles and personality testing. Corporations can make hiring and promotion decisions based on personality test results, which can save them money and time if they can weed out those who don't "fit" the position before they get in the door and drain resources. Television studios make casting decisions based on personality profiles because they know that certain personalities evoke strong and specific reactions from viewers. The reality television show *Survivor* has done more than one season where they bring back "Heroes and Villains," which already indicates that the returning cast members made strong impressions on the show's producers and audience members. Think about the reality television stars that you love to root for, want to see lose, and can't stand to look at or look away from. Shows like *Celebrity Rehab* intentionally cast fading stars who already have strong personalities and emotional and addiction issues in order to create the kind of human train wrecks that attract millions of viewers. So why does this work?

It is likely that you have more in common with that reality TV star than you care to admit. We tend to focus on personality traits in others that we feel are important to our own personality. What we like in ourselves, we like in others, and what we dislike in ourselves, we dislike in others. If you admire a person's loyalty, then loyalty is probably a trait that you think you possess as well. If you work hard to be positive and motivated and suppress negative and unproductive urges within yourself, you will likely think harshly about those negative traits in someone else. After all, if you can suppress your negativity, why can't they do the same? This way of thinking isn't always accurate or logical, but it is common.

The concept of assumed similarity refers to our tendency to perceive others as similar to us. When we don't have enough information about a person to know their key personality traits, we fill in the gaps—usually assuming they possess traits similar to those we see in ourselves. We also tend to assume that people have similar attitudes, or likes and dislikes, as us. If you set your friend up with a man you think she'll really like only to find out there was no chemistry when they met, you may be surprised to realize your friend doesn't have the same taste in men as you. Even though we may assume more trait and taste similarity between our significant others and ourselves than there actually is, research generally finds that while people do interpersonally group based on many characteristics including race, class, and intelligence, the findings don't show that people with similar personalities group together. Andrew Beer and David Watson, "Personality Judgement at Zero Acquaintance: Agreement, Assumed Similarity, and Implicit Simplicity," *Journal of Personality Assessment* 90, no. 3 (2008): 252.

In summary, personality affects our perception, and we all tend to be amateur personality scholars given the amount of effort we put into assuming and evaluating others' personality traits. This bank of knowledge we accumulate based on previous interactions with people is used

to help us predict how interactions will unfold and help us manage our interpersonal relationships. When we size up a person based on their personality, we are auditioning or interviewing them in a way to see if we think there is compatibility. We use these implicit personality theories to generalize a person's overall personality from the traits we can perceive. The theories are "implicit" because they are not of academic but of experience-based origin, and the information we use to theorize about people's personalities isn't explicitly known or observed but implied. In other words, we use previous experience to guess other people's personality traits. We then assume more about a person based on the personality traits we assign to them.

This process of assuming has its advantages and drawbacks. In terms of advantages, the use of implicit personality theories offers us a perceptual shortcut that can be useful when we first meet someone. Our assessment of their traits and subsequent assumptions about who they are as a person makes us feel like we "know the person," which reduces uncertainty and facilitates further interaction. In terms of drawbacks, our experience-based assumptions aren't always correct, but they are still persuasive and enduring. As we have already learned, first impressions carry a lot of weight in terms of how they influence further interaction. Positive and negative impressions formed early can also lead to a halo effect or a horn effect, which we discussed earlier. Personality-based impressions can also connect to impressions based on physical and environmental cues to make them even stronger. For example, perceiving another person as attractive can create a halo effect that then leads you to look for behavioral cues that you can then tie to positive personality traits. You may notice that the attractive person also says "please" and "thank you," which increases his or her likeability. You may notice that the person has clean and fashionable shoes, which leads you to believe he or she is professional and competent but also trendy and hip. Now you have an overall positive impression of this person that will affect your subsequent behaviors. But how accurate were your impressions? If on your way home you realize you just bought a car from this person, who happened to be a car salesperson, that was \$7,000 over your price range, you might have second thoughts about how good a person he or she actually is.

### Key Takeaways

- We use attributions to interpret perceptual information, specifically, people's behavior. Internal attributions connect behavior to internal characteristics such as personality traits. External attributions connect behavior to external characteristics such as situational factors.
  - Two common perceptual errors that occur in the process of attribution are the fundamental attribution error and the self-serving bias.
    - The fundamental attribution error refers to our tendency to overattribute other people's behaviors to internal rather than external causes.
    - The self-serving bias refers to our tendency to overattribute our successes to internal factors and overattribute our failures to external factors.
- First and last impressions are powerful forces in the perception process. The primacy effect is a perceptual tendency to place more importance on initial impressions than later impressions. The recency effect is the perceptual tendency to place more importance on the most recent impressions over earlier impressions.

- Physical and environmental cues such as clothing, grooming, attractiveness, and material objects influence the impressions that we form of people.
- The halo effect describes a perceptual effect that occurs when initial positive impressions lead us to view later interactions as positive. The horn effect describes a perceptual effect that occurs when initial negative impressions lead us to view later interactions as negative.
- Cultural identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, class, ability, nationality, and age all affect the perceptions that we make about basic sensory information such as sounds and smells as well as larger concepts such as marriage and privacy. Despite the fact that much popular knowledge claims that women and men communicate very differently, communication processes for each gender are more similar than different.
- Personality affects perception in many ways. Our personality traits, which are our underlying and enduring motivations for thinking and behaving the way we do, affect how we see others and ourselves. We use observed and implied personality traits to form impressions of others, which then influence how we act toward them.

## Exercises

1. Think of a recent conflict and how you explained the behavior that caused the conflict and subsequently formed impressions about the other person based on your perceptions. Briefly describe the conflict situation and then identify internal and external attributions for your behavior and the behavior of the other person. Is there any evidence of the fundamental attribution error or self-serving bias in this conflict encounter? If so, what?
2. Describe a situation in which you believe the primacy and/or recency effect influenced your perceptions of a person or event.
3. Has your perception of something ever changed because of exposure to cultural difference? For example, have you grown to like a kind of food, music, clothing, or other custom that you earlier perceived unfavorably?

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## 2.3 Self Concept

### Learning Objectives

- Define self-concept and discuss how we develop our self-concept.
- Define self-esteem and discuss how we develop self-esteem.
- Explain how social comparison theory and self-discrepancy theory influence self-perception.
- Discuss how social norms, family, culture, and media influence self-perception.
- Define self-presentation and discuss common self-presentation strategies.

Just as our perception of others affects how we communicate, so does our perception of ourselves. But what influences our self-perception? How much of our self is a product of our own making and how much of it is constructed based on how others react to us? How do we present ourselves to others in ways that maintain our sense of self or challenge how others see us? We will begin to answer these questions in this section as we explore self-concept, self-esteem, and self-presentation.

## Self-Concept

Self-concept refers to the overall idea of who a person thinks he or she is. If I said, “Tell me who you are,” your answers would be clues as to how you see yourself, your self-concept. Each person has an overall self-concept that might be encapsulated in a short list of overarching characteristics that he or she finds important. But each person’s self-concept is also influenced by context, meaning we think differently about ourselves depending on the situation we are in. In some situations, personal characteristics, such as our abilities, personality, and other distinguishing features, will best describe who we are. You might consider yourself laid back, traditional, funny, open minded, or driven, or you might label yourself a leader or a thrill seeker. In other situations, our self-concept may be tied to group or cultural membership. For example, you might consider yourself a member of the Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity, a Southerner, or a member of the track team.

Our self-concept is also formed through our interactions with others and their reactions to us. The concept of the looking glass self explains that we see ourselves reflected in other people’s reactions to us and then form our self-concept based on how we believe other people see us. This reflective process of building our self-concept is based on what other people have actually said, such as “You’re a good listener,” and other people’s actions, such as coming to you for advice. These thoughts evoke emotional responses that feed into our self-concept. For example, you may think, “I’m glad that people can count on me to listen to their problems.”

We also develop our self-concept through comparisons to other people. Social comparison theory states that we describe and evaluate ourselves in terms of how we compare to other people. Social comparisons are based on two dimensions: superiority/inferiority and similarity/difference. In terms of superiority and inferiority, we evaluate characteristics like attractiveness, intelligence, athletic ability, and so on. For example, you may judge yourself to be more intelligent than your brother or less athletic than your best friend, and these judgments are incorporated into your self-concept. This process of comparison and evaluation isn’t necessarily a bad thing, but it can have negative consequences if our reference group isn’t appropriate. Reference groups are the groups we use for social comparison, and they typically change based on what we are evaluating. In terms of athletic ability, many people choose unreasonable reference groups with which to engage in social comparison. If a man wants to get into better shape and starts an exercise routine, he may be discouraged by his difficulty keeping up with the aerobics instructor or running partner and judge himself as inferior, which could negatively affect his self-concept. Using as a reference group people who have only recently started a fitness program but have shown progress could help maintain a more accurate and hopefully positive self-concept.

We also engage in social comparison based on similarity and difference. Since self-concept is context specific, similarity may be desirable in some situations and difference more desirable in others. Factors like age and personality may influence whether or not we want to fit in or stand out. Although we compare ourselves to others throughout our lives, adolescent and teen years usually bring new pressure to be similar to or different from particular reference groups. Think of all the cliques in high school and how people voluntarily and involuntarily broke off into groups based on popularity, interest, culture, or grade level. Some kids in your high school probably wanted to fit in with and be similar to other people in the marching band but be different from the football players. Conversely, athletes were probably more apt to compare themselves, in terms of similar athletic ability, to other athletes rather than kids in show choir. But social comparison can be complicated by perceptual influences. As we learned earlier, we organize information based on similarity and difference, but these patterns don't always hold true. Even though students involved in athletics and students involved in arts may seem very different, a dancer or singer may also be very athletic, perhaps even more so than a member of the football team. As with other aspects of perception, there are positive and negative consequences of social comparison.

We generally want to know where we fall in terms of ability and performance as compared to others, but what people do with this information and how it affects self-concept varies. Not all people feel they need to be at the top of the list, but some won't stop until they get the high score on the video game or set a new school record in a track-and-field event. Some people strive to be first chair in the clarinet section of the orchestra, while another person may be content to be second chair. The education system promotes social comparison through grades and rewards such as honor rolls and dean's lists. Although education and privacy laws prevent me from displaying each student's grade on a test or paper for the whole class to see, I do typically report the aggregate grades, meaning the total number of As, Bs, Cs, and so on. This doesn't violate anyone's privacy rights, but it allows students to see where they fell in the distribution. This type of social comparison can be used as motivation. The student who was one of only three out of twenty-three to get a D on the exam knows that most of her classmates are performing better than she is, which may lead her to think, "If they can do it, I can do it." But social comparison that isn't reasoned can have negative effects and result in negative thoughts like "Look at how bad I did. Man, I'm stupid!" These negative thoughts can lead to negative behaviors, because we try to maintain internal consistency, meaning we act in ways that match up with our self-concept. So if the student begins to question her academic abilities and then incorporates an assessment of herself as a "bad student" into her self-concept, she may then behave in ways consistent with that, which is only going to worsen her academic performance. Additionally, a student might be comforted to learn that he isn't the only person who got a D and then not feel the need to try to improve, since he has company. You can see in this example that evaluations we place on our self-concept can lead to cycles of thinking and acting. These cycles relate to self-esteem and self-efficacy, which are components of our self-concept.

## **Self-Esteem**

Self-esteem refers to the judgments and evaluations we make about our self-concept. While self-concept is a broad description of the self, self-esteem is a more specifically an evaluation of the self. If I again prompted you to "Tell me who you are," and then asked you to evaluate (label as

good/bad, positive/negative, desirable/undesirable) each of the things you listed about yourself, I would get clues about your self-esteem. Like self-concept, self-esteem has general and specific elements. Generally, some people are more likely to evaluate themselves positively while others are more likely to evaluate themselves negatively. More specifically, our self-esteem varies across our life span and across contexts.

How we judge ourselves affects our communication and our behaviors, but not every negative or positive judgment carries the same weight. The negative evaluation of a trait that isn't very important for our self-concept will likely not result in a loss of self-esteem. For example, I am not very good at drawing. While I appreciate drawing as an art form, I don't consider drawing ability to be a very big part of my self-concept. If someone critiqued my drawing ability, my self-esteem wouldn't take a big hit. I do consider myself a good teacher, however, and I have spent and continue to spend considerable time and effort on improving my knowledge of teaching and my teaching skills. If someone critiqued my teaching knowledge and/or abilities, my self-esteem would definitely be hurt. This doesn't mean that we can't be evaluated on something we find important. Even though teaching is very important to my self-concept, I am regularly evaluated on it. Every semester, I am evaluated by my students, and every year, I am evaluated by my dean, department chair, and colleagues. Most of that feedback is in the form of constructive criticism, which can still be difficult to receive, but when taken in the spirit of self-improvement, it is valuable and may even enhance our self-concept and self-esteem. In fact, in professional contexts, people with higher self-esteem are more likely to work harder based on negative feedback, are less negatively affected by work stress, are able to handle workplace conflict better, and are better able to work independently and solve problems. Self-esteem isn't the only factor that contributes to our self-concept; perceptions about our competence also play a role in developing our sense of self.

Self-Efficacy refers to the judgments people make about their ability to perform a task within a specific context. As you can see in Figure 2.2 “Relationship between Self-Efficacy, Self-Esteem, and Self-Concept”, judgments about our self-efficacy influence our self-esteem, which influences our self-concept. The following example also illustrates these interconnections.



Figure 2.2 Relationship between Self-Efficacy, Self-Esteem, and Self-Concept

Pedro did a good job on his first college speech. During a meeting with his professor, Pedro indicates that he is confident going into the next speech and thinks he will do well. This skill-based assessment is an indication that Pedro has a high level of self-efficacy related to public speaking. If he does well on the speech, the praise from his classmates and professor will reinforce his self-efficacy and lead him to positively evaluate his speaking skills, which will contribute to his self-esteem. By the end of the class, Pedro likely thinks of himself as a good public speaker, which may then become an important part of his self-concept. Throughout these points of connection, it's important to remember that self-perception affects how we communicate, behave, and perceive other things. Pedro's increased feeling of self-efficacy may give him more confidence in his delivery, which will likely result in positive feedback that reinforces his self-perception. He may start to perceive his professor more positively since they share an interest in public speaking, and he may begin to notice other people's speaking skills more during class presentations and public lectures. Over time, he may even start to think about changing his major to communication or pursuing career options that incorporate public speaking, which would further integrate being "a good public speaker" into his self-concept. You can hopefully see that these interconnections can create powerful positive or negative cycles. While some of this process is under our control, much of it is also shaped by the people in our lives.

The verbal and nonverbal feedback we get from people affect our feelings of self-efficacy and our self-esteem. As we saw in Pedro's example, being given positive feedback can increase our self-efficacy, which may make us more likely to engage in a similar task in the future. Obviously, negative feedback can lead to decreased self-efficacy and a declining interest in engaging with the activity again. In general, people adjust their expectations about their abilities based on feedback they get from others. Positive feedback tends to make people raise their expectations for themselves and negative feedback does the opposite, which ultimately affects behaviors and creates the cycle. When feedback from others is different from how we view ourselves, additional cycles may develop that impact self-esteem and self-concept.

Self-discrepancy theory states that people have beliefs about and expectations for their actual and potential selves that do not always match up with what they actually experience. To understand this theory, we have to understand the different "selves" that make up our self-concept, which are the actual, ideal, and ought selves. The actual self consists of the attributes that you or someone else believes you actually possess. The ideal self consists of the attributes that you or someone else would like you to possess. The ought self consists of the attributes you or someone else believes you should possess.

These different selves can conflict with each other in various combinations. Discrepancies between the actual and ideal/ought selves can be motivating in some ways and prompt people to act for self-improvement. For example, if your ought self should volunteer more for the local animal shelter, then your actual self may be more inclined to do so. Discrepancies between the ideal and ought selves can be especially stressful. For example, many professional women who are also mothers have an ideal view of self that includes professional success and advancement. They may also have an ought self that includes a sense of duty and obligation to be a full-time

mother. The actual self may be someone who does OK at both but doesn't quite live up to the expectations of either. These discrepancies do not just create cognitive unease—they also lead to emotional, behavioral, and communicative changes.

When we compare the actual self to the expectations of ourselves and others, we can see particular patterns of emotional and behavioral effects. When our actual self doesn't match up with our own ideals of self, we are not obtaining our own desires and hopes, which can lead to feelings of dejection including disappointment, dissatisfaction, and frustration. For example, if your ideal self has no credit card debt and your actual self does, you may be frustrated with your lack of financial discipline and be motivated to stick to your budget and pay off your credit card bills.

When our actual self doesn't match up with other people's ideals for us, we may not be obtaining significant others' desires and hopes, which can lead to feelings of dejection including shame, embarrassment, and concern for losing the affection or approval of others. For example, if a significant other sees you as an "A" student and you get a 2.8 GPA your first year of college, then you may be embarrassed to share your grades with that person.

When our actual self doesn't match up with what we think other people think we should obtain, we are not living up to the ought self that we think others have constructed for us, which can lead to feelings of agitation, feeling threatened, and fearing potential punishment. For example, if your parents think you should follow in their footsteps and take over the family business, but your actual self wants to go into the military, then you may be unsure of what to do and fear being isolated from the family.

Finally, when our actual self doesn't match up with what we think we should obtain, we are not meeting what we see as our duties or obligations, which can lead to feelings of agitation including guilt, weakness, and a feeling that we have fallen short of our moral standard. For example, if your ought self should volunteer more for the local animal shelter, then your actual self may be more inclined to do so due to the guilt of reading about the increasing number of animals being housed at the facility. The following is a review of the four potential discrepancies between selves:

- Actual vs. own ideals. We have an overall feeling that we are not obtaining our desires and hopes, which leads to feelings of disappointment, dissatisfaction, and frustration.
- Actual vs. others' ideals. We have an overall feeling that we are not obtaining significant others' desires and hopes for us, which leads to feelings of shame and embarrassment.
- Actual vs. others' ought. We have an overall feeling that we are not meeting what others see as our duties and obligations, which leads to feelings of agitation including fear of potential punishment.
- Actual vs. own ought. We have an overall feeling that we are not meeting our duties and obligations, which can lead to a feeling that we have fallen short of our own moral standards.

## **Influences on Self-Concept**

We have already learned that other people influence our self-concept and self-esteem. While interactions we have with individuals and groups are definitely important to consider, we must also note the influence that larger, more systemic forces have on our self-perception. Social and family influences, culture, and the media all play a role in shaping who we think we are and how we feel about ourselves. Although these are powerful socializing forces, there are ways to maintain some control over our self-perception.

## **Social and Family Influences**

Various forces help socialize us into our respective social and cultural groups and play a powerful role in presenting us with options about who we can be. While we may like to think that our self-perception starts with a blank canvas, our perceptions are limited by our experiences and various social and cultural contexts.

Parents and peers shape our self-perceptions in positive and negative ways. Feedback that we get from significant others, which includes close family, can lead to positive views of self. In the past few years, however, there has been a public discussion and debate about how much positive reinforcement people should give to others, especially children. The following questions have been raised: Do we have current and upcoming generations that have been overpraised? Is the praise given warranted? What are the positive and negative effects of praise? What is the end goal of the praise? Let's briefly look at this discussion and its connection to self-perception.

Whether praise is warranted or not is very subjective and specific to each person and context, but in general there have been questions raised about the potential negative effects of too much praise. Motivation is the underlying force that drives us to do things. Sometimes we are intrinsically motivated, meaning we want to do something for the love of doing it or the resulting internal satisfaction. Other times we are extrinsically motivated, meaning we do something to receive a reward or avoid punishment. If you put effort into completing a short documentary for a class because you love filmmaking and editing, you have been largely motivated by intrinsic forces. If you complete the documentary because you want an "A" and know that if you fail your parents will not give you money for your spring break trip, then you are motivated by extrinsic factors. Both can, of course, effectively motivate us. Praise is a form of extrinsic reward, and if there is an actual reward associated with the praise, like money or special recognition, some people speculate that intrinsic motivation will suffer. But what's so good about intrinsic motivation? Intrinsic motivation is more substantial and long-lasting than extrinsic motivation and can lead to the development of a work ethic and sense of pride in one's abilities. Intrinsic motivation can move people to accomplish great things over long periods of time and be happy despite the effort and sacrifices made. Extrinsic motivation dies when the reward stops. Additionally, too much praise can lead people to have a misguided sense of their abilities. College professors who are reluctant to fail students who produce failing work may be setting those students up to be shocked when their supervisor critiques their abilities or output once they get into a professional context.

There are cultural differences in the amount of praise and positive feedback that teachers and parents give their children. For example, teachers give less positive reinforcement in Japanese and Taiwanese classrooms than do teachers in US classrooms. Chinese and Kenyan parents do

not regularly praise their children because they fear it may make them too individualistic, rude, or arrogant. So the phenomenon of overpraising isn't universal, and the debate over its potential effects is not resolved.

Research has also found that communication patterns develop between parents and children that are common to many verbally and physically abusive relationships. Such patterns have negative effects on a child's self-efficacy and self-esteem. As you'll recall from our earlier discussion, attributions are links we make to identify the cause of a behavior. In the case of aggressive or abusive parents, they are not as able to distinguish between mistakes and intentional behaviors, often seeing honest mistakes as intended and reacting negatively to the child. Such parents also communicate generally negative evaluations to their child by saying, for example, "You can't do anything right!" or "You're a bad girl." When children do exhibit positive behaviors, abusive parents are more likely to use external attributions that diminish the achievement of the child by saying, for example, "You only won because the other team was off their game." In general, abusive parents have unpredictable reactions to their children's positive and negative behavior, which creates an uncertain and often scary climate for a child that can lead to lower self-esteem and erratic or aggressive behavior. The cycles of praise and blame are just two examples of how the family as a socializing force can influence our self-perceptions. Culture also influences how we see ourselves.

## **Culture**

How people perceive themselves varies across cultures. For example, many cultures exhibit a phenomenon known as the self-enhancement bias, meaning that we tend to emphasize our desirable qualities relative to other people. But the degree to which people engage in self-enhancement varies. A review of many studies in this area found that people in Western countries such as the United States were significantly more likely to self-enhance than people in countries such as Japan. Many scholars explain this variation using a common measure of cultural variation that claims people in individualistic cultures are more likely to engage in competition and openly praise accomplishments than people in collectivistic cultures. The difference in self-enhancement has also been tied to economics, with scholars arguing that people in countries with greater income inequality are more likely to view themselves as superior to others or want to be perceived as superior to others (even if they don't have economic wealth) in order to conform to the country's values and norms. This holds true because countries with high levels of economic inequality, like the United States, typically value competition and the right to boast about winning or succeeding, while countries with more economic equality, like Japan, have a cultural norm of modesty.

Race also plays a role in self-perception. For example, positive self-esteem and self-efficacy tend to be higher in African American adolescent girls than Caucasian girls. In fact, more recent studies have discounted much of the early research on race and self-esteem that purported that African Americans of all ages have lower self-esteem than whites. Self-perception becomes more complex when we consider biracial individuals—more specifically those born to couples comprising an African American and a white parent. In such cases, it is challenging for biracial individuals to embrace both of their heritages, and social comparison becomes more difficult due to diverse and sometimes conflicting reference groups. Since many biracial individuals identify

as and are considered African American by society, living and working within a black community can help foster more positive self-perceptions in these biracial individuals. Such a community offers a more nurturing environment and a buffer zone from racist attitudes but simultaneously distances biracial individuals from their white identity. Conversely, immersion into a predominantly white community and separation from a black community can lead biracial individuals to internalize negative views of people of color and perhaps develop a sense of inferiority. Gender intersects with culture and biracial identity to create different experiences and challenges for biracial men and women. Biracial men have more difficulty accepting their potential occupational limits, especially if they have white fathers, and biracial women have difficulty accepting their black features, such as hair and facial features. All these challenges lead to a sense of being marginalized from both ethnic groups and interfere in the development of positive self-esteem and a stable self-concept.

There are some general differences in terms of gender and self-perception that relate to self-concept, self-efficacy, and envisioning ideal selves. As with any cultural differences, these are generalizations that have been supported by research, but they do not represent all individuals within a group. Regarding self-concept, men are more likely to describe themselves in terms of their group membership, and women are more likely to include references to relationships in their self-descriptions. For example, a man may note that he is a Tarheel fan, a boat enthusiast, or a member of the Rotary Club, and a woman may note that she is a mother of two or a loyal friend.

Regarding self-efficacy, men tend to have higher perceptions of self-efficacy than women. In terms of actual and ideal selves, men and women in a variety of countries both described their ideal self as more masculine. As was noted earlier, gender differences are interesting to study but are very often exaggerated beyond the actual variations. Socialization and internalization of societal norms for gender differences accounts for much more of our perceived differences than do innate or natural differences between genders. These gender norms may be explicitly stated—for example, a mother may say to her son, “Boys don’t play with dolls”—or they may be more implicit, with girls being encouraged to pursue historically feminine professions like teaching or nursing without others actually stating the expectation.

## **Media**

The representations we see in the media affect our self-perception. The vast majority of media images include idealized representations of attractiveness. Despite the fact that the images of people we see in glossy magazines and on movie screens are not typically what we see when we look at the people around us in a classroom, at work, or at the grocery store, many of us continue to hold ourselves to an unrealistic standard of beauty and attractiveness. Movies, magazines, and television shows are filled with beautiful people, and less attractive actors, when they are present in the media, are typically portrayed as the butt of jokes, villains, or only as background extras. Aside from overall attractiveness, the media also offers narrow representations of acceptable body weight.

Researchers have found that only 12 percent of prime-time characters are overweight, which is dramatically less than the national statistics for obesity among the actual US population. Further,

an analysis of how weight is discussed on prime-time sitcoms found that heavier female characters were often the targets of negative comments and jokes that audience members responded to with laughter. Conversely, positive comments about women's bodies were related to their thinness. In short, the heavier the character, the more negative the comments, and the thinner the character, the more positive the comments. The same researchers analyzed sitcoms for content regarding male characters' weight and found that although comments regarding their weight were made, they were fewer in number and not as negative, ultimately supporting the notion that overweight male characters are more accepted in media than overweight female characters. Much more attention has been paid in recent years to the potential negative effects of such narrow media representations. The following "Getting Critical" box explores the role of media in the construction of body image.

In terms of self-concept, media representations offer us guidance on what is acceptable or unacceptable and valued or not valued in our society. Mediated messages, in general, reinforce cultural stereotypes related to race, gender, age, sexual orientation, ability, and class. People from historically marginalized groups must look much harder than those in the dominant groups to find positive representations of their identities in media. As a critical thinker, it is important to question media messages and to examine who is included and who is excluded.

Advertising in particular encourages people to engage in social comparison, regularly communicating to us that we are inferior because we lack a certain product or that we need to change some aspect of our life to keep up with and be similar to others. For example, for many years advertising targeted to women instilled in them a fear of having a dirty house, selling them products that promised to keep their house clean, make their family happy, and impress their friends and neighbors. Now messages tell us to fear becoming old or unattractive, selling products to keep our skin tight and clear, which will in turn make us happy and popular.

Examples – "Getting Critical"

### **Body Image and Self-Concept**

Take a look at any magazine, television show, or movie and you will most likely see very beautiful people. When you look around you in your daily life, there are likely not as many glamorous and gorgeous people. Scholars and media critics have critiqued this discrepancy for decades because it has contributed to many social issues and public health issues ranging from body dysmorphic disorder, to eating disorders, to lowered self-esteem.

Much of the media is driven by advertising, and the business of media has been to perpetuate a "culture of lack." This means that we are constantly told, via mediated images, that we lack something. In short, advertisements often tell us we don't have enough money, enough beauty, or enough material possessions. Over the past few decades, women's bodies in the media have gotten smaller and thinner, while men's bodies have gotten bigger and more muscular. At the same time, the US population has become dramatically more obese. As research shows that men and women are becoming more and more dissatisfied with their bodies, which ultimately affects their self-concept and self-esteem, health and beauty product lines proliferate and cosmetic surgeries and other types of enhancements become more and more popular. From young children

to older adults, people are becoming more aware of and oftentimes unhappy with their bodies, which results in a variety of self-perception problems.

1. How do you think the media influences your self-perception and body image?
2. Describe the typical man that is portrayed in the media. Describe the typical woman that is portrayed in the media. What impressions do these typical bodies make on others? What are the potential positive and negative effects of the way the media portrays the human body?
3. Find an example of an “atypical” body represented in the media (a magazine, TV show, or movie). Is this person presented in a positive, negative, or neutral way? Why do you think this person was chosen?

## Self-Presentation

How we perceive ourselves manifests in how we present ourselves to others. Self-presentation is the process of strategically concealing or revealing personal information in order to influence others' perceptions. We engage in this process daily and for different reasons. Although people occasionally intentionally deceive others in the process of self-presentation, in general we try to make a good impression while still remaining authentic. Since self-presentation helps meet our instrumental, relational, and identity needs, we stand to lose quite a bit if we are caught intentionally misrepresenting ourselves. In May of 2012, Yahoo!'s CEO resigned after it became known that he stated on official documents that he had two college degrees when he actually only had one. In a similar incident, a woman who had long served as the dean of admissions for the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology was dismissed from her position after it was learned that she had only attended one year of college and had falsely indicated she had a bachelor's and master's degree. Such incidents clearly show that although people can get away with such false self-presentation for a while, the eventual consequences of being found out are dire. As communicators, we sometimes engage in more subtle forms of inauthentic self-presentation. For example, a person may state or imply that they know more about a subject or situation than they actually do in order to seem smart or “in the loop.” During a speech, a speaker works on a polished and competent delivery to distract from a lack of substantive content. These cases of strategic self-presentation may not ever be found out, but communicators should still avoid them as they do not live up to the standards of ethical communication.

Consciously and competently engaging in self-presentation can have benefits because we can provide others with a more positive and accurate picture of who we are. People who are skilled at impression management are typically more engaging and confident, which allows others to pick up on more cues from which to form impressions. Being a skilled self-presenter draws on many of the practices used by competent communicators, including becoming a higher self-monitor. When self-presentation skills and self-monitoring skills combine, communicators can simultaneously monitor their own expressions, the reaction of others, and the situational and social context. Sometimes people get help with their self-presentation. Although most people can't afford or wouldn't think of hiring an image consultant, some people have started generously donating their self-presentation expertise to help others. Many people who have been

riding the tough job market for a year or more get discouraged and may consider giving up on their job search. Now a project called “Style Me Hired” has started offering free makeovers to jobless people in order to offer them new motivation and help them make favorable impressions and hopefully get a job offer.

There are two main types of self-presentation: prosocial and self-serving. Prosocial self-presentation entails behaviors that present a person as a role model and make a person more likable and attractive. For example, a supervisor may call on her employees to uphold high standards for business ethics, model that behavior in her own actions, and compliment others when they exemplify those standards. Self-serving self-presentation entails behaviors that present a person as highly skilled, willing to challenge others, and someone not to be messed with. For example, a supervisor may publicly take credit for the accomplishments of others or publicly critique an employee who failed to meet a particular standard. In summary, prosocial strategies are aimed at benefiting others, while self-serving strategies benefit the self at the expense of others.

In general, we strive to present a public image that matches up with our self-concept, but we can also use self-presentation strategies to enhance our self-concept. When we present ourselves in order to evoke a positive evaluative response, we are engaging in self-enhancement. In the pursuit of self-enhancement, a person might try to be as appealing as possible in a particular area or with a particular person to gain feedback that will enhance one’s self-esteem. For example, a singer might train and practice for weeks before singing in front of a well-respected vocal coach but not invest as much effort in preparing to sing in front of friends. Although positive feedback from friends is beneficial, positive feedback from an experienced singer could enhance a person’s self-concept. Self-enhancement can be productive and achieved competently, or it can be used inappropriately. Using self-enhancement behaviors just to gain the approval of others or out of self-centeredness may lead people to communicate in ways that are perceived as phony or overbearing and end up making an unfavorable impression.

Examples – “Getting Plugged In”

### **Self-Presentation Online: Social Media, Digital Trails, and Your Reputation**

Although social networking has long been a way to keep in touch with friends and colleagues, the advent of social media has made the process of making connections and those all-important first impressions much more complex. Just looking at Facebook as an example, we can clearly see that the very acts of constructing a profile, posting status updates, “liking” certain things, and sharing various information via Facebook features and apps is self-presentation. People also form impressions based on the number of friends we have and the photos and posts that other people tag us in. All this information floating around can be difficult to manage. So how do we manage the impressions we make digitally given that there is a permanent record?

Research shows that people overall engage in positive and honest self-presentation on Facebook. Since people know how visible the information they post is, they may choose to only reveal things they think will form favorable impressions. But the mediated nature of Facebook also leads some people to disclose more personal information than they might otherwise in such a

public or semipublic forum. These hyperpersonal disclosures run the risk of forming negative impressions based on who sees them. In general, the ease of digital communication, not just on Facebook, has presented new challenges for our self-control and information management. Sending someone a sexually provocative image used to take some effort before the age of digital cameras, but now “sexting” an explicit photo only takes a few seconds. So people who would have likely not engaged in such behavior before are more tempted to now, and it is the desire to present oneself as desirable or cool that leads people to send photos they may later regret. In fact, new technology in the form of apps is trying to give people a little more control over the exchange of digital information. An iPhone app called “Snapchat” allows users to send photos that will only be visible for a few seconds. Although this isn’t a guaranteed safety net, the demand for such apps is increasing, which illustrates the point that we all now leave digital trails of information that can be useful in terms of our self-presentation but can also create new challenges in terms of managing the information floating around from which others may form impressions of us.

1. What impressions do you want people to form of you based on the information they can see on your Facebook page?
2. Have you ever used social media or the Internet to do “research” on a person? What things would you find favorable and unfavorable?
3. Do you have any guidelines you follow regarding what information about yourself you will put online or not? If so, what are they? If not, why?

## Key Takeaways

- Our self-concept is the overall idea of who we think we are. It is developed through our interactions with others and through social comparison that allows us to compare our beliefs and behaviors to others.
- Our self-esteem is based on the evaluations and judgments we make about various characteristics of our self-concept. It is developed through an assessment and evaluation of our various skills and abilities, known as self-efficacy, and through a comparison and evaluation of who we are, who we would like to be, and who we should be (self-discrepancy theory).
- Social comparison theory and self-discrepancy theory affect our self-concept and self-esteem because through comparison with others and comparison of our actual, ideal, and ought selves we make judgments about who we are and our self-worth. These judgments then affect how we communicate and behave.
- Socializing forces like family, culture, and media affect our self-perception because they give us feedback on who we are. This feedback can be evaluated positively or negatively and can lead to positive or negative patterns that influence our self-perception and then our communication.
- Self-presentation refers to the process of strategically concealing and/or revealing personal information in order to influence others’ perceptions. Prosocial self-presentation

is intended to benefit others and self-serving self-presentation is intended to benefit the self at the expense of others. People also engage in self-enhancement, which is a self-presentation strategy by which people intentionally seek out positive evaluations.

## Exercises

1. Make a list of characteristics that describe who you are (your self-concept). After looking at the list, see if you can come up with a few words that summarize the list to narrow in on the key features of your self-concept. Go back over the first list and evaluate each characteristic, for example noting whether it is something you do well/poorly, something that is good/bad, positive/negative, desirable/undesirable. Is the overall list more positive or more negative? After doing these exercises, what have you learned about your self-concept and self-esteem?
2. Discuss at least one time in which you had a discrepancy or tension between two of the three selves described by self-discrepancy theory (the actual, ideal, and ought selves). What effect did this discrepancy have on your self-concept and/or self-esteem?
3. Take one of the socializing forces discussed (family, culture, or media) and identify at least one positive and one negative influence that it/they have had on your self-concept and/or self-esteem.
4. Getting integrated: Discuss some ways that you might strategically engage in self-presentation to influence the impressions of others in an academic, a professional, a personal, and a civic context.

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## 2.4 Improving Perception

### Learning Objectives

- Discuss strategies for improving perception of others.
- Employ perception checking to improve perception of others.
- Discuss strategies for improving self-concept.

So far, we have learned about the perception process and how we perceive others and ourselves. Now we will turn to a discussion of how to improve our perception. Our self-perception can be improved by becoming aware of how schema, socializing forces, self-fulfilling prophecies, and negative patterns of thinking can distort our ability to describe and evaluate ourselves. How we perceive others can be improved by developing better listening and empathetic skills, becoming aware of stereotypes and prejudice, developing self-awareness through self-reflection, and engaging in perception checking.

### Overcoming Barriers to our Perceptions/Perceiving Others

There are many barriers that prevent us from competently perceiving others. While some are more difficult to overcome than others, they can all be addressed by raising our awareness of the influences around us and committing to monitoring, reflecting on, and changing some of our communication habits. Whether it is our lazy listening skills, lack of empathy, or stereotypes and prejudice, various filters and blinders influence how we perceive and respond to others.

### Develop Empathetic Listening Skills

As we will learn in Chapter 5 “Listening”, effective listening is not easy, and most of us do not make a concerted effort to overcome common barriers to listening. Our fast-paced lives and cultural values that emphasize speaking over listening sometimes make listening feel like a chore. But we shouldn’t underestimate the power of listening to make someone else feel better and to open our perceptual field to new sources of information. Empathetic listening can also help us expand our self- and social awareness by learning from other people’s experiences and taking on different perspectives. Empathetic listening is challenging because it requires cognitive and emotional investment that goes beyond the learning of a skill set.

I didn’t know what a lazy listener I was until I started teaching and realized how much time and effort teachers have to put into their jobs. Honestly, at first it was challenging to attentively listen to student issues, thoughts, and questions, but I immediately saw the value in it. To be a good teacher, I had to become a better listener. As a result, I also gained more empathy skills and became a lot more patient. A valuable lesson I learned during this time is best stated as follows: “Everyone’s biggest problem is his or her biggest problem.” If one person’s biggest problem is getting enough money together to buy a new cell phone and another person’s biggest problem is

getting enough money together to get much needed medication, each of these people is likely experiencing a similar amount of stress. As an outsider, we might look at this example and think about how a cell phone isn't necessary to live but the medication is. But everyone's reality is his or her reality, and when you can concede that someone's reality isn't like yours and you are OK with that, then you have overcome a significant barrier to becoming more aware of the perception process.

I recently had a good student inform me that he was leaving school to pursue other things. He had given speeches about wildfire firefighting and beer brewing and was passionate about both of those things, but not school. As an academic and lover of and advocate for higher education, I wouldn't have made that choice for myself or for him. But I am not him, and I can't assume his perceptions are consistent with mine. I think he was surprised when I said, "I think you are a smart and capable adult, and this is your decision to make, and I respect that. School is not going anywhere, so it'll be here when you're ready to come back. In the meantime, I'd be happy to be a reference for any jobs you're applying for. Just let me know." I wanted to make it clear that I didn't perceive him as irresponsible, immature, misguided, or uncommitted. He later told me that he appreciated my reaction that day.

## **Beware of Stereotypes and Prejudice**

Stereotypes are sets of beliefs that we develop about groups, which we then apply to individuals from that group. Stereotypes are schemata that are taken too far, as they reduce and ignore a person's individuality and the diversity present within a larger group of people. Stereotypes can be based on cultural identities, physical appearance, behavior, speech, beliefs, and values, among other things, and are often caused by a lack of information about the target person or group. Stereotypes can be positive, negative, or neutral, but all run the risk of lowering the quality of our communication.

While the negative effects of stereotypes are pretty straightforward in that they devalue people and prevent us from adapting and revising our schemata, positive stereotypes also have negative consequences. For example, the "model minority" stereotype has been applied to some Asian cultures in the United States. Seemingly positive stereotypes of Asian Americans as hardworking, intelligent, and willing to adapt to "mainstream" culture are not always received as positive and can lead some people within these communities to feel objectified, ignored, or overlooked.

Stereotypes can also lead to double standards that point to larger cultural and social inequalities. There are many more words to describe a sexually active female than a male, and the words used for females are disproportionately negative, while those used for males are more positive. Since stereotypes are generally based on a lack of information, we must take it upon ourselves to gain exposure to new kinds of information and people, which will likely require us to get out of our comfort zones. When we do meet people, we should base the impressions we make on describable behavior rather than inferred or secondhand information. When stereotypes negatively influence our overall feelings and attitudes about a person or group, prejudiced thinking results.

Prejudice is negative feelings or attitudes toward people based on their identity or identities. Prejudice can have individual or widespread negative effects. At the individual level, a hiring manager may not hire a young man with a physical disability (even though that would be illegal if it were the only reason), which negatively affects that one man. However, if pervasive cultural thinking that people with physical disabilities are mentally deficient leads hiring managers all over the country to make similar decisions, then the prejudice has become a social injustice. In another example, when the disease we know today as AIDS started killing large numbers of people in the early 1980s, response by some health and government officials was influenced by prejudice. Since the disease was primarily affecting gay men, Haitian immigrants, and drug users, the disease was prejudged to be a disease that affected only “deviants” and therefore didn’t get the same level of attention it would have otherwise. It took many years, investment of much money, and education campaigns to help people realize that HIV and AIDS do not prejudice based on race or sexual orientation and can affect any human.

## **Engage in Self-Reflection**

A good way to improve your perceptions and increase your communication competence in general is to engage in self-reflection. If a communication encounter doesn’t go well and you want to know why, your self-reflection will be much more useful if you are aware of and can recount your thoughts and actions.

Self-reflection can also help us increase our cultural awareness. Our thought process regarding culture is often “other focused,” meaning that the culture of the other person or group is what stands out in our perception. However, the old adage “know thyself” is appropriate, as we become more aware of our own culture by better understanding other cultures and perspectives. Developing cultural self-awareness often requires us to get out of our comfort zones. Listening to people who are different from us is a key component of developing self-knowledge. This may be uncomfortable, because our taken-for-granted or deeply held beliefs and values may become less certain when we see the multiple perspectives that exist.

We can also become more aware of how our self-concepts influence how we perceive others. We often hold other people to the standards we hold for ourselves or assume that their self-concept should be consistent with our own. For example, if you consider yourself a neat person and think that sloppiness in your personal appearance would show that you are unmotivated, rude, and lazy, then you are likely to think the same of a person you judge to have a sloppy appearance. So asking questions like “Is my impression based on how this person wants to be, or how I think this person should want to be?” can lead to enlightening moments of self-reflection. Asking questions in general about the perceptions you are making is an integral part of perception checking, which we will discuss next.

## **Checking Perception**

Perception checking is a strategy to help us monitor our reactions to and perceptions about people and communication. There are some internal and external strategies we can use to engage in perception checking. In terms of internal strategies, review the various influences on

perception that we have learned about in this chapter and always be willing to ask yourself, “What is influencing the perceptions I am making right now?” Even being aware of what influences are acting on our perceptions makes us more aware of what is happening in the perception process. In terms of external strategies, we can use other people to help verify our perceptions.

The cautionary adage “Things aren’t always as they appear” is useful when evaluating your own perceptions. Sometimes it’s a good idea to bounce your thoughts off someone, especially if the perceptions relate to some high-stakes situation. But not all situations allow us the chance to verify our perceptions. Preventable crimes have been committed because people who saw something suspicious didn’t report it even though they had a bad feeling about it. Of course, we have to walk a line between being reactionary and being too cautious, which is difficult to manage. We all know that we are ethically and sometimes legally required to report someone to the police who is harming himself or herself or others, but sometimes the circumstances are much more uncertain.

The Tony Award–winning play *Doubt: A Parable* and the Academy Award–winning movie based on it deal with the interplay of perception, doubt, and certainty. In the story, which is set in a Bronx, New York, Catholic school in 1964, a young priest with new ideas comes into the school, which is run by a traditional nun who, like many, is not fond of change. The older nun begins a campaign to get the young priest out of her school after becoming convinced that he has had an inappropriate relationship with one of the male students. No conclusive evidence is offered during the course of the story, and the audience is left, as are the characters in the story, to determine for themselves whether or not the priest is “guilty.” The younger priest doesn’t fit into the nun’s schema of how a priest should look and act. He has longer fingernails than other priests, he listens to secular music, and he takes three sugars in his tea. A series of perceptions like this lead the nun to certainty of the priest’s guilt, despite a lack of concrete evidence. Although this is a fictional example, it mirrors many high-profile cases of abuse that have been in the news in recent years. Hopefully we will not find ourselves in such an uncertain and dire position, but in these extreme cases and more mundane daily interactions, perception checking can be useful.

### Examples – Perception Checking Steps

Perception checking helps us slow down perception and communication processes and allows us to have more control over both. Perception checking involves being able to describe what is happening in a given situation, provide multiple interpretations of events or behaviors, and ask yourself and others questions for clarification. Some of this process happens inside our heads, and some happens through interaction. Let’s take an interpersonal conflict as an example.

Stefano and Patrick are roommates. Stefano is in the living room playing a video game when he sees Patrick walk through the room with his suitcase and walk out the front door. Since Patrick didn’t say or wave good-bye, Stefano has to make sense of this encounter, and perception checking can help him do that. First, he needs to try to describe (not evaluate yet) what just happened. This can be done by asking yourself, “What is going on?” In this case, Patrick left without speaking or waving good-bye. Next, Stefano needs to think of some possible

interpretations of what just happened. One interpretation could be that Patrick is mad about something (at him or someone else). Another could be that he was in a hurry and simply forgot, or that he didn't want to interrupt the video game. In this step of perception checking, it is good to be aware of the attributions you are making. You might try to determine if you are overattributing internal or external causes. Lastly, you will want to verify and clarify. So Stefano might ask a mutual friend if she knows what might be bothering Patrick or going on in his life that made him leave so suddenly. Or he may also just want to call, text, or speak to Patrick. During this step, it's important to be aware of punctuation. Even though Stefano has already been thinking about this incident, and is experiencing some conflict, Patrick may have no idea that his actions caused Stefano to worry. If Stefano texts and asks why he's mad (which wouldn't be a good idea because it's an assumption) Patrick may become defensive, which could escalate the conflict. Stefano could just describe the behavior (without judging Patrick) and ask for clarification by saying, "When you left today you didn't say bye or let me know where you were going. I just wanted to check to see if things are OK."

The steps of perception checking as described in the previous scenario are as follows:

- Step 1: Describe the behavior or situation without evaluating or judging it.
- Step 2: Think of 2 possible interpretations of the behavior, being aware of attributions and other influences on the perception process.
- Step 3: Verify what happened and ask for clarification from the other person's perspective. Be aware of punctuation, since the other person likely experienced the event differently than you.

Questions for reflection: Consider an example of how perception checking might be useful to you in academic, professional, personal, and civic contexts. Which step of perception checking do you think is the most challenging and why?

## Improving Self Concept

Our self-perceptions can and do change. Recall that we have an overall self-concept and self-esteem that are relatively stable, and we also have context-specific self-perceptions. Context-specific self-perceptions vary depending on the person with whom we are interacting, our emotional state, and the subject matter being discussed. Becoming aware of the process of self-perception and the various components of our self-concept (which you have already started to do by studying this chapter) will help you understand and improve your self-perceptions.

Since self-concept and self-esteem are so subjective and personal, it would be inaccurate to say that someone's self-concept is "right" or "wrong." Instead, we can identify negative and positive aspects of self-perceptions as well as discuss common barriers to forming accurate and positive self-perceptions. We can also identify common patterns that people experience that interfere with their ability to monitor, understand, and change their self-perceptions. Changing your overall self-concept or self-esteem is not an easy task given that these are overall reflections on who we are and how we judge ourselves that are constructed over many interactions. A variety of life-

changing events can relatively quickly alter our self-perceptions. Think of how your view of self changed when you moved from high school to college. Similarly, other people's self-perceptions likely change when they enter into a committed relationship, have a child, make a geographic move, or start a new job.

Aside from experiencing life-changing events, we can make slower changes to our self-perceptions with concerted efforts aimed at becoming more competent communicators through self-monitoring and reflection. As you actively try to change your self-perceptions, do not be surprised if you encounter some resistance from significant others. When you change or improve your self-concept, your communication will also change, which may prompt other people to respond to you differently. Although you may have good reasons for changing certain aspects of your self-perception, others may become unsettled or confused by your changing behaviors and communication. Remember, people try to increase predictability and decrease uncertainty within personal relationships. For example, many students begin to take their college education more seriously during their junior and senior years. As these students begin to change their self-concept to include the role of "serious student preparing to graduate and enter the professional world," they likely have friends that want to maintain the "semiserious student who doesn't exert much consistent effort and prefers partying to studying" role that used to be a shared characteristic of both students' self-concepts. As the first student's behavior changes to accommodate this new aspect of his or her self-concept, it may upset the friend who was used to weeknights spent hanging out rather than studying. Let's now discuss some suggestions to help avoid common barriers to accurate and positive self-perceptions and patterns of behavior that perpetuate negative self-perception cycles.

## **Avoid Reliance on Rigid Schema**

As we learned earlier, schemata are sets of information based on cognitive and experiential knowledge that guide our interaction. We rely on schemata almost constantly to help us make sense of the world around us. Sometimes schemata become so familiar that we use them as scripts, which prompts mindless communication and can lead us to overlook new information that may need to be incorporated into the schema. So it's important to remain mindful of new or contradictory information that may warrant revision of a schema. Being mindful is difficult, however, especially since we often unconsciously rely on schemata. Think about how when you're driving a familiar route you sometimes fall under "highway hypnosis." Despite all the advanced psychomotor skills needed to drive, such as braking, turning, and adjusting to other drivers, we can pull into a familiar driveway or parking lot having driven the whole way on autopilot. Again, this is not necessarily a bad thing. But have you slipped into autopilot on a familiar route only to remember that you are actually going somewhere else after you've already missed your turn? This example illustrates the importance of keeping our schemata flexible and avoiding mindless communication.

## **Be Critical of Socializing Forces**

We learned earlier that family, friends, sociocultural norms, and the media are just some of the socializing forces that influence our thinking and therefore influence our self-perception. These

powerful forces serve positive functions but can also set into motion negative patterns of self-perception. Two examples can illustrate the possibility for people to critique and resist socializing forces in order to improve their self-perception. The first deals with physical appearance and notions of health, and the second deals with cultural identities and discrimination.

We have already discussed how the media presents us with narrow and often unrealistic standards for attractiveness. Even though most of us know that these standards don't represent what is normal or natural for the human body, we internalize these ideals, which results in various problems ranging from eating disorders, to depression, to poor self-esteem. A relatively overlooked but controversial and interesting movement that has emerged partially in response to these narrow representations of the body is the fat acceptance movement. The fat acceptance movement has been around for more than thirty years, but it has more recently gotten public attention due to celebrities like Oprah Winfrey and Kirstie Alley, who after years of publicly struggling with weight issues have embraced a view that weight does not necessarily correspond to health. Many people have found inspiration in that message and have decided that being healthy and strong is more important than being thin. The "Healthy at Every Size" movement and the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance have challenged the narrative put out by the thirty-billion-dollar-a-year weight-loss industry that fat equals lazy, ugly, and unhealthy. Conflicting scientific studies make it difficult to say conclusively how strong the correlation is between weight and health, but it seems clear that a view that promotes healthy living and positive self-esteem over unconditional dieting and a cult of thinness is worth exploring more given the potential public health implications of distorted body image and obesity.

Cultural influences related to identities and difference can also lead to distorted self-perceptions, especially for people who occupy marginalized or oppressed identities. While perception research has often been used to support the notion that individuals who are subjected to discrimination, like racial and ethnic minorities, are likely to have low self-esteem because they internalize negative societal views, this is not always the case. In fact, even some early perception research showed that minorities do not just passively accept the negative views society places on them. Instead, they actively try to maintain favorable self-perceptions in the face of discriminatory attitudes. Numerous studies have shown that people in groups that are the targets of discrimination may identify with their in-group more because of this threat, which may actually help them maintain psychological well-being. In short, they reject the negative evaluations of the out-group and find refuge and support in their identification with others who share their marginalized status.

## **Beware of Self-Fulfilling Prophecies**

Self-fulfilling prophecies are thought and action patterns in which a person's false belief triggers a behavior that makes the initial false belief actually or seemingly come true. For example, let's say a student's biology lab instructor is a Chinese person who speaks English as a second language. The student falsely believes that the instructor will not be a good teacher because he speaks English with an accent. Because of this belief, the student doesn't attend class regularly and doesn't listen actively when she does attend. Because of these behaviors, the student fails the biology lab, which then reinforces her original belief that the instructor wasn't a good teacher.

Although the concept of self-fulfilling prophecies was originally developed to be applied to social inequality and discrimination, it has since been applied in many other contexts, including interpersonal communication. This research has found that some people are chronically insecure, meaning they are very concerned about being accepted by others but constantly feel that other people will dislike them. This can manifest in relational insecurity, which is again based on feelings of inferiority resulting from social comparison with others perceived to be more secure and superior. Such people often end up reinforcing their belief that others will dislike them because of the behaviors triggered by their irrational belief. Take the following scenario as an example: An insecure person assumes that his date will not like him. During the date he doesn't engage in much conversation, discloses negative information about himself, and exhibits anxious behaviors. Because of these behaviors, his date forms a negative impression and suggests they not see each other again, reinforcing his original belief that the date wouldn't like him. The example shows how a pattern of thinking can lead to a pattern of behavior that reinforces the thinking, and so on. Luckily, experimental research shows that self-affirmation techniques can be successfully used to intervene in such self-fulfilling prophecies. Thinking positive thoughts and focusing on personality strengths can stop this negative cycle of thinking and has been shown to have positive effects on academic performance, weight loss, and interpersonal relationships.

## **Create and Maintain Supporting Interpersonal Relationships**

Aside from giving yourself affirming messages to help with self-perception, it is important to find interpersonal support. Although most people have at least some supportive relationships, many people also have people in their lives who range from negative to toxic. When people find themselves in negative relational cycles, whether it is with friends, family, or romantic partners, it is difficult to break out of those cycles. But we can all make choices to be around people that will help us be who we want to be and not be around people who hinder our self-progress. This notion can also be taken to the extreme, however. It would not be wise to surround yourself with people who only validate you and do not constructively challenge you, because this too could lead to distorted self-perceptions.

## **Beware of Distorted Patterns of Thinking and Acting**

You already know from our discussion of attribution errors that we all have perceptual biases that distort our thinking. Many of these are common, and we often engage in distorted thinking without being conscious of it. Learning about some of the typical negative patterns of thinking and acting may help us acknowledge and intervene in them. One such pattern involves self-esteem and overcompensation.

People with low self-esteem may act in ways that overcompensate for their feelings of low self-worth and other insecurities. Whether it's the businessman buying his midlife crisis Corvette, the "country boy" adding monster tires to his truck, or the community leader who wears several carats of diamonds everywhere she goes, people often turn to material possessions to try to boost self-esteem. While these purchases may make people feel better in the short term, they may have negative financial effects that can exacerbate negative self-perceptions and lead to interpersonal

conflict. People also compensate for self-esteem with their relational choices. A person who is anxious about his career success may surround himself with people who he deems less successful than himself. In this case, being a big fish in a small pond helps some people feel better about themselves when they engage in social comparison.

People can also get into a negative thought and action cycle by setting unrealistic goals and consistently not meeting them. Similar to a self-fulfilling prophecy, people who set unrealistic goals can end up with negative feelings of self-efficacy, which as we learned earlier, can negatively affect self-esteem and self-concept. The goals we set should be challenging but progressive, meaning we work to meet a realistic goal, then increase our expectations and set another goal, and so on.

Some people develop low self-esteem because they lack accurate information about themselves, which may be intentional or unintentional. A person can intentionally try to maintain high self-esteem by ignoring or downplaying negative comments and beliefs and focusing on positive evaluations. While this can be a good thing, it can also lead to a distorted self-concept. There is a middle ground between beating yourself up or dwelling on the negative and ignoring potentially constructive feedback about weaknesses and missing opportunities to grow as a person. Conversely, people who have low self-esteem or negative self-concepts may discount or ignore positive feedback. To wrap up this section, I'd like to turn to one of my favorite shows and a great source for examples relevant to the perception process: American Idol.

I've always enjoyed showing clips from American Idol auditions in my class when I teach about self-perception. As you probably know, the season always starts with audition footage shot in various cities. The range of singing abilities, not to mention personalities, of those who show up for a chance to sing in front of the judges leads millions of viewers to keep tuning in. While it's obvious that the producers let some people through who they know don't have a chance at making it on the show, they also know that certain personalities make for good reality television viewing. I've often found myself wondering, "Do these people really think they can sing?" The answer is sometimes a very clear "Yes!" Sure, some are there just to make a spectacle and hopefully make it on TV, but there are many who actually believe they have singing abilities—even to the point that they challenge and discount the judges' comments.

During the contestant's tearful and/or angry postrejection interview, they are often shown standing with their family and friends, who are also surprised at the judges' decision. These contestants could potentially avoid this emotional ending by following some of the previous tips. It's good that they have supportive interpersonal relationships, but people's parents and friends are a little biased in their feedback, which can lead to a skewed self-concept. These contestants could also set incremental goals. Singing at a local event or even at a karaoke bar might have helped them gain more accurate information about their abilities and led them to realize they didn't have what it takes to be an "American idol."

## Key Takeaways

- We can improve self-perception by avoiding reliance on rigid schemata, thinking critically about socializing institutions, intervening in self-fulfilling prophecies, finding supportive interpersonal networks, and becoming aware of cycles of thinking that distort our self-perception.
- We can improve our perceptions of others by developing empathetic listening skills, becoming aware of stereotypes and prejudice, and engaging in self-reflection.
- Perception checking is a strategy that allows us to monitor our perceptions of and reactions to others and communication.

## Exercises

1. Which barrier(s) to self-perception do you think present the most challenge to you and why? What can you do to start to overcome these barriers?
2. Which barrier(s) to perceiving others do you think present the most challenge to you and why? What can you do to start to overcome these barriers?
3. Recount a recent communication encounter in which perception checking may have led to a more positive result. What could you have done differently?

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# Chapter 3: Verbal Communication

In my junior year of college, I took a course in semantics, which focused on verbal language and solidified my interest in language. I love learning about the history of words, learning new words, and seeing how language changes over time and from one context to the next. Judging from the recent explosion of interest in word game apps like Words with Friends and Scramble with Friends, I'm not alone in my love of language. In this chapter, we'll learn about the relationship between language and meaning, how we come to know the content and rules of verbal communication, the functions of language, how to use words well, and the relationship between language and culture.

## 3.1 Functions of Language

### Learning Objectives

- Explain how language is used to express meaning and emotion

### Language Is Expressive

Verbal communication helps us meet various needs through our ability to express ourselves. In terms of instrumental needs, we use verbal communication to ask questions that provide us with specific information. We also use verbal communication to describe things, people, and ideas. Verbal communication helps us inform, persuade, and entertain others, which as we will learn later are the three general purposes of public speaking. It is also through our verbal expressions that our personal relationships are formed. At its essence, language is expressive. Verbal expressions help us communicate our observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs.

### Expressing Observations

When we express observations, we report on the sensory information we are taking or have taken in. As we learned in [Chapter 2 “Communication and Perception”](#) on perception, observation and description occur in the first step of the perception-checking process. When you are trying to make sense of an experience, expressing observations in a descriptive rather than evaluative way can lessen defensiveness, which facilitates competent communication.

### Expressing Thoughts

When we express thoughts, we draw conclusions based on what we have experienced. In the perception process, this is similar to the interpretation step. We take various observations and evaluate and interpret them to assign them meaning (a conclusion). Whereas our observations are based on sensory information (what we saw, what we read, what we heard), thoughts are

connected to our beliefs (what we think is true/false), attitudes (what we like and dislike), and values (what we think is right/wrong or good/bad). Jury members are expected to express thoughts based on reported observations to help reach a conclusion about someone's guilt or innocence. A juror might express the following thought: "The neighbor who saw the car leaving the night of the crime seemed credible. And the defendant seemed to have a shady past—I think he's trying to hide something." Sometimes people intentionally or unintentionally express thoughts as if they were feelings. For example, when people say, "I feel like you're too strict with your attendance policy," they aren't really expressing a feeling; they are expressing a judgment about the other person (a thought).

## Expressing Feelings

When we express feelings, we communicate our emotions. Expressing feelings is a difficult part of verbal communication, because there are many social norms about how, why, when, where, and to whom we express our emotions. Norms for emotional expression also vary based on nationality and other cultural identities and characteristics such as age and gender. In terms of age, young children are typically freer to express positive and negative emotions in public. Gendered elements intersect with age as boys grow older and are socialized into a norm of emotional restraint. Although individual men vary in the degree to which they are emotionally expressive, there is still a prevailing social norm that encourages and even expects women to be more emotionally expressive than men.

Expressing feelings can be uncomfortable for those listening. Some people are generally not good at or comfortable with receiving and processing other people's feelings. Even those with good empathetic listening skills can be positively or negatively affected by others' emotions. Expressions of anger can be especially difficult to manage because they represent a threat to the face and self-esteem of others. Despite the fact that expressing feelings is more complicated than other forms of expression, emotion sharing is an important part of how we create social bonds and empathize with others, and it can be improved.

In order to verbally express our emotions, it is important that we develop an emotional vocabulary. The more specific we can be when we are verbally communicating our emotions, the less ambiguous our emotions will be for the person decoding our message. As we expand our emotional vocabulary, we are able to convey the intensity of the emotion we're feeling whether it is mild, moderate, or intense. For example, *happy* is mild, *delighted* is moderate, and *ecstatic* is intense; *ignored* is mild, *rejected* is moderate, and *abandoned* is intense.

In a time when so much of our communication is electronically mediated, it is likely that we will communicate emotions through the written word in an e-mail, text, or instant message. We may also still use pen and paper when sending someone a thank-you note, a birthday card, or a sympathy card. Communicating emotions through the written (or typed) word can have advantages such as time to compose your thoughts and convey the details of what you're feeling. There are also disadvantages in that important context and nonverbal communication can't be included. Things like facial expressions and tone of voice offer much insight into emotions that may not be expressed verbally. There is also a lack of immediate feedback. Sometimes people respond immediately to a text or e-mail, but think about how frustrating it is when you text

someone and they don't get back to you right away. If you're in need of emotional support or want validation of an emotional message you just sent, waiting for a response could end up negatively affecting your emotional state.

## Expressing Needs

When we express needs, we are communicating in an instrumental way to help us get things done. Since we almost always know our needs more than others do, it's important for us to be able to convey those needs to others. Expressing needs can help us get a project done at work or help us navigate the changes of a long-term romantic partnership. Not expressing needs can lead to feelings of abandonment, frustration, or resentment. For example, if one romantic partner expresses the following thought "I think we're moving too quickly in our relationship" but doesn't also express a need, the other person in the relationship doesn't have a guide for what to do in response to the expressed thought. Stating, "I need to spend some time with my hometown friends this weekend. Would you mind if I went home by myself?" would likely make the expression more effective. Be cautious of letting evaluations or judgments sneak into your expressions of need. Saying "I need you to stop suffocating me!" really expresses a thought-feeling mixture more than a need.

**Table 3.1 Four Types of Verbal Expressions**

| Type        | Description                                                  | Example                                                                                      |
|-------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Observation | Report of sensory experiences or memories                    | "Pauline asked me to bring this file to you."                                                |
| Thought     | Conclusion about or judgment of experiences and observations | "Students today have much less respect for authority."                                       |
| Feeling     | Communicating emotions                                       | "I feel at peace when we're together."                                                       |
| Need        | Stating wants or requesting help or support                  | "I'm saving money for summer vacation. Is it OK if we skip our regular night out this week?" |

Source: Adapted from Matthew McKay, Martha Davis, and Patrick Fanning, *Messages: Communication Skills Book*, 2nd ed. (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 1995), 34–36.

Examples – "Getting Plugged In"

### Is "Textese" Hurting Our Verbal Communication?

Textese, also called text-message-ese and txt talk, among other things, has been called a "new dialect" of English that mixes letters and numbers, abbreviates words, and drops vowels and punctuation to create concise words and statements. Although this "dialect" has primarily been relegated to the screens of smartphones and other text-capable devices, it has slowly been creeping into our spoken language. Some critics say textese is "destroying" language by "pillaging punctuation" and "savaging our sentences." A relatively straightforward tks for

“thanks” or u for “you” has now given way to textese sentences like IMHO U R GR8. If you translated that into “In my humble opinion, you are great,” then you are fluent in textese. Although teachers and parents seem convinced that this type of communicating will eventually turn our language into emoticons and abbreviations, some scholars aren’t. [David Crystal, a well-known language expert](#), says that such changes to the English language aren’t new and that texting can actually have positive effects. He points out that Shakespeare also abbreviated many words, played with the rules of language, and made up several thousand words, and he is not considered an abuser of language. He also cites research that found, using experimental data, that children who texted more scored higher on reading and vocabulary tests. Crystal points out that in order to play with language, you must first have some understanding of the rules of language.

1. What effects, if any, do you think textese has had on your non-text-message communication?
2. Overall do you think textese and other forms of computer-mediated communication have affected our communication? Try to identify one potential positive and negative influence that textese has had on our verbal communication.

## Language Is Relational

We use verbal communication to initiate, maintain, and terminate our interpersonal relationships. The first few exchanges with a potential romantic partner or friend help us size the other person up and figure out if we want to pursue a relationship or not. We then use verbal communication to remind others how we feel about them and to check in with them—engaging in relationship maintenance through language use. When negative feelings arrive and persist, or for many other reasons, we often use verbal communication to end a relationship.

## Language Can Bring Us Together

Interpersonally, verbal communication is key to bringing people together and maintaining relationships. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, our use of words like *I*, *you*, *we*, *our*, and *us* affect our relationships. “We language” includes the words *we*, *our*, and *us* and can be used to promote a feeling of inclusiveness. “I language” can be useful when expressing thoughts, needs, and feelings because it leads us to “own” our expressions and avoid the tendency to mistakenly attribute the cause of our thoughts, needs, and feelings to others. Communicating emotions using “I language” may also facilitate emotion sharing by not making our conversational partner feel at fault or defensive. For example, instead of saying, “You’re making me crazy!” you could say, “I’m starting to feel really anxious because we can’t make a decision about this.” Conversely, “you language” can lead people to become defensive and feel attacked, which could be divisive and result in feelings of interpersonal separation.

Aside from the specific words that we use, the frequency of communication impacts relationships. Of course, the content of what is said is important, but research shows that romantic partners who communicate frequently with each other and with mutual friends and

family members experience less stress and uncertainty in their relationship and are more likely to stay together. When frequent communication combines with supportive messages, which are messages communicated in an open, honest, and nonconfrontational way, people are sure to come together.

At the interpersonal level, unsupportive messages can make others respond defensively, which can lead to feelings of separation and actual separation or dissolution of a relationship. It's impossible to be supportive in our communication all the time, but consistently unsupportive messages can hurt others' self-esteem, escalate conflict, and lead to defensiveness. People who regularly use unsupportive messages may create a toxic win/lose climate in a relationship. Six verbal tactics that can lead to feelings of defensiveness and separation are global labels, sarcasm, dragging up the past, negative comparisons, judgmental "you" messages, and threats.

### Common Types of Unsupportive Messages

1. **Global labels.** "You're a liar." Labeling someone irresponsible, untrustworthy, selfish, or lazy calls his or her whole identity as a person into question. Such sweeping judgments and generalizations are sure to only escalate a negative situation.
2. **Sarcasm.** "No, you didn't miss anything in class on Wednesday. We just sat here and looked at each other." Even though sarcasm is often disguised as humor, it usually represents passive-aggressive behavior through which a person indirectly communicates negative feelings.
3. **Dragging up the past.** "I should have known not to trust you when you never paid me back that \$100 I let you borrow." Bringing up negative past experiences is a tactic used by people when they don't want to discuss a current situation. Sometimes people have built up negative feelings that are suddenly let out by a seemingly small thing in the moment.
4. **Negative comparisons.** "Jade graduated from college without any credit card debt. I guess you're just not as responsible as her." Holding a person up to the supposed standards or characteristics of another person can lead to feelings of inferiority and resentment. Parents and teachers may unfairly compare children to their siblings.
5. **Judgmental "you" messages.** "You're never going to be able to hold down a job." Accusatory messages are usually generalized overstatements about another person that go beyond labeling but still do not describe specific behavior in a productive way.
6. **Threats.** "If you don't stop texting back and forth with your ex, both of you are going to regret it." Threatening someone with violence or some other negative consequence usually signals the end of productive communication. Aside from the potential legal consequences, threats usually overcompensate for a person's insecurity.

### Key Takeaways

- Language helps us express observations (reports on sensory information), thoughts (conclusions and judgments based on observations or ideas), feelings, and needs.
- Language is powerful in that it expresses our identities through labels used by and on us, affects our credibility based on how we support our ideas, serves as a means of control, and performs actions when spoken by certain people in certain contexts.

- The productivity and limitlessness of language creates the possibility for countless word games and humorous uses of language.
- Language is dynamic, meaning it is always changing through the addition of neologisms, new words or old words with new meaning, and the creation of slang.
- Language is relational and can be used to bring people together through a shared reality but can separate people through unsupportive and divisive messages.

## Exercises

1. Based on what you are doing and how you are feeling at this moment, write one of each of the four types of expressions—an observation, a thought, a feeling, and a need.
2. Getting integrated: A key function of verbal communication is expressing our identities. Identify labels or other words that are important for your identity in each of the following contexts: academic, professional, personal, and civic. (Examples include honors student for academic, trainee for professional, girlfriend for personal, and independent for civic.)
3. Review the types of unsupportive messages discussed earlier. Which of them do you think has the potential to separate people the most? Why? Which one do you have the most difficulty avoiding (directing toward others)? Why?

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## 3.2 Using Words Well

### Learning Objectives

- Discuss how the process of abstraction and the creation of whole messages relate to language clarity.
- Employ figurative and evocative language.
- Identify strategies for using language ethically.

Have you ever gotten lost because someone gave you directions that didn't make sense to you? Have you ever puzzled over the instructions for how to put something like a bookshelf or grill together? When people don't use words well, there are consequences that range from mild annoyance to legal actions. When people do use words well, they can be inspiring and make us better people. In this section, we will learn how to use words well by using words clearly, using words affectively, and using words ethically.

### Using Words Clearly

The level of clarity with which we speak varies depending on whom we talk to, the situation we're in, and our own intentions and motives. We sometimes make a deliberate effort to speak as clearly as possible. We can indicate this concern for clarity nonverbally by slowing our rate and increasing our volume or verbally by saying, "Frankly..." or "Let me be clear..." Sometimes it can be difficult to speak clearly—for example, when we are speaking about something with which we are unfamiliar. Emotions and distractions can also interfere with our clarity. Being aware of the varying levels of abstraction within language can help us create clearer and more "whole" messages.

### Level of Abstraction

The ladder of abstraction is a model used to illustrate how language can range from concrete to abstract. As we follow a concept up the ladder of abstraction, more and more of the "essence" of the original object is lost or left out, which leaves more room for interpretation, which can lead to misunderstanding. This process of abstracting, of leaving things out, allows us to communicate more effectively because it serves as a shorthand that keeps us from having a completely unmanageable language filled with millions of words—each referring to one specific thing. But it requires us to use context and often other words to generate shared meaning. Some words are more directly related to a concept or idea than others. If I asked you to go take a picture of a book, you could do that. If I asked you to go and take a picture of "work," you couldn't because *work* is an abstract word that was developed to refer to any number of possibilities from the act of writing a book, to repairing an air conditioner, to fertilizing an organic garden. You could take a picture of any of those things, but you can't take a picture of "work."



Figure 3.2 Ladder of Abstraction

You can see the semanticist S. I. Hayakawa’s classic example of the abstraction ladder with “Bessie the cow” in Figure 3.2 “Ladder of Abstraction”. At the lowest level, we have something that is very concrete. At this level we are actually in the moment of experiencing the stimuli that is coming in through our senses. We perceive the actual “thing,” which is the “cow” in front of us (either in person or as an image). This is concrete, because it is unmediated, meaning it is actually the moment of experience. As we move up a level, we give the experience a name—we are looking at “Bessie.” So now, instead of the direct experience with the “thing” in front of us, we have given the thing a name, which takes us one step away from the direct experience to the use of a more abstract symbol. Now we can talk and think about Bessie even when we aren’t directly experiencing her. At the next level, the word *cow* now lumps Bessie in with other bovine

creatures that share similar characteristics. As we go on up the ladder, *cow* becomes *livestock*, *livestock* becomes an *asset*, and then an *asset* becomes *wealth*. Note that it becomes increasingly difficult to define the meaning of the symbol as we go up the ladder and how with each step we lose more of the characteristics of the original concrete experience.

When shared referents are important, we should try to use language that is lower on the ladder of abstraction. Being intentionally concrete is useful when giving directions, for example, and can help prevent misunderstanding. We sometimes intentionally use abstract language. Since abstract language is often unclear or vague, we can use it as a means of testing out a potential topic (like asking a favor), offering negative feedback indirectly (to avoid hurting someone's feelings or to hint), or avoiding the specifics of a topic.

## Definitions and Clarity

Knowing more about the role that abstraction plays in the generation of meaning can help us better describe and define the words we use. As we learned earlier, denotative definitions are those found in the dictionary—the official or agreed-on definition. Since definitions are composed of other words, people who compile dictionaries take for granted that there is a certain amount of familiarity with the words they use to define another word—otherwise we would just be going in circles. One challenge we face when defining words is our tendency to go up the ladder of abstraction rather than down. For example, if I asked you to define the word *blue*, you'd likely say it's a color. If I asked you what a color is, you'd tell me it's a tint or characteristic of the appearance of a particular thing. To define more clearly, by going down the ladder of abstraction, you could say, "It's the color of Frank Sinatra's eyes," or "It's what the sky looks like on a clear day." People often come to understanding more quickly when a definition is descriptive and/or ties into their personal experiences. Definitions aren't useless, but they are usually best when paired with examples. You'll notice that I include many key terms and definitions in this book, but knowing some of the challenges of generating meaning through language, I also include many examples and narratives that come from real life. Jargon refers to specialized words used by a certain group or profession. Since jargon is specialized, it is often difficult to relate to a diverse audience and should therefore be limited when speaking to people from outside the group—or at least be clearly defined when it is used.

## Creating Whole Messages

Earlier we learned about the four types of expressions, which are observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs. Whole messages include all the relevant types of expressions needed to most effectively communicate in a given situation, including what you see, what you think, what you feel, and what you need. Partial messages are missing a relevant type of expression and can lead to misunderstanding and conflict. Whole messages help keep lines of communication open, which can help build solid relationships. On the other hand, people can often figure out a message is partial even if they can't readily identify what is left out. For example, if Roscoe says to Rachel, "I don't trust Bob anymore," Rachel may be turned off or angered by Roscoe's conclusion (an expression of thought) about their mutual friend. However, if Roscoe recounted

his observation of Bob's behavior, how that behavior made him feel, and what he needs from Rachel in this situation, she will be better able to respond.

While partial messages lack relevant expressions needed to clearly communicate, contaminated messages include mixed or misleading expressions. For example, if Alyssa says to her college-aged daughter, "It looks like you wasted another semester," she has contaminated observations, feelings, and thoughts. Although the message appears to be an observation, there are underlying messages that are better brought to the surface. To decontaminate her message, and make it more whole and less alienating, Alyssa could more clearly express herself by saying, "Your dad and I talked, and he said you told him you failed your sociology class and are thinking about changing your major" (observation). "I think you're hurting your chances of graduating on time and getting started on your career" (thought). "I feel anxious because you and I are both taking out loans to pay for your education" (feeling).

Messages in which needs are contaminated with observations or feelings can be confusing. For example, if Shea says to Duste, "You're so lucky that you don't have to worry about losing your scholarship over this stupid biology final," it seems like he's expressing an observation, but it's really a thought, with an underlying feeling and need. To make the message more whole, Shea could bring the need and feeling to the surface: "I noticed you did really well on the last exam in our biology class" (observation). "I'm really stressed about the exam next week and the possibility of losing my scholarship if I fail it" (feeling). "Would you be willing to put together a study group with me?" (need). More clarity in language is important, but as we already know, communication isn't just about exchanging information—the words we use also influence our emotions and relationships.

## Evocative Language

Vivid language captures people's attention and their imagination by conveying emotions and action. Think of the array of mental images that a poem or a well-told story from a friend can conjure up. Evocative language can also lead us to have physical reactions. Words like *shiver* and *heartbroken* can lead people to remember previous physical sensations related to the word. As a speaker, there may be times when evoking a positive or negative reaction could be beneficial. Evoking a sense of calm could help you talk a friend through troubling health news. Evoking a sense of agitation and anger could help you motivate an audience to action. When we are conversing with a friend or speaking to an audience, we are primarily engaging others' visual and auditory senses. Evocative language can help your conversational partner or audience members feel, smell, or taste something as well as hear it and see it. Good writers know how to use words effectively and affectively. A well-written story, whether it is a book or screenplay, will contain all the previous elements. The rich fantasy worlds conceived in *Star Trek*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Twilight*, and *Harry Potter* show the power of figurative and evocative language to capture our attention and our imagination.

Some words are so evocative that their usage violates the social norms of appropriate conversations. Although we could use such words to intentionally shock people, we can also use euphemisms, or less evocative synonyms for or indirect references to words or ideas that are deemed inappropriate to discuss directly. We have many euphemisms for things like excretory

acts, sex, and death. While euphemisms can be socially useful and creative, they can also lead to misunderstanding and problems in cases where more direct communication is warranted despite social conventions.

## **Polarizing Language**

Philosophers of language have long noted our tendency to verbally represent the world in very narrow ways when we feel threatened. This misrepresents reality and closes off dialogue. Although in our everyday talk we describe things in nuanced and measured ways, quarrels and controversies often narrow our vision, which is reflected in our vocabulary. In order to maintain a civil discourse in which people interact ethically and competently, it has been suggested that we keep an open mind and an open vocabulary.

One feature of communicative incivility is polarizing language, which refers to language that presents people, ideas, or situations as polar opposites. Such language exaggerates differences and overgeneralizes. Things aren't simply black or white, right or wrong, or good or bad. Being able to only see two values and clearly accepting one and rejecting another doesn't indicate sophisticated or critical thinking. We don't have to accept every viewpoint as right and valid, and we can still hold strongly to our own beliefs and defend them without ignoring other possibilities or rejecting or alienating others. A citizen who says, "All cops are corrupt," is just as wrong as the cop who says, "All drug users are scum." In avoiding polarizing language we keep a more open mind, which may lead us to learn something new. A citizen may have a personal story about a negative encounter with a police officer that could enlighten us on his or her perspective, but the statement also falsely overgeneralizes that experience. Avoiding polarizing language can help us avoid polarized thinking, and the new information we learn may allow us to better understand and advocate for our position. Avoiding sweeping generalizations allows us to speak more clearly and hopefully avoid defensive reactions from others that result from such blanket statements.

## **Swearing**

Scholars have identified two main types of swearing: social swearing and annoyance swearing. People engage in social swearing to create social bonds or for impression management (to seem cool or attractive). This type of swearing is typically viewed as male dominated, but some research studies have shown that the differences in frequency and use of swearing by men and women aren't as vast as perceived. Nevertheless, there is generally more of a social taboo against women swearing than men, but as you already know, communication is contextual. Annoyance swearing provides a sense of relief, as people use it to manage stress and tension, which can be a preferred alternative to physical aggression. In some cases, swearing can be cathartic, allowing a person to release emotions that might otherwise lead to more aggressive or violent actions.

In the past few decades, the amount of profanity used in regular conversations and on television shows and movies has increased. This rise has been connected to a variety of factors, including increasing social informality since the 1960s and a decrease in the centrality of traditional/conservative religious views in many Western cultures. As a result of these changes,

the shock value that swearing once had is lessening, and this desensitization has contributed to its spread. You have probably even noticed in your lifetime that the amount of swearing on television has increased, and in June of 2012 the Supreme Court stripped the Federal Communications Commission of some of its authority to fine broadcasters for obscenities. There has also been a reaction, or backlash, to this spread, which is most publicly evidenced by the website, book, and other materials produced by the [Cuss Control Academy](#). Although swearing is often viewed as negative and uncivil, some scholars argue for its positive effects. Specifically, swearing can help people to better express their feelings and to develop social bonds. In fact, swearing is typically associated more with the emotional part of the brain than the verbal part of the brain, as evidenced by people who suffer trauma to the verbal part of their brain and lose all other language function but are still able to swear.

## Accountability

The complexity of our verbal language system allows us to present inferences as facts and mask judgments within seemingly objective or oblique language. As an ethical speaker and a critical listener, it is important to be able to distinguish between facts, inferences, and judgments. Inferences are conclusions based on thoughts or speculation, but not direct observation. Facts are conclusions based on direct observation or group consensus. Judgments are expressions of approval or disapproval that are subjective and not verifiable.

Linguists have noted that a frequent source of miscommunication is inference-observation confusion, or the misperception of an inference (conclusion based on limited information) as an observation (an observed or agreed-on fact). We can see the possibility for such confusion in the following example: If a student posts on a professor-rating site the statement “This professor grades unfairly and plays favorites,” then they are presenting an inference and a judgment that could easily be interpreted as a fact. Using some of the strategies discussed earlier for speaking clearly can help present information in a more ethical way—for example, by using concrete and descriptive language and owning emotions and thoughts through the use of “I language.” To help clarify the message and be more accountable, the student could say, “I worked for three days straight on my final paper and only got a C,” which we will assume is a statement of fact. This could then be followed up with “But my friend told me she only worked on hers the day before it was due and she got an A. I think that’s unfair and I feel like my efforts aren’t recognized by the professor.” Of the last two statements, the first states what may be a fact (note, however, that the information is secondhand rather than directly observed) and the second states an inferred conclusion and expresses an owned thought and feeling. Sometimes people don’t want to mark their statements as inferences because they want to believe them as facts. In this case, the student may have attributed her grade to the professor’s “unfairness” to cover up or avoid thoughts that her friend may be a better student in this subject area, a better writer, or a better student in general. Distinguishing between facts, inferences, and judgments, however, allows your listeners to better understand your message and judge the merits of it, which makes us more accountable and therefore more ethical speakers.

### Key Takeaways

- The symbolic nature of language means that misunderstanding can easily occur when words and their definitions are abstract (far removed from the object or idea to which the symbol refers). The creation of whole messages, which contain relevant observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs, can help reduce misunderstandings.
- Affective language refers to language used to express a person's feelings and create similar feelings in another person. Metaphor, simile, personification, and vivid language can evoke emotions in speaker and listener.
- Incivility occurs when people deviate from accepted social norms for communication and behavior and manifests in swearing and polarized language that casts people and ideas as opposites. People can reduce incivility by being more accountable for the short- and long-term effects of their communication.

## Exercises

1. Following the example in the ladder of abstraction, take a common word referring to an object (like bicycle or smartphone) and write its meaning, in your own words, at each step from most concrete to most abstract. Discuss how the meaning changes as the word/idea becomes more abstract and how the word becomes more difficult to define.
2. Decontaminate the following messages by rewriting them in a way that makes them whole (separate out each type of relevant expression). You can fill in details if needed to make your expressions more meaningful.
  - "I feel like you can't ever take me seriously."
  - "It looks like you've ruined another perfectly good relationship."
3. Find a famous speech (for example, at <http://www.americanrhetoric.com>) and identify components of figurative language. How do these elements add to the meaning of the speech?
4. Getting integrated: Review the section on using words ethically. Identify a situation in which language could be used unethically in each of the following contexts: academic, professional, personal, and civic. Specifically tie your example to civility, polarizing language, swearing, or accountability.

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# Chapter 4: Nonverbal Communication

When we think about communication, we most often focus on how we exchange information using words. While verbal communication is important, humans relied on nonverbal communication for thousands of years before we developed the capability to communicate with words. Nonverbal communication is a process of generating meaning using behavior other than words. Rather than thinking of nonverbal communication as the opposite of or as separate from verbal communication, it's more accurate to view them as operating side by side—as part of the same system. Yet, as part of the same system, they still have important differences, including how the brain processes them. For instance, nonverbal communication is typically governed by the right side of the brain and verbal, the left. This hemispheric distinction has been clearly evidenced, as people who suffer trauma to the right side of their brain lose the ability to recognize facial expressions but can still process verbal communication. Conversely, people whose left hemisphere of the brain is damaged lose the ability to speak, read, and understand language. Interestingly, a person with damage to the left hemisphere of the brain who loses the ability to speak can often still sing since the creation, but not the reading, of music is governed by the right brain. The content and composition of verbal and nonverbal communication also differs. In terms of content, nonverbal communication tends to do the work of communicating emotions more than verbal. In terms of composition, although there are rules of grammar that structure our verbal communication, no such official guides govern our use of nonverbal signals. Likewise, there aren't dictionaries and thesauruses of nonverbal communication like there are with verbal symbols. Finally, whereas we humans are unique in our capacity to abstract and transcend space and time using verbal symbols, we are not the only creatures that engage in nonverbal communication. These are just some of the characteristics that differentiate verbal communication from nonverbal, and in the remainder of this chapter we will discuss in more detail the principles, functions, and types of nonverbal communication and conclude with some guidance on how to improve our nonverbal communication competence.

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# 4.1 Principles & Functions of Nonverbal Communication

## Learning Objectives

- Define nonverbal communication.
- Compare and contrast verbal communication and nonverbal communication.
- Discuss the principles of nonverbal communication.
- Provide examples of the functions of nonverbal communication.

As you'll recall from our introductory chapter, a channel is the sensory route on which a message travels. Oral communication only relies on one channel, because spoken language is transmitted through sound and picked up by our ears. Nonverbal communication, on the other hand, can be taken in by all five of our senses. Since most of our communication relies on visual and auditory channels, those will be the focus of this chapter. But we can also receive messages and generate meaning through touch, taste, and smell. Touch is an especially powerful form of nonverbal communication that we will discuss in this chapter, but we will not get into taste and smell, which have not received as much scholarly attention in relation to nonverbal communication as the other senses.

To further define nonverbal communication, we need to distinguish between vocal and verbal aspects of communication. Verbal and nonverbal communication include both vocal and nonvocal elements, and **Table 4.1** "Vocal and Nonvocal Elements of Communication" shows the relationship among vocal, nonvocal, verbal, and nonverbal aspects of communication. A vocal element of verbal communication is spoken words—for example, "Come back here." A vocal element of nonverbal communication is paralanguage, which is the vocalized but not verbal part of a spoken message, such as speaking rate, volume, and pitch. Nonvocal elements of verbal communication include the use of unspoken symbols to convey meaning. Writing and American Sign Language (ASL) are nonvocal examples of verbal communication and are not considered nonverbal communication. Nonvocal elements of nonverbal communication include body language such as gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact. Gestures are nonvocal and nonverbal since most of them do not refer to a specific word like a written or signed symbol does.

**Table 4.1 Vocal and Nonvocal Elements of Communication**

| Verbal Communication |                        | Nonverbal Communication                                         |
|----------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Vocal                | Spoken words           | Paralanguage (pitch, volume, speaking rate, etc.)               |
| Nonvocal             | Writing, sign language | Body language (gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, etc.) |

# **Principles of Nonverbal Communication**

Nonverbal communication has a distinct history and serves separate evolutionary functions from verbal communication. For example, nonverbal communication is primarily biologically based while verbal communication is primarily culturally based. This is evidenced by the fact that some nonverbal communication has the same meaning across cultures while no verbal communication systems share that same universal recognizability. Nonverbal communication also evolved earlier than verbal communication and served an early and important survival function that helped humans later develop verbal communication. While some of our nonverbal communication abilities, like our sense of smell, lost strength as our verbal capacities increased, other abilities like paralanguage and movement have grown alongside verbal complexity. The fact that nonverbal communication is processed by an older part of our brain makes it more instinctual and involuntary than verbal communication.

## **Nonverbal Communication Conveys Important Interpersonal and Emotional Messages**

You've probably heard that more meaning is generated from nonverbal communication than from verbal. Some studies have claimed that 90 percent of our meaning is derived from nonverbal signals, but more recent and reliable findings claim that it is closer to 65 percent. We may rely more on nonverbal signals in situations where verbal and nonverbal messages conflict and in situations where emotional or relational communication is taking place. For example, when someone asks a question and we're not sure about the "angle" they are taking, we may hone in on nonverbal cues to fill in the meaning. For example, the question "What are you doing tonight?" could mean any number of things, but we could rely on posture, tone of voice, and eye contact to see if the person is just curious, suspicious, or hinting that they would like company for the evening. We also put more weight on nonverbal communication when determining a person's credibility. For example, if a classmate delivers a speech in class and her verbal content seems well-researched and unbiased, but her nonverbal communication is poor (her voice is monotone, she avoids eye contact, she fidgets), she will likely not be viewed as credible. Conversely, in some situations, verbal communication might carry more meaning than nonverbal. In interactions where information exchange is the focus, at a briefing at work, for example, verbal communication likely accounts for much more of the meaning generated. Despite this exception, a key principle of nonverbal communication is that it often takes on more meaning in interpersonal and/or emotional exchanges.

## **Nonverbal Communication Is More Involuntary than Verbal**

There are some instances in which we verbally communicate involuntarily. These types of exclamations are often verbal responses to a surprising stimulus. For example, we say "owww!" when we stub our toe or scream "stop!" when we see someone heading toward danger. Involuntary nonverbal signals are much more common, and although most nonverbal communication isn't completely involuntary, it is more below our consciousness than verbal communication and therefore more difficult to control.

The involuntary nature of much nonverbal communication makes it more difficult to control or “fake.” For example, although you can consciously smile a little and shake hands with someone when you first see them, it’s difficult to fake that you’re “happy” to meet someone. Nonverbal communication leaks out in ways that expose our underlying thoughts or feelings. Spokespeople, lawyers, or other public representatives who are the “face” of a politician, celebrity, corporation, or organization must learn to control their facial expressions and other nonverbal communication so they can effectively convey the message of their employer or client without having their personal thoughts and feelings leak through. Poker players, therapists, police officers, doctors, teachers, and actors are also in professions that often require them to have more awareness of and control over their nonverbal communication.

Have you ever tried to conceal your surprise, suppress your anger, or act joyful even when you weren’t? Most people whose careers don’t involve conscious manipulation of nonverbal signals find it difficult to control or suppress them. While we can consciously decide to stop sending verbal messages, our nonverbal communication always has the potential of generating meaning for another person. The teenager who decides to shut out his dad and not communicate with him still sends a message with his “blank” stare (still a facial expression) and lack of movement (still a gesture). In this sense, nonverbal communication is “irrepressible.”

## **Nonverbal Communication Is More Ambiguous**

In [Chapter 3 “Verbal Communication”](#), we learn that the symbolic and abstract nature of language can lead to misunderstandings, but nonverbal communication is even more ambiguous. As with verbal communication, most of our nonverbal signals can be linked to multiple meanings, but unlike words, many nonverbal signals do not have any one specific meaning. If you’ve ever had someone wink at you and didn’t know why, you’ve probably experienced this uncertainty. Did they wink to express their affection for you, their pleasure with something you just did, or because you share some inside knowledge or joke?

Just as we look at context clues in a sentence or paragraph to derive meaning from a particular word, we can look for context clues in various sources of information like the physical environment, other nonverbal signals, or verbal communication to make sense of a particular nonverbal cue. Unlike verbal communication, however, nonverbal communication doesn’t have explicit rules of grammar that bring structure, order, and agreed-on patterns of usage. Instead, we implicitly learn norms of nonverbal communication, which leads to greater variance. In general, we exhibit more idiosyncrasies in our usage of nonverbal communication than we do with verbal communication, which also increases the ambiguity of nonverbal communication.

## **Nonverbal Communication Is More Credible**

Although we can rely on verbal communication to fill in the blanks sometimes left by nonverbal expressions, we often put more trust into what people do over what they say. This is especially true in times of stress or danger when our behaviors become more instinctual and we rely on older systems of thinking and acting that evolved before our ability to speak and write. This innateness creates intuitive feelings about the genuineness of nonverbal communication, and this genuineness relates back to our earlier discussion about the sometimes involuntary and often

subconscious nature of nonverbal communication. An example of the innateness of nonverbal signals can be found in children who have been blind since birth but still exhibit the same facial expressions as other children. In short, the involuntary or subconscious nature of nonverbal communication makes it less easy to fake, which makes it seem more honest and credible. We will learn more about the role that nonverbal communication plays in deception later in this chapter.

## **Functions of Nonverbal Communication**

A primary function of nonverbal communication is to convey meaning by reinforcing, substituting for, or contradicting verbal communication. Nonverbal communication is also used to influence others and regulate conversational flow. Perhaps even more important are the ways in which nonverbal communication functions as a central part of relational communication and identity expression.

### **Nonverbal Communication Conveys Meaning**

Nonverbal communication conveys meaning by reinforcing, substituting for, or contradicting verbal communication. As we've already learned, verbal and nonverbal communication are two parts of the same system that often work side by side, helping us generate meaning. In terms of reinforcing verbal communication, gestures can help describe a space or shape that another person is unfamiliar with in ways that words alone cannot. Gestures also reinforce basic meaning—for example, pointing to the door when you tell someone to leave. Facial expressions reinforce the emotional states we convey through verbal communication. For example, smiling while telling a funny story better conveys your emotions. Vocal variation can help us emphasize a particular part of a message, which helps reinforce a word or sentence's meaning. For example, saying "How was your weekend?" conveys a different meaning than "How was your weekend?"

Nonverbal communication can substitute for verbal communication in a variety of ways. Nonverbal communication can convey much meaning when verbal communication isn't effective because of language barriers. Language barriers are present when a person hasn't yet learned to speak or loses the ability to speak. For example, babies who have not yet developed language skills make facial expressions, at a few months old, that are similar to those of adults and therefore can generate meaning. People who have developed language skills but can't use them because they have temporarily or permanently lost them or because they are using incompatible language codes, like in some cross-cultural encounters, can still communicate nonverbally. Although it's always a good idea to learn some of the local language when you travel, gestures such as pointing or demonstrating the size or shape of something may suffice in basic interactions.

Nonverbal communication is also useful in a quiet situation where verbal communication would be disturbing; for example, you may use a gesture to signal to a friend that you're ready to leave the library. Crowded or loud places can also impede verbal communication and lead people to rely more on nonverbal messages. Getting a server or bartender's attention with a hand gesture is definitely more polite than yelling, "Hey you!" Finally, there are just times when we know it's

better not to say something aloud. If you want to point out a person's unusual outfit or signal to a friend that you think his or her date is a loser, you're probably more likely to do that nonverbally.

Last, nonverbal communication can convey meaning by contradicting verbal communication. As we learned earlier, we often perceive nonverbal communication to be more credible than verbal communication. This is especially true when we receive mixed messages, or messages in which verbal and nonverbal signals contradict each other. For example, a person may say, "You can't do anything right!" in a mean tone but follow that up with a wink, which could indicate the person is teasing or joking. Mixed messages lead to uncertainty and confusion on the part of receivers, which leads us to look for more information to try to determine which message is more credible. If we are unable to resolve the discrepancy, we are likely to react negatively and potentially withdraw from the interaction. Persistent mixed messages can lead to relational distress and hurt a person's credibility in professional settings.

## **Nonverbal Communication Influences Others**

Nonverbal communication can be used to influence people in a variety of ways, but the most common way is through deception. Deception is typically thought of as the intentional act of altering information to influence another person, which means that it extends beyond lying to include concealing, omitting, or exaggerating information. While verbal communication is to blame for the content of the deception, nonverbal communication partners with the language through deceptive acts to be more convincing. Since most of us intuitively believe that nonverbal communication is more credible than verbal communication, we often intentionally try to control our nonverbal communication when we are engaging in deception. Likewise, we try to evaluate other people's nonverbal communication to determine the veracity of their messages. Students initially seem surprised when we discuss the prevalence of deception, but their surprise diminishes once they realize that deception isn't always malevolent, mean, or hurtful. Deception obviously has negative connotations, but people engage in deception for many reasons, including to excuse our own mistakes, to be polite to others, or to influence others' behaviors or perceptions.

The fact that deception served an important evolutionary purpose helps explain its prevalence among humans today. Species that are capable of deception have a higher survival rate. Other animals engage in nonverbal deception that helps them attract mates, hide from predators, and trap prey. To put it bluntly, the better at deception a creature is, the more likely it is to survive. So, over time, the humans that were better liars were the ones that got their genes passed on. But the fact that lying played a part in our survival as a species doesn't give us a license to lie.

Aside from deception, we can use nonverbal communication to "take the edge off" a critical or unpleasant message in an attempt to influence the reaction of the other person. We can also use eye contact and proximity to get someone to move or leave an area. For example, hungry diners waiting to snag a first-come-first-serve table in a crowded restaurant send messages to the people who have already eaten and paid that it's time to go. People on competition reality television shows like *Survivor* and *Big Brother* play what they've come to term a "social game." The social aspects of the game involve the manipulation of verbal and nonverbal cues to send strategic messages about oneself in an attempt to influence others. Nonverbal cues such as length of

conversational turn, volume, posture, touch, eye contact, and choices of clothing and accessories can become part of a player's social game strategy. Although reality television isn't a reflection of real life, people still engage in competition and strategically change their communication to influence others, making it important to be aware of how we nonverbally influence others and how they may try to influence us.

## **Nonverbal Communication Regulates Conversational Flow**

Conversational interaction has been likened to a dance, where each person has to make moves and take turns without stepping on the other's toes. Nonverbal communication helps us regulate our conversations so we don't end up constantly interrupting each other or waiting in awkward silences between speaker turns. Pitch, which is a part of vocalics, helps us cue others into our conversational intentions. A rising pitch typically indicates a question and a falling pitch indicates the end of a thought or the end of a conversational turn. We can also use a falling pitch to indicate closure, which can be very useful at the end of a speech to signal to the audience that you are finished, which cues the applause and prevents an awkward silence that the speaker ends up filling with "That's it" or "Thank you." We also signal our turn is coming to an end by stopping hand gestures and shifting our eye contact to the person who we think will speak next. Conversely, we can "hold the floor" with nonverbal signals even when we're not exactly sure what we're going to say next. Repeating a hand gesture or using one or more verbal fillers can extend our turn even though we are not verbally communicating at the moment.

## **Nonverbal Communication Affects Relationships**

To successfully relate to other people, we must possess some skill at encoding and decoding nonverbal communication. The nonverbal messages we send and receive influence our relationships in positive and negative ways and can work to bring people together or push them apart. Nonverbal communication in the form of tie signs, immediacy behaviors, and expressions of emotion are just three of many examples that illustrate how nonverbal communication affects our relationships.

Tie signs are nonverbal cues that communicate intimacy and signal the connection between two people. These relational indicators can be objects such as wedding rings or tattoos that are symbolic of another person or the relationship, actions such as sharing the same drinking glass, or touch behaviors such as hand-holding. Touch behaviors are the most frequently studied tie signs and can communicate much about a relationship based on the area being touched, the length of time, and the intensity of the touch. Kisses and hugs, for example, are considered tie signs, but a kiss on the cheek is different from a kiss on the mouth and a full embrace is different from a half embrace. If you consider yourself a "people watcher," take note of the various tie signs you see people use and what they might say about the relationship.

Immediacy behaviors play a central role in bringing people together and have been identified by some scholars as the most important function of nonverbal communication. Immediacy behaviors are verbal and nonverbal behaviors that lessen real or perceived physical and psychological distance between communicators and include things like smiling, nodding, making eye contact, and occasionally engaging in social, polite, or professional touch. Immediacy

behaviors are a good way of creating rapport, or a friendly and positive connection between people. Skilled nonverbal communicators are more likely to be able to create rapport with others due to attention-getting expressiveness, warm initial greetings, and an ability to get “in tune” with others, which conveys empathy. These skills are important to help initiate and maintain relationships.

While verbal communication is our primary tool for solving problems and providing detailed instructions, nonverbal communication is our primary tool for communicating emotions. This makes sense when we remember that nonverbal communication emerged before verbal communication and was the channel through which we expressed anger, fear, and love for thousands of years of human history. Touch and facial expressions are two primary ways we express emotions nonverbally. Love is a primary emotion that we express nonverbally and that forms the basis of our close relationships. Although no single facial expression for love has been identified, it is expressed through prolonged eye contact, close interpersonal distances, increased touch, and increased time spent together, among other things. Given many people’s limited emotional vocabulary, nonverbal expressions of emotion are central to our relationships.

Examples – “Getting Real”

### **Teachers and Immediacy Behaviors**

A considerable amount of research has been done on teachers’ use of immediacy behaviors, which points to the importance of this communication concept in teaching professions. Immediacy behaviors are verbal and nonverbal behaviors that lessen real or perceived physical and psychological distance between communicators. Specific nonverbal behaviors have been found to increase or decrease perceived levels of immediacy, and such behaviors impact student learning, teacher’s evaluations, and the teacher-student relationship. Even those who do not plan on going into teaching as a career can benefit from learning about immediacy behaviors, as they can also be used productively in other interpersonal contexts such as between a manager and employee, a salesperson and a client, or a politician and constituent. Much of this research in teaching contexts has focused on the relationship between immediacy behaviors and student learning, and research consistently shows that effective use of immediacy behaviors increases learning in various contexts and at various levels. Aside from enhancing student learning, the effective use of immediacy behaviors also leads to better evaluations by students, which can have a direct impact on a teacher’s career. While student evaluations of teachers take various factors into consideration, judgments of personality may be formed, as we learned in [Chapter 2 “Communication and Perception”](#), after only brief initial impressions. Research shows that students make character assumptions about teachers after only brief exposure to their nonverbal behaviors. Based on nonverbal cues such as frowning, head nodding, pointing, sitting, smiling, standing, strong gestures, weak gestures, and walking, students may or may not evaluate a teacher as open, attentive, confident, dominant, honest, likable, anxious, professional, supportive, or enthusiastic. The following are examples of immediacy behaviors that can be effectively used by teachers:

- Moving around the classroom during class activities, lectures, and discussions (reduces physical distance)

- Keeping the line of sight open between the teacher's body and the students by avoiding or only briefly standing behind lecterns / computer tables or sitting behind a desk while directly interacting with students (reduces physical distance)
- Being expressive and animated with facial expressions, gestures, and voice (demonstrates enthusiasm)
- Smiling (creates a positive and open climate)
- Making frequent eye contact with students (communicates attentiveness and interest)
- Calling students by name (reduces perceived psychological distance)
- Making appropriate self-disclosures to students about personal thoughts, feelings, or experiences (reduces perceived psychological distance, creates open climate)

Teachers who are judged as less immediate are more likely to sit, touch their heads, shake instead of nod their heads, use sarcasm, avoid eye contact, and use less expressive nonverbal behaviors. Finally, immediacy behaviors affect the teacher-student relationship. Immediacy behaviors help establish rapport, which is a personal connection that increases students' investment in the class and material, increases motivation, increases communication between teacher and student, increases liking, creates a sense of mutual respect, reduces challenging behavior by students, and reduces anxiety.

1. Recall a teacher you have had that exhibited effective immediacy behaviors. Recall a teacher you have had that didn't exhibit immediacy behaviors. Make a column for each teacher and note examples of specific behaviors of each. Discuss your list with a classmate and compare and contrast your lists.
2. Think about the teachers that you listed in the previous question. Discuss how their behaviors affected your learning and your relationship.
3. How much should immediacy behaviors, relative to other characteristics such as professionalism, experience, training, and content knowledge, factor into the evaluation of teachers by their students, peers, and supervisors? What, if anything, should schools do to enhance teachers' knowledge of immediacy behaviors?

## **Nonverbal Communication Expresses Our Identities**

Nonverbal communication expresses who we are. Our identities (the groups to which we belong, our cultures, our hobbies and interests, etc.) are conveyed nonverbally through the way we set up our living and working spaces, the clothes we wear, the way we carry ourselves, and the accents and tones of our voices. Our physical bodies give others impressions about who we are, and some of these features are more under our control than others. Height, for example, has been shown to influence how people are treated and perceived in various contexts. Our level of attractiveness also influences our identities and how people perceive us. Although we can temporarily alter our height or looks—for example, with different shoes or different color contact lenses—we can only permanently alter these features using more invasive and costly measures such as cosmetic surgery. We have more control over some other aspects of nonverbal communication in terms of how we communicate our identities. For example, the way we carry

and present ourselves through posture, eye contact, and tone of voice can be altered to present ourselves as warm or distant depending on the context.

Aside from our physical body, artifacts, which are the objects and possessions that surround us, also communicate our identities. Examples of artifacts include our clothes, jewelry, and space decorations. In all the previous examples, implicit norms or explicit rules can affect how we nonverbally present ourselves. For example, in a particular workplace it may be a norm (implicit) for people in management positions to dress casually, or it may be a rule (explicit) that different levels of employees wear different uniforms or follow particular dress codes. We can also use nonverbal communication to express identity characteristics that do not match up with who we actually think we are. Through changes to nonverbal signals, a capable person can try to appear helpless, a guilty person can try to appear innocent, or an uninformed person can try to appear credible.

### Key Takeaways

- Nonverbal communication is a process of generating meaning using behavior other than words. Nonverbal communication includes vocal elements, which is referred to as paralanguage and includes pitch, volume, and rate, and nonvocal elements, which are usually referred to as body language and includes gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact, among other things.
- Although verbal communication and nonverbal communication work side by side as part of a larger language system, there are some important differences between the two. They are processed by different hemispheres of the brain, nonverbal communication conveys more emotional and affective meaning than does verbal communication, nonverbal communication isn't governed by an explicit system of rules in the same way that grammar guides verbal communication, and while verbal communication is a uniquely human ability, many creatures including plants, birds, and mammals communicate nonverbally.
- Nonverbal communication operates on the following principles: nonverbal communication typically conveys more meaning than verbal communication, nonverbal communication is more involuntary than verbal communication, nonverbal communication is often more ambiguous than verbal communication, and nonverbal communication is often more credible than verbal communication.
- Nonverbal communication serves several functions.
- Nonverbal communication affects verbal communication in that it can complement, reinforce, substitute, or contradict verbal messages.
- Nonverbal communication influences others, as it is a key component of deception and can be used to assert dominance or to engage in compliance gaining.
- Nonverbal communication regulates conversational flow, as it provides important cues that signal the beginning and end of conversational turns and facilitates the beginning and end of an interaction.
- Nonverbal communication affects relationships, as it is a primary means through which we communicate emotions, establish social bonds, and engage in relational maintenance.

- Nonverbal communication expresses our identities, as who we are is conveyed through the way we set up our living and working spaces, the clothes we wear, our personal presentation, and the tones in our voices.

## Exercises

- Getting integrated: To better understand nonverbal communication, try to think of an example to illustrate each of the four principles discussed in the chapter. Be integrative in your approach by including at least one example from an academic, professional, civic, and personal context.
- When someone sends you a mixed message in which the verbal and nonverbal messages contradict each other, which one do you place more meaning on? Why?
- Our personal presentation, style of dress, and surroundings such as a dorm room, apartment, car, or office send nonverbal messages about our identities. Analyze some of the nonverbal signals that your personal presentation or environment send. What do they say about who you are? Do they create the impression that you desire?

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## 4.2 Types of Nonverbal Communication

### Learning Objectives

- Define kinesics.
- Define haptics.
- Define vocalics.
- Define proxemics.
- Define chronemics.
- Provide examples of types of nonverbal communication that fall under these categories.
- Discuss the ways in which personal presentation and environment provide nonverbal cues.

Just as verbal language is broken up into various categories, there are also different types of nonverbal communication. As we learn about each type of nonverbal signal, keep in mind that nonverbals often work in concert with each other, combining to repeat, modify, or contradict the verbal message being sent.

### Kinesics

The word kinesics comes from the root word kinesis, which means “movement,” and refers to the study of hand, arm, body, and face movements. Specifically, this section will outline the use of gestures, head movements and posture, eye contact, and facial expressions as nonverbal communication.

### Gestures

There are three main types of gestures: adaptors, emblems, and illustrators. Adaptors are touching behaviors and movements that indicate internal states typically related to arousal or anxiety. Adaptors can be targeted toward the self, objects, or others. In regular social situations, adaptors result from uneasiness, anxiety, or a general sense that we are not in control of our surroundings. Many of us subconsciously click pens, shake our legs, or engage in other adaptors during classes, meetings, or while waiting as a way to do something with our excess energy. Public speaking students who watch video recordings of their speeches notice nonverbal adaptors that they didn't know they used. In public speaking situations, people most commonly use self- or object-focused adaptors. Common self-touching behaviors like scratching, twirling hair, or fidgeting with fingers or hands are considered self-adaptors. Some self-adaptors manifest internally, as coughs or throat-clearing sounds. My personal weakness is object adaptors. Specifically, I subconsciously gravitate toward metallic objects like paper clips or staples holding my notes together and catch myself bending them or fidgeting with them while I'm speaking. Other people play with dry-erase markers, their note cards, the change in their pockets, or the lectern while speaking. Use of object adaptors can also signal boredom as people play with the straw in their drink or peel the label off a bottle of beer. Smartphones have become common

object adaptors, as people can fiddle with their phones to help ease anxiety. Finally, as noted, other adaptors are more common in social situations than in public speaking situations given the speaker's distance from audience members. Other adaptors involve adjusting or grooming others, similar to how primates like chimpanzees pick things off each other. It would definitely be strange for a speaker to approach an audience member and pick lint off his or her sweater, fix a crooked tie, tuck a tag in, or pat down a flyaway hair in the middle of a speech.

Emblems are gestures that have a specific agreed-on meaning. These are still different from the signs used by hearing-impaired people or others who communicate using American Sign Language (ASL). Even though they have a generally agreed-on meaning, they are not part of a formal sign system like ASL that is explicitly taught to a group of people. A hitchhiker's raised thumb, the "OK" sign with thumb and index finger connected in a circle with the other three fingers sticking up, and the raised middle finger are all examples of emblems that have an agreed-on meaning or meanings with a culture. Emblems can be still or in motion; for example, circling the index finger around at the side of your head says "He or she is crazy," or rolling your hands over and over in front of you says "Move on."

Illustrators are the most common type of gesture and are used to illustrate the verbal message they accompany. For example, you might use hand gestures to indicate the size or shape of an object. Unlike emblems, illustrators do not typically have meaning on their own and are used more subconsciously than emblems. These largely involuntary and seemingly natural gestures flow from us as we speak but vary in terms of intensity and frequency based on context. Although we are never explicitly taught how to use illustrative gestures, we do it automatically. Think about how you still gesture when having an animated conversation on the phone even though the other person can't see you.

## **Head Movements and Posture**

I group head movements and posture together because they are often both used to acknowledge others and communicate interest or attentiveness. In terms of head movements, a head nod is a universal sign of acknowledgement in cultures where the formal bow is no longer used as a greeting. In these cases, the head nod essentially serves as an abbreviated bow. An innate and universal head movement is the headshake back and forth to signal "no." This nonverbal signal begins at birth, even before a baby has the ability to know that it has a corresponding meaning. Babies shake their head from side to side to reject their mother's breast and later shake their head to reject attempts to spoon-feed.

## **Eye Contact**

We also communicate through eye behaviors, primarily eye contact. While eye behaviors are often studied under the category of kinesics, they have their own branch of nonverbal studies called oculusics, which comes from the Latin word *oculus*, meaning "eye." The face and eyes are the main point of focus during communication, and along with our ears our eyes take in most of the communicative information around us. The proverb "The eyes are the window to the soul" is actually accurate in terms of where people typically think others are "located," which is right

behind the eyes. Certain eye behaviors have become tied to personality traits or emotional states, as illustrated in phrases like “hungry eyes,” “evil eyes,” and “bedroom eyes.” To better understand oculosics, we will discuss the characteristics and functions of eye contact and pupil dilation.

Eye contact serves several communicative functions ranging from regulating interaction to monitoring interaction, to conveying information, to establishing interpersonal connections. In terms of regulating communication, we use eye contact to signal to others that we are ready to speak or we use it to cue others to speak. I’m sure we’ve all been in that awkward situation where a teacher asks a question, no one else offers a response, and he or she looks directly at us as if to say, “What do you think?” In that case, the teacher’s eye contact is used to cue us to respond. During an interaction, eye contact also changes as we shift from speaker to listener. US Americans typically shift eye contact while speaking—looking away from the listener and then looking back at his or her face every few seconds. Toward the end of our speaking turn, we make more direct eye contact with our listener to indicate that we are finishing up. While listening, we tend to make more sustained eye contact, not glancing away as regularly as we do while speaking.

Aside from regulating conversations, eye contact is also used to monitor interaction by taking in feedback and other nonverbal cues and to send information. Our eyes bring in the visual information we need to interpret people’s movements, gestures, and eye contact. A speaker can use his or her eye contact to determine if an audience is engaged, confused, or bored and then adapt his or her message accordingly. Our eyes also send information to others. People know not to interrupt when we are in deep thought because we naturally look away from others when we are processing information. Making eye contact with others also communicates that we are paying attention and are interested in what another person is saying. As we will learn in [Chapter 5 “Listening”](#), eye contact is a key part of active listening.

Eye contact can also be used to intimidate others. We have social norms about how much eye contact we make with people, and those norms vary depending on the setting and the person. Staring at another person in some contexts could communicate intimidation, while in other contexts it could communicate flirtation. As we learned, eye contact is a key immediacy behavior, and it signals to others that we are available for communication. Once communication begins, if it does, eye contact helps establish rapport or connection. We can also use our eye contact to signal that we do not want to make a connection with others. For example, in a public setting like an airport or a gym where people often make small talk, we can avoid making eye contact with others to indicate that we do not want to engage in small talk with strangers. Another person could use eye contact to try to coax you into speaking, though. For example, when one person continues to stare at another person who is not reciprocating eye contact, the person avoiding eye contact might eventually give in, become curious, or become irritated and say, “Can I help you with something?” As you can see, eye contact sends and receives important communicative messages that help us interpret others’ behaviors, convey information about our thoughts and feelings, and facilitate or impede rapport or connection. This list reviews the specific functions of eye contact:

- Regulate interaction and provide turn-taking signals

- Monitor communication by receiving nonverbal communication from others
- Signal cognitive activity (we look away when processing information)
- Express engagement (we show people we are listening with our eyes)
- Convey intimidation
- Express flirtation
- Establish rapport or connection

## Facial Expressions

Our faces are the most expressive part of our bodies. Think of how photos are often intended to capture a particular expression “in a flash” to preserve for later viewing. Even though a photo is a snapshot in time, we can still interpret much meaning from a human face caught in a moment of expression, and basic facial expressions are recognizable by humans all over the world. Much research has supported the universality of a core group of facial expressions: happiness, sadness, fear, anger, and disgust. The first four are especially identifiable across cultures. However, the triggers for these expressions and the cultural and social norms that influence their displays are still culturally diverse. If you’ve spent much time with babies you know that they’re capable of expressing all these emotions. Getting to see the pure and innate expressions of joy and surprise on a baby’s face is what makes playing peek-a-boo so entertaining for adults. As we get older, we learn and begin to follow display rules for facial expressions and other signals of emotion and also learn to better control our emotional expression based on the norms of our culture.

Smiles are powerful communicative signals and, as you’ll recall, are a key immediacy behavior. Although facial expressions are typically viewed as innate and several are universally recognizable, they are not always connected to an emotional or internal biological stimulus; they can actually serve a more social purpose. For example, most of the smiles we produce are primarily made for others and are not just an involuntary reflection of an internal emotional state. These social smiles, however, are slightly but perceptibly different from more genuine smiles. People generally perceive smiles as more genuine when the other person smiles “with their eyes.” This particular type of smile is difficult if not impossible to fake because the muscles around the eye that are activated when we spontaneously or genuinely smile are not under our voluntary control. It is the involuntary and spontaneous contraction of these muscles that moves the skin around our cheeks, eyes, and nose to create a smile that’s distinct from a fake or polite smile. People are able to distinguish the difference between these smiles, which is why photographers often engage in cheesy joking with adults or use props with children to induce a genuine smile before they snap a picture.

We will learn more about competent encoding and decoding of facial expressions in Section 4.3 “Nonverbal Communication Competence” and Section 4.4 “Nonverbal Communication in Context”, but since you are likely giving speeches in this class, let’s learn about the role of the face in public speaking. Facial expressions help set the emotional tone for a speech. In order to set a positive tone before you start speaking, briefly look at the audience and smile to communicate friendliness, openness, and confidence. Beyond your opening and welcoming facial expressions, facial expressions communicate a range of emotions and can be used to infer personality traits and make judgments about a speaker’s credibility and competence. Facial expressions can communicate that a speaker is tired, excited, angry, confused, frustrated, sad,

confident, smug, shy, or bored. Even if you aren't bored, for example, a slack face with little animation may lead an audience to think that you are bored with your own speech, which isn't likely to motivate them to be interested. So make sure your facial expressions are communicating an emotion, mood, or personality trait that you think your audience will view favorably, and that will help you achieve your speech goals. Also make sure your facial expressions match the content of your speech. When delivering something light-hearted or humorous, a smile, bright eyes, and slightly raised eyebrows will nonverbally enhance your verbal message. When delivering something serious or somber, a furrowed brow, a tighter mouth, and even a slight head nod can enhance that message. If your facial expressions and speech content are not consistent, your audience could become confused by the mixed messages, which could lead them to question your honesty and credibility.

## **Haptics**

Think of how touch has the power to comfort someone in moment of sorrow when words alone cannot. This positive power of touch is countered by the potential for touch to be threatening because of its connection to sex and violence. To learn about the power of touch, we turn to haptics, which refers to the study of communication by touch. We probably get more explicit advice and instruction on how to use touch than any other form of nonverbal communication. A lack of nonverbal communication competence related to touch could have negative interpersonal consequences; for example, if we don't follow the advice we've been given about the importance of a firm handshake, a person might make negative judgments about our confidence or credibility. A lack of competence could have more dire negative consequences, including legal punishment, if we touch someone inappropriately (intentionally or unintentionally). Touch is necessary for human social development, and it can be welcoming, threatening, or persuasive. Research projects have found that students evaluated a library and its staff more favorably if the librarian briefly touched the patron while returning his or her library card, that female restaurant servers received larger tips when they touched patrons, and that people were more likely to sign a petition when the petitioner touched them during their interaction.

There are several types of touch, including functional-professional, social-polite, friendship-warmth, love-intimacy, and sexual-arousal touch. At the functional-professional level, touch is related to a goal or part of a routine professional interaction, which makes it less threatening and more expected. For example, we let barbers, hairstylists, doctors, nurses, tattoo artists, and security screeners touch us in ways that would otherwise be seen as intimate or inappropriate if not in a professional context. At the social-polite level, socially sanctioned touching behaviors help initiate interactions and show that others are included and respected. A handshake, a pat on the arm, and a pat on the shoulder are examples of social-polite touching. A handshake is actually an abbreviated hand-holding gesture, but we know that prolonged hand-holding would be considered too intimate and therefore inappropriate at the functional-professional or social-polite level. At the functional-professional and social-polite levels, touch still has interpersonal implications. The touch, although professional and not intimate, between hair stylist and client, or between nurse and patient, has the potential to be therapeutic and comforting. In addition, a social-polite touch exchange plays into initial impression formation, which can have important implications for how an interaction and a relationship unfold.

Of course, touch is also important at more intimate levels. At the friendship-warmth level, touch is more important and more ambiguous than at the social-polite level. At this level, touch interactions are important because they serve a relational maintenance purpose and communicate closeness, liking, care, and concern. The types of touching at this level also vary greatly from more formal and ritualized to more intimate, which means friends must sometimes negotiate their own comfort level with various types of touch and may encounter some ambiguity if their preferences don't match up with their relational partner's. In a friendship, for example, too much touch can signal sexual or romantic interest, and too little touch can signal distance or unfriendliness. At the love-intimacy level, touch is more personal and is typically only exchanged between significant others, such as best friends, close family members, and romantic partners. Touching faces, holding hands, and full frontal embraces are examples of touch at this level. Although this level of touch is not sexual, it does enhance feelings of closeness and intimacy and can lead to sexual-arousal touch, which is the most intimate form of touch, as it is intended to physically stimulate another person.

Touch is also used in many other contexts—for example, during play (e.g., arm wrestling), during physical conflict (e.g., slapping), and during conversations (e.g., to get someone's attention). We also inadvertently send messages through accidental touch (e.g., bumping into someone). One of my interpersonal communication professors admitted that she enjoyed going to restaurants to observe “first-date behavior” and boasted that she could predict whether or not there was going to be a second date based on the couple's nonverbal communication. What sort of touching behaviors would indicate a good or bad first date?

During a first date or less formal initial interactions, quick fleeting touches give an indication of interest. For example, a pat on the back is an abbreviated hug. In general, the presence or absence of touching cues us into people's emotions. So as the daters sit across from each other, one person may lightly tap the other's arm after he or she said something funny. If the daters are sitting side by side, one person may cross his or her legs and lean toward the other person so that each person's knees or feet occasionally touch. Touching behavior as a way to express feelings is often reciprocal. A light touch from one dater will be followed by a light touch from the other to indicate that the first touch was OK. While verbal communication could also be used to indicate romantic interest, many people feel too vulnerable at this early stage in a relationship to put something out there in words. If your date advances a touch and you are not interested, it is also unlikely that you will come right out and say, “Sorry, but I'm not really interested.” Instead, due to common politeness rituals, you would be more likely to respond with other forms of nonverbal communication like scooting back, crossing your arms, or simply not acknowledging the touch.

I find hugging behavior particularly interesting, perhaps because of my experiences growing up in a very hug-friendly environment in the Southern United States and then living elsewhere where there are different norms. A hug can be obligatory, meaning that you do it because you feel like you have to, not because you want to. Even though you may think that this type of hug doesn't communicate emotions, it definitely does. A limp, weak, or retreating hug may communicate anger, ambivalence, or annoyance. Think of other types of hugs and how you hug different people. Some types of hugs are the crisscross hug, the neck-waist hug, and the engulfing hug. The crisscross hug is a rather typical hug where each person's arm is below or above the other person's arm. This hug is common among friends, romantic partners, and family

members, and perhaps even coworkers. The neck-waist hug usually occurs in more intimate relationships as it involves one person's arms around the other's neck and the other person's arms around the other's waist. I think of this type of hug as the "slow-dance hug." The engulfing hug is similar to a bear hug in that one person completely wraps the arms around the other as that person basically stands there. This hugging behavior usually occurs when someone is very excited and hugs the other person without warning.

Some other types of hugs are the "shake-first-then-tap hug" and the "back-slap hug." I observe that these hugs are most often between men. The shake-first-then-tap hug involves a modified hand-shake where the hands are joined more with the thumb and fingers than the palm and the elbows are bent so that the shake occurs between the two huggers' chests. The hug comes after the shake has been initiated with one arm going around the other person for usually just one tap, then a step back and release of the handshake. In this hugging behavior, the handshake that is maintained between the chests minimizes physical closeness and the intimacy that may be interpreted from the crisscross or engulfing hug where the majority of the huggers' torsos are touching. This move away from physical closeness likely stems from a US norm that restricts men's physical expression of affection due to homophobia or the worry of being perceived as gay. The slap hug is also a less physically intimate hug and involves a hug with one or both people slapping the other person's back repeatedly, often while talking to each other. I've seen this type of hug go on for many seconds and with varying degrees of force involved in the slap. When the slap is more of a tap, it is actually an indication that one person wants to let go. The video footage of then-president Bill Clinton hugging Monica Lewinsky that emerged as allegations that they had an affair were being investigated shows her holding on, while he was tapping from the beginning of the hug.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://textbooks.whatcom.edu/cmst210/?p=304#oembed-1>

## **"Getting Critical"**

### **Airport Pat-Downs: The Law, Privacy, and Touch**

Everyone who has flown over the past ten years has experienced the steady increase in security screenings. Since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, airports around the world have had increased security. While passengers have long been subject to pat-downs if they set off the metal detector or arouse suspicion, recently foiled terrorist plots have made passenger screening more personal. The "shoe bomber" led to mandatory shoe removal and screening, and the more recent use of nonmetallic explosives hidden in clothing or in body cavities led to the use of body scanners that can see through clothing to check for concealed objects. Protests against and anxiety about the body scanners, more colloquially known as "naked x-ray machines," led to the new "enhanced pat-down" techniques for passengers who refuse to go through the scanners or passengers who are randomly selected or arouse suspicion in other ways. The strong reactions are expected given what we've learned about the power of touch as a form of nonverbal communication. The new pat-downs routinely involve touching the areas around a passenger's breasts and/or genitals with a sliding hand motion. The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) notes that the areas being examined haven't changed, but the degree of the touch has, as

screeners now press and rub more firmly but used to use a lighter touch. Interestingly, police have long been able to use more invasive pat-downs, but only with probable cause. In the case of random selection at the airport, no probable cause provision has to be met, giving TSA agents more leeway with touch than police officers. Experts in aviation security differ in their assessment of the value of the pat-downs and other security procedures. Several experts have called for a revision of the random selection process in favor of more targeted screenings. What civil rights organizations critique as racial profiling, consumer rights activists and some security experts say allows more efficient use of resources and less inconvenience for the majority of passengers. Although the TSA has made some changes to security screening procedures and have announced more to come, some passengers have started a backlash of their own. There have been multiple cases of passengers stripping down to their underwear or getting completely naked to protest the pat-downs, while several other passengers have been charged with assault for “groping” TSA agents in retaliation. Footage of pat-downs of toddlers and grandmothers in wheelchairs and self-uploaded videos of people recounting their pat-down experiences have gone viral on YouTube.

1. What limits, if any, do you think there should be on the use of touch in airport screening procedures?
2. In June of 2012 a passenger was charged with battery after “groping” a TSA supervisor to, as she claims, demonstrate the treatment that she had received while being screened. You can [read more about the story](#) and see the video below. Do you think that her actions were justified? Why or why not?
3. Do you think that more targeted screening, as opposed to random screenings in which each person has an equal chance of being selected for enhanced pat-downs, is a good idea? Why? Do you think such targeted screening could be seen as a case of unethical racial profiling? Why or why not?

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## Vocalics

We learned earlier that paralanguage refers to the vocalized but nonverbal parts of a message. Vocalics is the study of paralanguage, which includes the vocal qualities that go along with verbal messages, such as pitch, volume, rate, vocal quality, and verbal fillers.

Pitch helps convey meaning, regulate conversational flow, and communicate the intensity of a message. Even babies recognize a sentence with a higher pitched ending as a question. We also learn that greetings have a rising emphasis and farewells have falling emphasis. Of course, no one ever tells us these things explicitly; we learn them through observation and practice. We do not pick up on some more subtle and/or complex patterns of paralanguage involving pitch until we are older. Children, for example, have a difficult time perceiving sarcasm, which is usually

conveyed through paralinguistic characteristics like pitch and tone rather than the actual words being spoken. Adults with lower than average intelligence and children have difficulty reading sarcasm in another person's voice and instead may interpret literally what they say.

Paralanguage provides important context for the verbal content of speech. For example, volume helps communicate intensity. A louder voice is usually thought of as more intense, although a soft voice combined with a certain tone and facial expression can be just as intense. We typically adjust our volume based on our setting, the distance between people, and the relationship. In our age of computer-mediated communication, TYPING IN ALL CAPS is usually seen as offensive, as it is equated with yelling. A voice at a low volume or a whisper can be very appropriate when sending a covert message or flirting with a romantic partner, but it wouldn't enhance a person's credibility if used during a professional presentation.

Speaking rate refers to how fast or slow a person speaks and can lead others to form impressions about our emotional state, credibility, and intelligence. As with volume, variations in speaking rate can interfere with the ability of others to receive and understand verbal messages. A slow speaker could bore others and lead their attention to wander. A fast speaker may be difficult to follow, and the fast delivery can actually distract from the message. Speaking a little faster than the normal 120–150 words a minute, however, can be beneficial, as people tend to find speakers whose rate is above average more credible and intelligent. When speaking at a faster-than-normal rate, it is important that a speaker also clearly articulate and pronounce his or her words. Boomhauer, a character on the show *King of the Hill*, is an example of a speaker whose fast rate of speech combines with a lack of articulation and pronunciation to create a stream of words that only he can understand. A higher rate of speech combined with a pleasant tone of voice can also be beneficial for compliance gaining and can aid in persuasion.

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Our tone of voice can be controlled somewhat with pitch, volume, and emphasis, but each voice has a distinct quality known as a vocal signature. Voices vary in terms of resonance, pitch, and tone, and some voices are more pleasing than others. People typically find pleasing voices that employ vocal variety and are not monotone, are lower pitched (particularly for males), and do not exhibit particular regional accents. Many people perceive nasal voices negatively and assign negative personality characteristics to them. Think about people who have very distinct voices. Whether they are a public figure like President Bill Clinton, a celebrity like Snooki from the *Jersey Shore*, or a fictional character like Peter Griffin from *Family Guy*, some people's voices stick with us and make a favorable or unfavorable impression.

Verbal fillers are sounds that fill gaps in our speech as we think about what to say next. They are considered a part of nonverbal communication because they are not like typical words that stand in for a specific meaning or meanings. Verbal fillers such as “um,” “uh,” “like,” and “ah” are common in regular conversation and are not typically disruptive. As we learned earlier, the use of verbal fillers can help a person “keep the floor” during a conversation if they need to pause for a moment to think before continuing on with verbal communication. Verbal fillers in more formal settings, like a public speech, can hurt a speaker's credibility.

The following is a review of the various communicative functions of vocalics:

- Repetition. Vocalic cues reinforce other verbal and nonverbal cues (e.g., saying “I’m not sure” with an uncertain tone).
- Complementing. Vocalic cues elaborate on or modify verbal and nonverbal meaning (e.g., the pitch and volume used to say “I love sweet potatoes” would add context to the meaning of the sentence, such as the degree to which the person loves sweet potatoes or the use of sarcasm).
- Accenting. Vocalic cues allow us to emphasize particular parts of a message, which helps determine meaning (e.g., “She is my friend,” or “She is my friend,” or “She is my friend”).
- Substituting. Vocalic cues can take the place of other verbal or nonverbal cues (e.g., saying “uh huh” instead of “I am listening and understand what you’re saying”).
- Regulating. Vocalic cues help regulate the flow of conversations (e.g., falling pitch and slowing rate of speaking usually indicate the end of a speaking turn).
- Contradicting. Vocalic cues may contradict other verbal or nonverbal signals (e.g., a person could say “I’m fine” in a quick, short tone that indicates otherwise).

## Proxemics

Proxemics refers to the study of how space and distance influence communication. We only need look at the ways in which space shows up in common metaphors to see that space, communication, and relationships are closely related. For example, when we are content with and attracted to someone, we say we are “close” to him or her. When we lose connection with someone, we may say he or she is “distant.” In general, space influences how people communicate and behave. Smaller spaces with a higher density of people often lead to breaches of our personal space bubbles. If this is a setting in which this type of density is expected beforehand, like at a crowded concert or on a train during rush hour, then we make various communicative adjustments to manage the space issue. Unexpected breaches of personal space can lead to negative reactions, especially if we feel someone has violated our space voluntarily, meaning that a crowding situation didn’t force them into our space. Additionally, research has shown that crowding can lead to criminal or delinquent behavior, known as a “mob mentality.” To better understand how proxemics functions in nonverbal communication, we will more closely examine the proxemic distances associated with personal space and the concept of territoriality.

## Proxemic Distances

We all have varying definitions of what our “personal space” is, and these definitions are contextual and depend on the situation and the relationship. Although our bubbles are invisible, people are socialized into the norms of personal space within their cultural group. Scholars have identified four zones for US Americans, which are public, social, personal, and intimate distance. The zones are more elliptical than circular, taking up more space in our front, where our line of sight is, than at our side or back where we can’t monitor what people are doing. You can see how these zones relate to each other and to the individual in Figure 4.1 “Proxemic Zones of Personal

Space”. Even within a particular zone, interactions may differ depending on whether someone is in the outer or inner part of the zone.

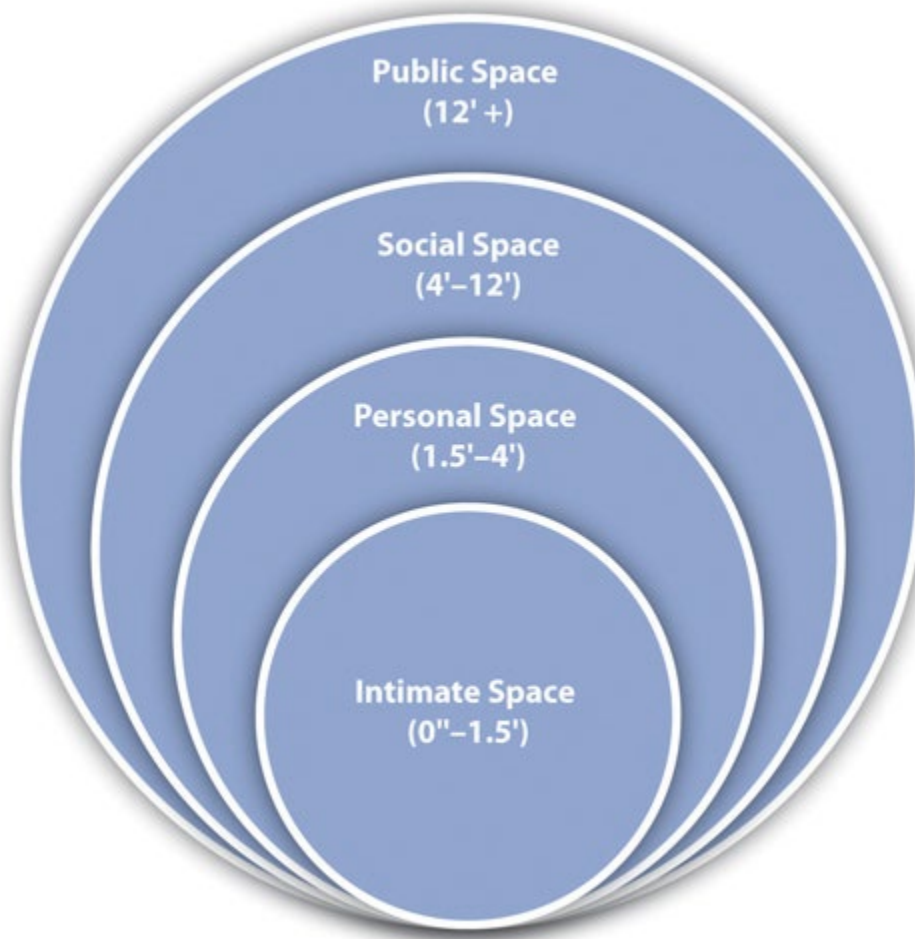


Figure 4.1 Proxemic Zones of Personal Space

### **Public Space (12 Feet or More)**

Public and social zones refer to the space four or more feet away from our body, and the communication that typically occurs in these zones is formal and not intimate. Public space starts about twelve feet from a person and extends out from there. This is the least personal of the four zones and would typically be used when a person is engaging in a formal speech and is removed from the audience to allow the audience to see or when a high-profile or powerful person like a celebrity or executive maintains such a distance as a sign of power or for safety and security reasons. In terms of regular interaction, we are often not obligated or expected to acknowledge or interact with people who enter our public zone. It would be difficult to have a deep conversation with someone at this level because you have to speak louder and don't have the physical closeness that is often needed to promote emotional closeness and/or establish rapport.

## **Social Space (4–12 Feet)**

Communication that occurs in the social zone, which is four to twelve feet away from our body, is typically in the context of a professional or casual interaction, but not intimate or public. This distance is preferred in many professional settings because it reduces the suspicion of any impropriety. The expression “keep someone at an arm’s length” means that someone is kept out of the personal space and kept in the social/professional space. If two people held up their arms and stood so just the tips of their fingers were touching, they would be around four feet away from each other, which is perceived as a safe distance because the possibility for intentional or unintentional touching doesn’t exist. It is also possible to have people in the outer portion of our social zone but not feel obligated to interact with them, but when people come much closer than six feet to us then we often feel obligated to at least acknowledge their presence. In many typically sized classrooms, much of your audience for a speech will actually be in your social zone rather than your public zone, which is actually beneficial because it helps you establish a better connection with them. Students in large lecture classes should consider sitting within the social zone of the professor, since students who sit within this zone are more likely to be remembered by the professor, be acknowledged in class, and retain more information because they are close enough to take in important nonverbal and visual cues. Students who talk to me after class typically stand about four to five feet away when they speak to me, which keeps them in the outer part of the social zone, typical for professional interactions. When students have more personal information to discuss, they will come closer, which brings them into the inner part of the social zone.

## **Personal Space (1.5–4 Feet)**

Personal and intimate zones refer to the space that starts at our physical body and extends four feet. These zones are reserved for friends, close acquaintances, and significant others. Much of our communication occurs in the personal zone, which is what we typically think of as our “personal space bubble” and extends from 1.5 feet to 4 feet away from our body. Even though we are getting closer to the physical body of another person, we may use verbal communication at this point to signal that our presence in this zone is friendly and not intimate. Even people who know each other could be uncomfortable spending too much time in this zone unnecessarily. This zone is broken up into two subzones, which helps us negotiate close interactions with people we may not be close to interpersonally. The outer-personal zone extends from 2.5 feet to 4 feet and is useful for conversations that need to be private but that occur between people who are not interpersonally close. This zone allows for relatively intimate communication but doesn’t convey the intimacy that a closer distance would, which can be beneficial in professional settings. The inner-personal zone extends from 1.5 feet to 2.5 feet and is a space reserved for communication with people we are interpersonally close to or trying to get to know. In this subzone, we can easily touch the other person as we talk to them, briefly placing a hand on his or her arm or engaging in other light social touching that facilitates conversation, self-disclosure, and feelings of closeness.

## **Intimate Space**

As we breach the invisible line that is 1.5 feet from our body, we enter the intimate zone, which is reserved for only the closest friends, family, and romantic/intimate partners. It is impossible to completely ignore people when they are in this space, even if we are trying to pretend that we're ignoring them. A breach of this space can be comforting in some contexts and annoying or frightening in others. We need regular human contact that isn't just verbal but also physical. We have already discussed the importance of touch in nonverbal communication, and in order for that much-needed touch to occur, people have to enter our intimate space. Being close to someone and feeling their physical presence can be very comforting when words fail. There are also social norms regarding the amount of this type of closeness that can be displayed in public, as some people get uncomfortable even seeing others interacting in the intimate zone. While some people are comfortable engaging in or watching others engage in PDAs (public displays of affection) others are not.

So what happens when our space is violated? Although these zones are well established in research for personal space preferences of US Americans, individuals vary in terms of their reactions to people entering certain zones, and determining what constitutes a "violation" of space is subjective and contextual. For example, another person's presence in our social or public zones doesn't typically arouse suspicion or negative physical or communicative reactions, but it could in some situations or with certain people. However, many situations lead to our personal and intimate space being breached by others against our will, and these breaches are more likely to be upsetting, even when they are expected. We've all had to get into a crowded elevator or wait in a long line. In such situations, we may rely on some verbal communication to reduce immediacy and indicate that we are not interested in closeness and are aware that a breach has occurred. People make comments about the crowd, saying, "We're really packed in here like sardines," or use humor to indicate that they are pleasant and well adjusted and uncomfortable with the breach like any "normal" person would be. Interestingly, as we will learn in our discussion of territoriality, we do not often use verbal communication to defend our personal space during regular interactions. Instead, we rely on more nonverbal communication like moving, crossing our arms, or avoiding eye contact to deal with breaches of space.

## **Territoriality**

Territoriality is an innate drive to take up and defend spaces. This drive is shared by many creatures and entities, ranging from packs of animals to individual humans to nations. Whether it's a gang territory, a neighborhood claimed by a particular salesperson, your preferred place to sit in a restaurant, your usual desk in the classroom, or the seat you've marked to save while getting concessions at a sporting event, we claim certain spaces as our own. There are three main divisions for territory: primary, secondary, and public. Sometimes our claim to a space is official. These spaces are known as our primary territories because they are marked or understood to be exclusively ours and under our control. A person's house, yard, room, desk, side of the bed, or shelf in the medicine cabinet could be considered primary territories.

Secondary territories don't belong to us and aren't exclusively under our control, but they are associated with us, which may lead us to assume that the space will be open and available to us

when we need it without us taking any further steps to reserve it. This happens in classrooms regularly. Students often sit in the same desk or at least same general area as they did on the first day of class. There may be some small adjustments during the first couple of weeks, but by a month into the semester, I don't notice students moving much voluntarily. When someone else takes a student's regular desk, she or he is typically annoyed. I do classroom observations for the graduate teaching assistants I supervise, which means I come into the classroom toward the middle of the semester and take a seat in the back to evaluate the class session. Although I don't intend to take someone's seat, on more than one occasion, I've been met by the confused or even glaring eyes of a student whose routine is suddenly interrupted when they see me sitting in "their seat."

Public territories are open to all people. People are allowed to mark public territory and use it for a limited period of time, but space is often up for grabs, which makes public space difficult to manage for some people and can lead to conflict. To avoid this type of situation, people use a variety of objects that are typically recognized by others as nonverbal cues that mark a place as temporarily reserved—for example, jackets, bags, papers, or a drink. There is some ambiguity in the use of markers, though. A half-empty cup of coffee may be seen as trash and thrown away, which would be an annoying surprise to a person who left it to mark his or her table while visiting the restroom. One scholar's informal observations revealed that a full drink sitting on a table could reserve a space in a university cafeteria for more than an hour, but a cup only half full usually only worked as a marker of territory for less than ten minutes. People have to decide how much value they want their marker to have. Obviously, leaving a laptop on a table indicates that the table is occupied, but it could also lead to the laptop getting stolen. A pencil, on the other hand, could just be moved out of the way and the space usurped.

## **Chronemics**

Chronemics refers to the study of how time affects communication. Time can be classified into several different categories, including biological, personal, physical, and cultural time. Biological time refers to the rhythms of living things. Humans follow a circadian rhythm, meaning that we are on a daily cycle that influences when we eat, sleep, and wake. When our natural rhythms are disturbed, by all-nighters, jet lag, or other scheduling abnormalities, our physical and mental health and our communication competence and personal relationships can suffer. Keep biological time in mind as you communicate with others. Remember that early morning conversations and speeches may require more preparation to get yourself awake enough to communicate well and a more patient or energetic delivery to accommodate others who may still be getting warmed up for their day.

Personal time refers to the ways in which individuals experience time. The way we experience time varies based on our mood, our interest level, and other factors. Think about how quickly time passes when you are interested in and therefore engaged in something. I have taught fifty-minute classes that seemed to drag on forever and three-hour classes that zipped by. Individuals also vary based on whether or not they are future or past oriented. People with past-time orientations may want to reminisce about the past, reunite with old friends, and put considerable time into preserving memories and keepsakes in scrapbooks and photo albums. People with future-time orientations may spend the same amount of time making career and personal plans,

writing out to-do lists, or researching future vacations, potential retirement spots, or what book they're going to read next.

Physical time refers to the fixed cycles of days, years, and seasons. Physical time, especially seasons, can affect our mood and psychological states. Some people experience seasonal affective disorder that leads them to experience emotional distress and anxiety during the changes of seasons, primarily from warm and bright to dark and cold (summer to fall and winter).

Cultural time refers to how a large group of people view time. Polychronic people do not view time as a linear progression that needs to be divided into small units and scheduled in advance. Polychronic people keep more flexible schedules and may engage in several activities at once. Monochronic people tend to schedule their time more rigidly and do one thing at a time. A polychronic or monochronic orientation to time influences our social realities and how we interact with others.

Additionally, the way we use time depends in some ways on our status. For example, doctors can make their patients wait for extended periods of time, and executives and celebrities may run consistently behind schedule, making others wait for them. Promptness and the amount of time that is socially acceptable for lateness and waiting varies among individuals and contexts. Chronemics also covers the amount of time we spend talking. We've already learned that conversational turns and turn-taking patterns are influenced by social norms and help our conversations progress. We all know how annoying it can be when a person dominates a conversation or when we can't get a person to contribute anything.

## **Personal Presentation and Environment**

Personal presentation involves two components: our physical characteristics and the artifacts with which we adorn and surround ourselves. Physical characteristics include body shape, height, weight, attractiveness, and other physical features of our bodies. We do not have as much control over how these nonverbal cues are encoded as we do with many other aspects of nonverbal communication. As [Chapter 2 “Communication and Perception”](#) noted, these characteristics play a large role in initial impression formation even though we know we “shouldn't judge a book by its cover.” Although ideals of attractiveness vary among cultures and individuals, research consistently indicates that people who are deemed attractive based on physical characteristics have distinct advantages in many aspects of life. This fact, along with media images that project often unrealistic ideals of beauty, have contributed to booming health and beauty, dieting, gym, and plastic surgery industries. While there have been some controversial reality shows that seek to transform people's physical characteristics, like *Extreme Makeover*, *The Swan*, and *The Biggest Loser*, the relative ease with which we can change the artifacts that send nonverbal cues about us has led to many more style and space makeover shows.

Have you ever tried to consciously change your “look?” I can distinctly remember two times in my life when I made pretty big changes in how I presented myself in terms of clothing and accessories. In high school, at the height of the “thrift store” craze, I started wearing clothes from

the local thrift store daily. Of course, most of them were older clothes, so I was basically going for a “retro” look, which I thought really suited me at the time. Then in my junior year of college, as graduation finally seemed on the horizon and I felt myself entering a new stage of adulthood, I started wearing business-casual clothes to school every day, embracing the “dress for the job you want” philosophy. In both cases, these changes definitely impacted how others perceived me. Television programs like *What Not to Wear* seek to show the power of wardrobe and personal style changes in how people communicate with others.

Aside from clothes, jewelry, visible body art, hairstyles, and other political, social, and cultural symbols send messages to others about who we are. In the United States, body piercings and tattoos have been shifting from subcultural to mainstream over the past few decades. The physical location, size, and number of tattoos and piercings play a large role in whether or not they are deemed appropriate for professional contexts, and many people with tattoos and/or piercings make conscious choices about when and where they display their body art. Hair also sends messages whether it is on our heads or our bodies. Men with short hair are generally judged to be more conservative than men with long hair, but men with shaved heads may be seen as aggressive. Whether a person has a part in their hair, a mohawk, faux-hawk, ponytail, curls, or bright pink hair also sends nonverbal signals to others.

Jewelry can also send messages with varying degrees of direct meaning. A ring on the “ring finger” of a person’s left hand typically indicates that they are married or in an otherwise committed relationship. A thumb ring or a right-hand ring on the “ring finger” doesn’t send such a direct message. People also adorn their clothes, body, or belongings with religious or cultural symbols, like a cross to indicate a person’s Christian faith or a rainbow flag to indicate that a person is gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, or an ally to one or more of those groups. People now wear various types of rubber bracelets, which have become a popular form of social cause marketing, to indicate that they identify with the “Livestrong” movement or support breast cancer awareness and research.

Last, the environment in which we interact affects our verbal and nonverbal communication. This is included because we can often manipulate the nonverbal environment similar to how we would manipulate our gestures or tone of voice to suit our communicative needs. The books that we display on our coffee table, the magazines a doctor keeps in his or her waiting room, the placement of fresh flowers in a foyer, or a piece of mint chocolate on a hotel bed pillow all send particular messages and can easily be changed. The placement of objects and furniture in a physical space can help create a formal, distant, friendly, or intimate climate. In terms of formality, we can use nonverbal communication to convey dominance and status, which helps define and negotiate power and roles within relationships. Fancy cars and expensive watches can serve as symbols that distinguish a CEO from an entry-level employee. A room with soft lighting, a small fountain that creates ambient sounds of water flowing, and a comfy chair can help facilitate interactions between a therapist and a patient. In summary, whether we know it or not, our physical characteristics and the artifacts that surround us communicate much.

## Examples – “Getting Plugged In”

### Avatars

Avatars are computer-generated images that represent users in online environments or are created to interact with users in online and offline situations. Avatars can be created in the likeness of humans, animals, aliens, or other nonhuman creatures. Avatars vary in terms of functionality and technical sophistication and can include stationary pictures like buddy icons, cartoonish but humanlike animations like a Mii character on the Wii, or very humanlike animations designed to teach or assist people in virtual environments. More recently, 3-D holographic avatars have been put to work helping travelers at airports in Paris and New York. Research has shown, though, that humanlike avatars influence people even when they are not sophisticated in terms of functionality and adaptability. Avatars are especially motivating and influential when they are similar to the observer or user but more closely represent the person’s ideal self. Appearance has been noted as one of the most important attributes of an avatar designed to influence or motivate. Attractiveness, coolness (in terms of clothing and hairstyle), and age were shown to be factors that increase or decrease the influence an avatar has over users.

People also create their own avatars as self-representations in a variety of online environments ranging from online role-playing games like World of Warcraft and [Second Life](#) to some online learning management systems used by colleges and universities. Research shows that the line between reality and virtual reality can become blurry when it comes to avatar design and identification. This can become even more pronounced when we consider that some users, especially of online role-playing games, spend about twenty hours a week as their avatar.

Avatars do more than represent people in online worlds; they also affect their behaviors offline. For example, one study found that people who watched an avatar that looked like them exercising and losing weight in an online environment exercised more and ate healthier in the real world. Seeing an older version of them online led participants to form a more concrete social and psychological connection with their future selves, which led them to invest more money in a retirement account. People’s actions online also mirror the expectations for certain physical characteristics, even when the user doesn’t exhibit those characteristics and didn’t get to choose them for his or her avatar. For example, experimental research showed that people using more attractive avatars were more extroverted and friendly than those with less attractive avatars, which is also a nonverbal communication pattern that exists among real people. In summary, people have the ability to self-select physical characteristics and personal presentation for their avatars in a way that they can’t in their real life. People come to see their avatars as part of themselves, which opens the possibility for avatars to affect users’ online and offline communication.

1. Describe an avatar that you have created for yourself. What led you to construct the avatar the way you did, and how do you think your choices reflect your typical nonverbal self-presentation? If you haven’t ever constructed an avatar, what would you make your avatar look like and why?
2. In 2009, a man in Japan became the first human to marry an avatar (that we know of). Although he claims that his avatar is better than any human girlfriend, he has been

criticized as being out of touch with reality. You can [read more about this human-avatar union](#). Do you think the boundaries between human reality and avatar fantasy will continue to fade as we become a more technologically fused world? How do you feel about interacting more with avatars in customer service situations like the airport avatar mentioned above? What do you think about having avatars as mentors, role models, or teachers?

## Key Takeaways

- Kinesics refers to body movements and posture and includes the following components:
  - Gestures are arm and hand movements and include adaptors like clicking a pen or scratching your face, emblems like a thumbs-up to say “OK,” and illustrators like bouncing your hand along with the rhythm of your speaking.
  - Head movements and posture include the orientation of movements of our head and the orientation and positioning of our body and the various meanings they send. Head movements such as nodding can indicate agreement, disagreement, and interest, among other things. Posture can indicate assertiveness, defensiveness, interest, readiness, or intimidation, among other things.
  - Eye contact is studied under the category of oculusics and specifically refers to eye contact with another person’s face, head, and eyes and the patterns of looking away and back at the other person during interaction. Eye contact provides turn-taking signals, signals when we are engaged in cognitive activity, and helps establish rapport and connection, among other things.
  - Facial expressions refer to the use of the forehead, brow, and facial muscles around the nose and mouth to convey meaning. Facial expressions can convey happiness, sadness, fear, anger, and other emotions.
- Haptics refers to touch behaviors that convey meaning during interactions. Touch operates at many levels, including functional-professional, social-polite, friendship-warmth, and love-intimacy. Vocalics refers to the vocalized but not verbal aspects of nonverbal communication, including our speaking rate, pitch, volume, tone of voice, and vocal quality. These qualities, also known as paralanguage, reinforce the meaning of verbal communication, allow us to emphasize particular parts of a message, or can contradict verbal messages.
- Proxemics refers to the use of space and distance within communication. US Americans, in general, have four zones that constitute our personal space: the public zone (12 or more feet from our body), social zone (4–12 feet from our body), the personal zone (1.5–4 feet from our body), and the intimate zone (from body contact to 1.5 feet away). Proxemics also studies territoriality, or how people take up and defend personal space.
- Chronemics refers to the study of how time affects communication and includes how different time cycles affect our communication, including the differences between people who are past or future oriented and cultural perspectives on time as fixed and measured (monochronic) or fluid and adaptable (polychronic).

- Personal presentation and environment refers to how the objects we adorn ourselves and our surroundings with, referred to as artifacts, provide nonverbal cues that others make meaning from and how our physical environment—for example, the layout of a room and seating positions and arrangements—influences communication.

## Exercises

1. Provide some examples of how eye contact plays a role in your communication throughout the day.
2. One of the key functions of vocalics is to add emphasis to our verbal messages to influence the meaning. Provide a meaning for each of the following statements based on which word is emphasized: “She is my friend.” “She is my friend.” “She is my friend.”
3. Getting integrated: Many people do not think of time as an important part of our nonverbal communication. Provide an example of how chronemics sends nonverbal messages in academic settings, professional settings, and personal settings

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## 4.3 Nonverbal Communication Competence

### Learning Objectives

- Identify and employ strategies for improving competence with sending nonverbal messages.
- Identify and employ strategies for improving competence with interpreting nonverbal messages.

As we age, we internalize social and cultural norms related to sending (encoding) and interpreting (decoding) nonverbal communication. In terms of sending, the tendency of children to send unmonitored nonverbal signals reduces as we get older and begin to monitor and perhaps censor or mask them. Likewise, as we become more experienced communicators we tend to think that we become better at interpreting nonverbal messages. In this section we will discuss some strategies for effectively encoding and decoding nonverbal messages. As we've already learned, we receive little, if any, official instruction in nonverbal communication, but you can think of this chapter as a training manual to help improve your own nonverbal communication competence. As with all aspects of communication, improving your nonverbal communication takes commitment and continued effort. However, research shows that education and training in nonverbal communication can lead to quick gains in knowledge and skill. Additionally, once the initial effort is put into improving your nonverbal encoding and decoding skills and those new skills are put into practice, people are encouraged by the positive reactions from others. Remember that people enjoy interacting with others who are skilled at nonverbal encoding and decoding, which will be evident in their reactions, providing further motivation and encouragement to hone your skills.

## **Guidelines for Sending Nonverbal Messages**

As is stressed in [Chapter 2 “Communication and Perception”](#), first impressions matter. Nonverbal cues account for much of the content from which we form initial impressions, so it's important to know that people make judgments about our identities and skills after only brief exposure. Our competence regarding and awareness of nonverbal communication can help determine how an interaction will proceed and, in fact, whether it will take place at all. People who are skilled at encoding nonverbal messages are more favorably evaluated after initial encounters. This is likely due to the fact that people who are more nonverbally expressive are also more attention getting and engaging and make people feel more welcome and warm due to increased immediacy behaviors, all of which enhance perceptions of charisma.

### **Understand That Nonverbal Communication Affects Our Interactions**

Nonverbal communication affects our own and others behaviors and communication. Changing our nonverbal signals can affect our thoughts and emotions. Knowing this allows us to have more control over the trajectory of our communication, possibly allowing us to intervene in a negative cycle. For example, if you are waiting in line to get your driver's license renewed and the agents in front of you are moving slower than you'd like and the man in front of you doesn't have his materials organized and is asking unnecessary questions, you might start to exhibit nonverbal clusters that signal frustration. You might cross your arms, a closing-off gesture, and combine that with wrapping your fingers tightly around one bicep and occasionally squeezing, which is a self-touch adaptor that results from anxiety and stress. The longer you stand like that, the more frustrated and defensive you will become, because that nonverbal cluster reinforces and heightens your feelings. Increased awareness about these cycles can help you make conscious moves to change your nonverbal communication and, subsequently, your cognitive and emotional states.

As your nonverbal encoding competence increases, you can strategically manipulate your behaviors. During my years as a restaurant server I got pretty good at knowing what tables to engage with and “schmooze” a little more to get a better tip. Restaurant servers, bartenders, car salespeople, realtors, exotic dancers, and many others who work in a service or sales capacity know that part of “sealing the deal” is making people feel liked, valued, and important. The strategic use of nonverbal communication to convey these messages is largely accepted and expected in our society, and as customers or patrons, we often play along because it feels good in the moment to think that the other person actually cares about us. Using nonverbals that are intentionally deceptive and misleading can have negative consequences and cross the line into unethical communication.

As you get better at monitoring and controlling your nonverbal behaviors and understanding how nonverbal cues affect our interaction, you may show more competence in multiple types of communication. For example, people who are more skilled at monitoring and controlling nonverbal displays of emotion report that they are more comfortable public speakers. Since speakers become more nervous when they think that audience members are able to detect their nervousness based on outwardly visible, mostly nonverbal cues, it is logical that confidence in one’s ability to control those outwardly visible cues would result in a lessening of that common fear.

## **Understand How Nonverbal Communication Creates Rapport**

Humans have evolved an innate urge to mirror each other’s nonverbal behavior, and although we aren’t often aware of it, this urge influences our behavior daily. Think, for example, about how people “fall into formation” when waiting in a line. Our nonverbal communication works to create an unspoken and subconscious cooperation, as people move and behave in similar ways. When one person leans to the left the next person in line may also lean to the left, and this shift in posture may continue all the way down the line to the end, until someone else makes another movement and the whole line shifts again. This phenomenon is known as mirroring, which refers to the often subconscious practice of using nonverbal cues in a way that match those of others around us. Mirroring sends implicit messages to others that say, “Look! I’m just like you.” Mirroring evolved as an important social function in that it allowed early humans to more easily fit in with larger groups. Logically, early humans who were more successful at mirroring were more likely to secure food, shelter, and security and therefore passed that genetic disposition on down the line to us.

Last summer, during a backyard game of “corn hole” with my family, my mom and sister were standing at the other board and kept whispering to each other and laughing at my dad and me. Corn hole, which is also called “bags,” involves throwing a cloth sack filled with corn toward another team’s board with the goal of getting it in the hole or on the board to score points. They later told us that they were amazed at how we stood, threw our bags, and shifted position between rounds in unison. Although my dad and I didn’t realize we were doing it, our subconscious mirroring was obviously noticeable to others. Mirroring is largely innate and subconscious, but we can more consciously use it and a variety of other nonverbal signals, like the immediacy behaviors we discussed earlier, to help create social bonds and mutual liking.

## **Understand How Nonverbal Communication Regulates Conversations**

The ability to encode appropriate turn-taking signals can help ensure that we can hold the floor when needed in a conversation or work our way into a conversation smoothly, without inappropriately interrupting someone or otherwise being seen as rude. People with nonverbal encoding competence are typically more “in control” of conversations. This regulating function can be useful in initial encounters when we are trying to learn more about another person and in situations where status differentials are present or compliance gaining or dominance are goals. Although close friends, family, and relational partners can sometimes be an exception, interrupting is generally considered rude and should be avoided. Even though verbal communication is most often used to interrupt another person, interruptions are still studied as a part of chronemics because it interferes with another person’s talk time. Instead of interrupting, you can use nonverbal signals like leaning in, increasing your eye contact, or using a brief gesture like subtly raising one hand or the index finger to signal to another person that you’d like to soon take the floor.

## **Understand How Nonverbal Communication Relates to Listening**

Part of being a good listener involves nonverbal-encoding competence, as nonverbal feedback in the form of head nods, eye contact, and posture can signal that a listener is paying attention and the speaker’s message is received and understood. Active listening, for example, combines good cognitive listening practices with outwardly visible cues that signal to others that we are listening. We will learn more about active listening in [Chapter 5 “Listening”](#), but we all know from experience which nonverbal signals convey attentiveness and which convey a lack of attentiveness. Listeners are expected to make more eye contact with the speaker than the speaker makes with them, so it’s important to “listen with your eyes” by maintaining eye contact, which signals attentiveness. Listeners should also avoid distracting movements in the form of self, other, and object adaptors. Being a higher self-monitor can help you catch nonverbal signals that might signal that you aren’t listening, at which point you could consciously switch to more active listening signals.

## **Understand How Nonverbal Communication Relates to Impression Management**

The nonverbal messages we encode also help us express our identities and play into impression management, which as we learned in [Chapter 1 “Introduction to Communication Studies”](#) is a key part of communicating to achieve identity goals. Being able to control nonverbal expressions and competently encode them allows us to better manage our persona and project a desired self to others—for example, a self that is perceived as competent, socially attractive, and engaging. Being nonverbally expressive during initial interactions usually leads to more favorable impressions. So smiling, keeping an attentive posture, and offering a solid handshake help communicate confidence and enthusiasm that can be useful on a first date, during a job interview, when visiting family for the holidays, or when running into an acquaintance at the grocery store. Nonverbal communication can also impact the impressions you make as a student. Research has also found that students who are more nonverbally expressive are liked more by their teachers and are more likely to have their requests met by their teachers.

# Increase Competence in Specific Channels of Nonverbal Communication

While it is important to recognize that we send nonverbal signals through multiple channels simultaneously, we can also increase our nonverbal communication competence by becoming more aware of how it operates in specific channels. Although no one can truly offer you a rulebook on how to effectively send every type of nonverbal signal, there are several nonverbal guidebooks that are written from more anecdotal and less academic perspectives. While these books vary tremendously in terms of their credibility and quality, some, like Allan Pease and Barbara Pease's [\*The Definitive Book of Body Language\*](#) (BF 637 .N66P43 2006), are informative and interesting to read.

## Kinesics

The following guidelines may help you more effectively encode nonverbal messages sent using your hands, arms, body, and face.

### Gestures

- Illustrators make our verbal communication more engaging. I recommend that people doing phone interviews or speaking on the radio make an effort to gesture as they speak, even though people can't see the gestures, because it will make their words sound more engaging.
- Remember that adaptors can hurt your credibility in more formal or serious interactions. Figure out what your common adaptors are and monitor them so you can avoid creating unfavorable impressions.
- Gestures send messages about your emotional state. Since many gestures are spontaneous or subconscious, it is important to raise your awareness of them and monitor them. Be aware that clenched hands may signal aggression or anger, nail biting or fidgeting may signal nervousness, and finger tapping may signal boredom.

### Eye Contact

- Eye contact is useful for initiating and regulating conversations. To make sure someone is available for interaction and to avoid being perceived as rude, it is usually a good idea to "catch their eye" before you start talking to them.
- Avoiding eye contact or shifting your eye contact from place to place can lead others to think you are being deceptive or inattentive. Minimize distractions by moving a clock, closing a door, or closing window blinds to help minimize distractions that may lure your eye contact away.
- Although avoiding eye contact can be perceived as sign of disinterest, low confidence, or negative emotionality, eye contact avoidance can be used positively as a face-saving strategy. The notion of civil inattention refers to a social norm that leads us to avoid making eye contact with people in situations that deviate from expected social norms, such as witnessing someone fall or being in close proximity to a stranger expressing

negative emotions (like crying). We also use civil inattention when we avoid making eye contact with others in crowded spaces.

## **Facial Expressions**

- You can use facial expressions to manage your expressions of emotions to intensify what you're feeling, to diminish what you're feeling, to cover up what you're feeling, to express a different emotion than you're feeling, or to simulate an emotion that you're not feeling.
- Be aware of the power of emotional contagion, or the spread of emotion from one person to another. Since facial expressions are key for emotional communication, you may be able to strategically use your facial expressions to cheer someone up, lighten a mood, or create a more serious and somber tone.
- Smiles are especially powerful as an immediacy behavior and a rapport-building tool. Smiles can also help to disarm a potentially hostile person or deescalate conflict. When I have a problem or complain in a customer service situation, I always make sure to smile at the clerk, manager, or other person before I begin talking to help minimize my own annoyance and set a more positive tone for the interaction.

## **Haptics**

The following guidelines may help you more effectively encode nonverbal signals using touch:

- Remember that culture, status, gender, age, and setting influence how we send and interpret touch messages.
- In professional and social settings, it is generally OK to touch others on the arm or shoulder. Although we touch others on the arm or shoulder with our hand, it is often too intimate to touch your hand to another person's hand in a professional or social/casual setting.

These are types of touch to avoid:

- Avoid touching strangers unless being introduced or offering assistance.
- Avoid hurtful touches and apologize if they occur, even if accidentally.
- Avoid startling/surprising another person with your touch.
- Avoid interrupting touches such as hugging someone while they are talking to someone else.
- Avoid moving people out of the way with only touch—pair your touch with a verbal message like “excuse me.”
- Avoid overly aggressive touch, especially when disguised as playful touch (e.g., horseplay taken too far).
- Avoid combining touch with negative criticism; a hand on the shoulder during a critical statement can increase a person's defensiveness and seem condescending or aggressive.

## Vocalics

The following guidelines may help you more effectively encode nonverbal signals using paralanguage.

- Verbal fillers are often used subconsciously and can negatively affect your credibility and reduce the clarity of your message when speaking in more formal situations. In fact, verbal fluency is one of the strongest predictors of persuasiveness. Becoming a higher self-monitor can help you notice your use of verbal fillers and begin to eliminate them. Beginner speakers can often reduce their use of verbal fillers noticeably over just a short period of time.
- Vocal variety increases listener and speaker engagement, understanding, information recall, and motivation. So having a more expressive voice that varies appropriately in terms of rate, pitch, and volume can help you achieve communication goals related to maintaining attention, effectively conveying information, and getting others to act in a particular way.

## Proxemics

The following may help you more effectively encode nonverbal signals related to interpersonal distances.

- When breaches of personal space occur, it is a social norm to make nonverbal adjustments such as lowering our level of immediacy, changing our body orientations, and using objects to separate ourselves from others. To reduce immediacy, we engage in civil inattention and reduce the amount of eye contact we make with others. We also shift the front of our body away from others since it has most of our sensory inputs and also allows access to body parts that are considered vulnerable, such as the stomach, face, and genitals. When we can't shift our bodies, we often use coats, bags, books, or our hands to physically separate or block off the front of our bodies from others.
- Although pets and children are often granted more leeway to breach other people's space, since they are still learning social norms and rules, as a pet owner, parent, or temporary caretaker, be aware of this possibility and try to prevent such breaches or correct them when they occur.

## Chronemics

The following guideline may help you more effectively encode nonverbal signals related to time.

- In terms of talk time and turn taking, research shows that people who take a little longer with their turn, holding the floor slightly longer than normal, are actually seen as more credible than people who talk too much or too little.
- Our lateness or promptness can send messages about our professionalism, dependability, or other personality traits. Formal time usually applies to professional situations in which we are expected to be on time or even a few minutes early. You generally wouldn't want

to be late for work, a job interview, a medical appointment, and so on. Informal time applies to casual and interpersonal situations in which there is much more variation in terms of expectations for promptness. For example, when I lived in a large city, people often arrived to dinner parties or other social gatherings about thirty minutes after the announced time, given the possibility of interference by heavy traffic or people's hectic schedules. Now that I live in a smaller town in the Midwest, I've learned that people are expected to arrive at or close to the announced time. For most social meetings with one other person or a small group, you can be five minutes late without having to offer much of an apology or explanation. For larger social gatherings you can usually be fifteen minutes late as long as your late arrival doesn't interfere with the host's plans or preparations.

- Quality time is an important part of interpersonal relationships, and sometimes time has to be budgeted so that it can be saved and spent with certain people or on certain occasions—like date nights for couples or family time for parents and children or other relatives.

Examples – “Getting Competent”

### **Deception and Communication Competence**

The research on deception and nonverbal communication indicates that heightened arousal and increased cognitive demands contribute to the presence of nonverbal behaviors that can be associated with deception. Remember, however, that these nonverbal behaviors are not solely related to deception and also manifest as a result of other emotional or cognitive states. Additionally, when people are falsely accused of deception, the signs that they exhibit as a result of the stress of being falsely accused are very similar to the signals exhibited by people who are actually engaging in deception.

There are common misconceptions about what behaviors are associated with deception. Behaviors mistakenly linked to deception include longer response times, slower speech rates, decreased eye contact, increased body movements, excessive swallowing, and less smiling. None of these have consistently been associated with deception. As we've learned, people also tend to give more weight to nonverbal than verbal cues when evaluating the truthfulness of a person or her or his message. This predisposition can lead us to focus on nonverbal cues while overlooking verbal signals of deception. A large study found that people were better able to detect deception by sound alone than they were when exposed to both auditory and visual cues. Aside from nonverbal cues, also listen for inconsistencies in or contradictions between statements, which can also be used to tell when others are being deceptive. The following are some nonverbal signals that have been associated with deception in research studies, but be cautious about viewing these as absolutes since individual and contextual differences should also be considered.

**Gestures.** One of the most powerful associations between nonverbal behaviors and deception is the presence of adaptors. Self-touches like wringing hands and object-adaptors like playing with a pencil or messing with clothing have been shown to correlate to deception. Some highly experienced deceivers, however, can control the presence of adaptors.

Eye contact. Deceivers tend to use more eye contact when lying to friends, perhaps to try to increase feelings of immediacy or warmth, and less eye contact when lying to strangers. A review of many studies of deception indicates that increased eye blinking is associated with deception, probably because of heightened arousal and cognitive activity.

Facial expressions. People can intentionally use facial expressions to try to deceive, and there are five primary ways that this may occur. People may show feelings that they do not actually have, show a higher intensity of feelings than they actually have, try to show no feelings, try to show less feeling than they actually have, or mask one feeling with another.

Vocalics. One of the most common nonverbal signs of deception is speech errors. As you'll recall, verbal fillers and other speech disfluencies are studied as part of vocalics; examples include false starts, stutters, and fillers. Studies also show that an increase in verbal pitch is associated with deception and is likely caused by heightened arousal and tension.

Chronemics. Speech turns are often thought to correspond to deception, but there is no consensus among researchers as to the exact relationship. Most studies reveal that deceivers talk less, especially in response to direct questions.

1. Studies show that people engage in deception much more than they care to admit. Do you consider yourself a good deceiver? Why or why not? Which, if any, of the nonverbal cues discussed do you think help you deceive others or give you away?
2. For each of the following scenarios, note (1) what behaviors may indicate deception, (2) alternative explanations for the behaviors (aside from deception), and (3) questions you could ask to get more information before making a judgment.

Scenario 1. A politician is questioned by a reporter about allegations that she used taxpayer money to fund personal vacations. She looks straight at the reporter, crosses one leg over the other, and says, "I've worked for the people of this community for ten years and no one has ever questioned my ethics until now." As she speaks, she points her index finger at the politician and uses a stern and clear tone of voice.

Scenario 2. You ask your roommate if you can borrow his car to go pick up a friend from the train station about ten miles away. He says, "Um, well...I had already made plans to go to dinner with Cal and he drove last time so it's kind of my turn to drive this time. I mean, is there someone else you could ask or someone else who could get her? You know I don't mind sharing things with you, and I would totally let you, you know, if I didn't have this thing to do. Sorry." As he says, "Sorry," he raises both of his hands, with his palms facing toward you, and shrugs.

Scenario 3. A professor asks a student to explain why he didn't cite sources for several passages in his paper that came from various websites. The student scratches his head and says, "What do you mean? Those were my ideas. I did look at several websites, but I didn't directly quote anything so I didn't think I needed to put the citations in parentheses." As he says this, he rubs the back of his neck and then scratches his face and only makes minimal eye contact with the professor.

## Key Takeaways

- To improve your competence encoding nonverbal messages, increase your awareness of the messages you are sending and receiving and the contexts in which your communication is taking place. Since nonverbal communication is multichannel, it is important to be aware that nonverbal cues can complement, enhance, or contradict each other. Also realize that the norms and expectations for sending nonverbal messages, especially touch and personal space, vary widely between relational and professional contexts.
- To improve your competence decoding nonverbal messages, look for multiple nonverbal cues, avoid putting too much weight on any one cue, and evaluate nonverbal messages in relation to the context and your previous experiences with the other person. Although we put more weight on nonverbal communication than verbal when trying to detect deception, there is no set guide that can allow us to tell whether or not another person is being deceptive.

## Exercises

1. Getting integrated: As was indicated earlier, research shows that instruction in nonverbal communication can lead people to make gains in their nonverbal communication competence. List some nonverbal skills that you think are important in each of the following contexts: academic, professional, personal, and civic.
2. Using concepts from this section, analyze your own nonverbal encoding competence. What are your strengths and weaknesses? Do the same for your nonverbal decoding competence
3. To understand how chronemics relates to nonverbal communication norms, answer the following questions: In what situations is it important to be early? In what situations can you arrive late? How long would you wait on someone you were meeting for a group project for a class? A date? A job interview?

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## 4.4 Nonverbal Communication in Context

### Learning Objectives

- Discuss the role of nonverbal communication in relational contexts.
- Discuss the role of nonverbal communication in professional contexts.
- Provide examples of cultural differences in nonverbal communication.
- Provide examples of gender differences in nonverbal communication.

Nonverbal communication receives less attention than verbal communication as a part of our everyday lives. Learning more about nonverbal communication and becoming more aware of our own and others' use of nonverbal cues can help us be better relational partners and better professionals. In addition, learning about cultural differences in nonverbal communication is important for people traveling abroad but also due to our increasingly multinational business world and the expanding diversity and increased frequency of intercultural communication within our own borders.

### Nonverbal Communication in Relational Contexts

A central, if not primary, function of nonverbal communication is the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Further, people who are skilled at encoding nonverbal messages have various interpersonal advantages, including being more popular, having larger social networks consisting of both acquaintances and close friends, and being less likely to be lonely or socially anxious.

Nonverbal communication increases our expressivity, and people generally find attractive and want to pay more attention to things that are expressive. This increases our chances of initiating interpersonal relationships. Relationships then form as a result of some initial exchanges of verbal and nonverbal information through mutual self-disclosure. As the depth of self-disclosure increases, messages become more meaningful if they are accompanied by congruent nonverbal cues. Impressions formed at this stage of interaction help determine whether or not a relationship will progress. As relationships progress from basic information exchange and the establishment of early interpersonal bonds to more substantial emotional connections, nonverbal communication plays a more central role. As we've learned, nonverbal communication conveys much emotional meaning, so the ability to effectively encode and decode appropriate nonverbal

messages sent through facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, and touch leads to high-quality interactions that are rewarding for the communicators involved.

Nonverbal communication helps maintain relationships once they have moved beyond the initial stages by helping us communicate emotions and seek and provide social and emotional support. In terms of communicating emotions, competent communicators know when it is appropriate to express emotions and when more self-regulation is needed. They also know how to adjust their emotional expressions to fit various contexts and individuals, which is useful in preventing emotional imbalances within a relationship. Emotional imbalances occur when one relational partner expresses too much emotion in a way that becomes a burden for the other person. Ideally, each person in a relationship is able to express his or her emotions in a way that isn't too taxing for the other person. Occasionally, one relational partner may be going through an extended period of emotional distress, which can become very difficult for other people in his or her life. Since people with nonverbal communication competence are already more likely to have larger social support networks, it is likely that they will be able to spread around their emotional communication, specifically related to negative emotions, in ways that do not burden others. Unfortunately, since people with less nonverbal skill are likely to have smaller social networks, they may end up targeting one or two people for their emotional communication, which could lead the other people to withdraw from the relationship.

Expressing the need for support is also an important part of relational maintenance. People who lack nonverbal encoding skills may send unclear or subtle cues requesting support that are not picked up on by others, which can lead to increased feelings of loneliness. Skilled encoders of nonverbal messages, on the other hand, are able to appropriately communicate the need for support in recognizable ways. As relationships progress in terms of closeness and intimacy, nonverbal signals become a shorthand form of communicating, as information can be conveyed with a particular look, gesture, tone of voice, or posture. Family members, romantic couples, close friends, and close colleagues can bond over their familiarity with each other's nonverbal behaviors, which creates a shared relational reality that is unique to the relationship.

## **Nonverbal Communication in Professional Contexts**

Surveys of current professionals and managers have found that most report that nonverbal skills are important to their jobs. Although important, there is rarely any training or instruction related to nonverbal communication, and a consistent issue that has been reported by employees has been difficulty with mixed messages coming from managers. Interpreting contradictory verbal and nonverbal messages is challenging in any context and can have negative effects on job satisfaction and productivity. As a supervisor who gives positive and negative feedback regularly and/or in periodic performance evaluations, it is important to be able to match nonverbal signals with the content of the message. For example, appropriate nonverbal cues can convey the seriousness of a customer or coworker complaint, help ease the delivery of constructive criticism, or reinforce positive feedback. Professionals also need to be aware of how context, status, and power intersect with specific channels of nonverbal communication. For example, even casual touching of supervisees, mentees, or employees may be considered condescending or inappropriate in certain situations. A well-deserved pat on the back is different from an unnecessary hand on the shoulder to say hello at the start of a business meeting.

In professional contexts, managers and mentors with nonverbal decoding skills can exhibit sensitivity to others' nonverbal behavior and better relate to employees and mentees. In general, interpreting emotions from nonverbal cues can have interpersonal and professional benefits. One study found that salespeople who were skilled at recognizing emotions through nonverbal cues sold more products and earned higher salaries. Aside from bringing financial rewards, nonverbal communication also helps create supportive climates. Bosses, supervisors, and service providers like therapists can help create rapport and a positive climate by consciously mirroring the nonverbal communication of their employees or clients. In addition, mirroring the nonverbal communication of others during a job interview, during a sales pitch, or during a performance evaluation can help put the other person at ease and establish rapport. Much of the mirroring we do is natural, so trying to overcompensate may actually be detrimental, but engaging in self-monitoring and making small adjustments could be beneficial.

You can also use nonverbal communication to bring positive attention to yourself. Being able to nonverbally encode turn-taking cues can allow people to contribute to conversations at relevant times, and getting an idea or a piece of information or feedback in at the right time can help bring attention to your professional competence. Being able to encode an appropriate amount of professionalism and enthusiasm during a job interview can also aid in desired impression formation since people make judgments about others' personalities based on their nonverbal cues. A person who comes across as too enthusiastic may be seen as pushy or fake, and a person who comes across as too relaxed may be seen as unprofessional and unmotivated.

## **Nonverbal Communication and Culture**

As with other aspects of communication, norms for nonverbal communication vary from country to country and also among cultures within a particular country. We've already learned that some nonverbal communication behaviors appear to be somewhat innate because they are universally recognized. Two such universal signals are the "eyebrow flash" of recognition when we see someone we know and the open hand and the palm up gesture that signals a person would like something or needs help. Smiling is also a universal nonverbal behavior, but the triggers that lead a person to smile vary from culture to culture. The expansion of media, particularly from the United States and other Western countries around the world, is leading to more nonverbal similarities among cultures, but the biggest cultural differences in nonverbal communication occur within the categories of eye contact, touch, and personal space. Next, we will overview some interesting and instructive differences within several channels of nonverbal communication that we have discussed so far. As you read, remember that these are not absolute, in that nonverbal communication like other forms of communication is influenced by context and varies among individuals within a particular cultural group as well.

### **Kinesics**

Cultural variations in the way we gesture, use head movements, and use eye contact fall under the nonverbal category of kinesics.

### **Gestures**

Remember that emblems are gestures that correspond to a word and an agreed-on meaning. When we use our fingers to count, we are using emblematic gestures, but even our way of counting varies among cultures. I could fairly accurately separate British people and US Americans from French, Greek, and German people based on a simple and common gesture. Let's try this exercise: First, display with your hand the number five. Second, keeping the five displayed, change it to a two. If you are from the United States or Britain you are probably holding up your index finger and your middle finger. If you are from another European country you are probably holding up your thumb and index finger. While Americans and Brits start counting on their index finger and end with five on their thumb, other Europeans start counting on their thumb and end with five on their pinky finger.

How you use your hands can also get you into trouble if you're unaware of cultural differences. Allan Pease and Barbara Pease, *The Definitive Book of Body Language* (New York, NY: Bantam, 2004), 110–11. For example, the “thumbs up” gesture, as we just learned, can mean “one” in mainland Europe, but it also means “up yours” in Greece (when thrust forward) and is recognized as a signal for hitchhiking or “good,” “good job / way to go,” or “OK” in many other cultures. Two hands up with the palms out can signal “ten” in many Western countries and is recognized as a signal for “I’m telling the truth” or “I surrender” in many cultures. The same gesture, however, means “up yours twice” in Greece. So using that familiar gesture to say you surrender might actually end up escalating rather than ending a conflict if used in Greece.

## **Head Movements**

Bowing is a nonverbal greeting ritual that is more common in Asian cultures than Western cultures, but the head nod, which is a common form of acknowledgement in many cultures, is actually an abbreviated bow. Japan is considered a noncontact culture, which refers to cultural groups in which people stand farther apart while talking, make less eye contact, and touch less during regular interactions. Because of this, bowing is the preferred nonverbal greeting over handshaking. Bows vary based on status, with higher status people bowing the least. For example, in order to indicate the status of another person, a Japanese businessperson may bow deeply. An interesting ritual associated with the bow is the exchange of business cards when greeting someone in Japan. This exchange allows each person to view the other's occupation and title, which provides useful information about the other's status and determines who should bow more. Since bowing gives each person a good view of the other person's shoes, it is very important to have clean shoes that are in good condition, since they play an important part of initial impression formation.

## **Eye Contact**

In some cultures, avoiding eye contact is considered a sign of respect. Such eye contact aversion, however, could be seen as a sign that the other person is being deceptive, is bored, or is being rude. Some Native American nations teach that people should avoid eye contact with elders, teachers, and other people with status. This can create issues in classrooms when teachers are unaware of this norm and may consider a Native American student's lack of eye contact as a sign of insubordination or lack of engagement, which could lead to false impressions that the student is a troublemaker or less intelligent.

## Haptics

As we've learned, touch behaviors are important during initial interactions, and cultural differences in these nonverbal practices can lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding. Shaking hands as a typical touch greeting, for example, varies among cultures. It is customary for British, Australian, German, and US American colleagues to shake hands when seeing each other for the first time and then to shake again when departing company. In the United States, the colleagues do not normally shake hands again if they see each other again later in the day, but European colleagues may shake hands with each other several times a day. Once a certain level of familiarity and closeness is reached, US American colleagues will likely not even shake hands daily unless engaging in some more formal interaction, but many European colleagues will continue to shake each time they see each other. Some French businesspeople have been known to spend up to thirty minutes a day shaking hands. The squeezes and up-and-down shakes used during handshakes are often called "pumps," and the number of pumps used in a handshake also varies among cultures. Although the Germans and French shake hands more often throughout the day, they typically only give one or two pumps and then hold the shake for a couple seconds before letting go. Brits tend to give three to five pumps, and US Americans tend to give five to seven pumps. This can be humorous to watch at a multinational business event, but it also affects the initial impressions people make of each other. A US American may think that a German is being unfriendly or distant because of his or her single hand pump, while a German may think that a US American is overdoing it with seven.

Contact cultures are cultural groups in which people stand closer together, engage in more eye contact, touch more frequently, and speak more loudly. Italians are especially known for their vibrant nonverbal communication in terms of gestures, volume, eye contact, and touching, which not surprisingly places them in the contact culture category. Italians use hand motions and touching to regulate the flow of conversations, and when non-Italians don't know how to mirror an Italian's nonverbals they may not get to contribute much to the conversation, which likely feeds into the stereotype of Italians as domineering in conversations or overexpressive. For example, Italians speak with their hands raised as a way to signal that they are holding the floor for their conversational turn. If their conversational partner starts to raise his or her hands, the Italian might gently touch the other person and keep on talking. Conversational partners often interpret this as a sign of affection or of the Italian's passion for what he or she is saying. In fact, it is a touch intended to keep the partner from raising his or her hands, which would signal that the Italian's conversational turn is over and the other person now has the floor. It has been suggested that in order to get a conversational turn, you must physically grab their hands in midair and pull them down. While this would seem very invasive and rude to northern Europeans and US Americans, it is a nonverbal norm in Italian culture and may be the only way to get to contribute to a conversation.

## Vocalics

The volume at which we speak is influenced by specific contexts and is more generally influenced by our culture. In European countries like France, England, Sweden, and Germany, it is not uncommon to find restaurants that have small tables very close together. In many cases, two people dining together may be sitting at a table that is actually touching the table of another

pair of diners. Most US Americans would consider this a violation of personal space, and Europeans often perceive US Americans to be rude in such contexts because they do not control the volume of their conversations more. Since personal space is usually more plentiful in the United States, Americans are used to speaking at a level that is considered loud to many cultures that are used to less personal space. I have personally experienced both sides of this while traveling abroad. One time, my friends and I were asked to leave a restaurant in Sweden because another table complained that we were being loud. Another time, at a restaurant in Argentina, I was disturbed, as were the others dining around me, by a “loud” table of Americans seated on the other side of the dining area. In this case, even though we were also Americans, we were bothered by the lack of cultural awareness being exhibited by the other Americans at the restaurant. These examples show how proxemics and vocalics can combine to make for troubling, but hopefully informative, nonverbal intercultural encounters.

## **Proxemics**

Cultural norms for personal space vary much more than some other nonverbal communication channels such as facial expressions, which have more universal similarity and recognizability. We’ve already learned that contact and noncontact cultures differ in their preferences for touch and interpersonal distance. Countries in South America and southern Europe exhibit characteristics of contact cultures, while countries in northern Europe and Southeast Asia exhibit noncontact cultural characteristics. Because of the different comfort levels with personal space, a Guatemalan and a Canadian might come away with differing impressions of each other because of proxemic differences. The Guatemalan may feel the Canadian is standoffish, and the Canadian may feel the Guatemalan is pushy or aggressive.

## **Chronemics**

The United States and many northern and western European countries have a monochronic orientation to time, meaning time is seen as a commodity that can be budgeted, saved, spent, and wasted. Events are to be scheduled in advance and have set beginning and ending times. Countries like Spain and Mexico have a polychronic orientation to time. Appointments may be scheduled at overlapping times, making an “orderly” schedule impossible. People may also miss appointments or deadlines without offering an apology, which would be considered very rude by a person with a monochronic orientation to time. People from cultures with a monochronic orientation to time are frustrated when people from polychronic cultures cancel appointments or close businesses for family obligations. Conversely, people from polychronic cultures feel that US Americans, for example, follow their schedules at the expense of personal relationships.

## **Nonverbal Communication and Gender**

Gender and communication scholar Kathryn Dindia contests the notion that men and women are from different planets and instead uses another analogy. She says men are from South Dakota and women are from North Dakota. Although the states border each other and are similar in many ways, state pride and in-group identifications lead the people of South Dakota to perceive themselves to be different from the people of North Dakota and vice versa. But if we expand our perspective and take the position of someone from California or Illinois, North Dakotans and

South Dakotans are pretty much alike. This comparison is intended to point out that in our daily lives we do experience men and women to be fairly different, but when we look at the differences between men and women compared to the differences between humans and other creatures, men and women are much more similar than different. For example, in terms of nonverbal communication, men and women all over the world make similar facial expressions and can recognize those facial expressions in one another. We use similar eye contact patterns, gestures, and, within cultural groups, have similar notions of the use of time and space. As I will reiterate throughout this book, it's important to understand how gender influences communication, but it's also important to remember that in terms of communication, men and women are about 99 percent similar and 1 percent different.

## **Kinesics**

Although men and women are mostly similar in terms of nonverbal communication, we can gain a better understanding of the role that gender plays in influencing our social realities by exploring some of the channel-specific differences. Within the category of kinesics, we will discuss some gender differences in how men and women use gestures, posture, eye contact, and facial expressions.

## **Gestures**

- Women use more gestures in regular conversation than do men, but men tend to use larger gestures than women when they do use them.
- Men are, however, more likely to use physical adaptors like restless foot and hand movements, probably because girls are socialized to avoid such movements because they are not “ladylike.”

## **Posture**

- Men are more likely to lean in during an interaction than are women.
- Women are more likely to have a face-to-face body orientation while interacting than are men.
- Women's tendency to use a face-to-face body orientation influences the general conclusion that women are better at sending and receiving nonverbal messages than men. Women's more direct visual engagement during interactions allows them to take in more nonverbal cues, which allows them to better reflect on and more accurately learn from experience what particular nonverbal cues mean in what contexts.

## **Eye Contact**

- In general, women make more eye contact than men. As we learned, women use face-to-face body orientations in conversations more often than men, which likely facilitates more sustained eye contact.
- Overall, women tend to do more looking and get looked at more than men.

## **Facial Expressions**

- Women reveal emotion through facial expressions more frequently and more accurately than men.
- Men are more likely than women to exhibit angry facial expressions.
- Men are often socialized to believe it is important to hide their emotions. This is especially evident in the case of smiling, with women smiling more than men. This also contributes to the stereotype of the more emotionally aware and nurturing woman, since people tend to like and view as warmer others who show positive emotion.
- Gender socialization plays a role in facial displays as girls are typically rewarded for emotional displays, especially positive ones, and boys are rewarded when they conceal emotions—for instance, when they are told to “suck it up,” “take it like a man,” or “show sportsmanship” by not gloating or celebrating openly.

## Haptics

- Although it is often assumed that men touch women more than women touch men, this hasn’t been a consistent research finding. In fact, differences in touch in cross-gender interactions are very small.
- Women do engage in more touching when interacting with same-gender conversational partners than do men.
- In general, men tend to read more sexual intent into touch than do women, who often underinterpret sexual intent.

There is a touch taboo for men in the United States. In fact, research supports the claim that men’s aversion to same-gender touching is higher in the United States than in other cultures, which shows that this taboo is culturally relative. For example, seeing two adult men holding hands in public in Saudi Arabia would signal that the men are close friends and equals, but it wouldn’t signal that they are sexually attracted to each other. The touch taboo also extends to cross-gender interactions in certain contexts. It’s important to be aware of the potential interpretations of touch, especially as they relate to sexual and aggressive interpretations.

## Vocalics

- Women are socialized to use more vocal variety, which adds to the stereotype that women are more expressive than men.
- In terms of pitch, women tend more than men to end their sentences with an upward inflection of pitch, which implies a lack of certainty, even when there isn’t.

A biological difference between men and women involves vocal pitch, with men’s voices being lower pitched and women’s being higher. Varying degrees of importance and social meaning are then placed on these biological differences, which lead some men and women to consciously or unconsciously exaggerate the difference. Men may speak in a lower register than they would naturally and women may speak in more soft, breathy tones to accentuate the pitch differences. These ways of speaking often start as a conscious choice after adolescence to better fit into socially and culturally proscribed gender performances, but they can become so engrained that people spend the rest of their lives speaking in a voice that is a modified version of their natural tone.

## Proxemics

- Men are implicitly socialized to take up as much space as possible, and women are explicitly socialized to take up less space.
- In terms of interpersonal distance, research shows that women interact in closer proximity to one another than do men.
- Men do not respond as well as women in situations involving crowding. High-density environments evoke more negative feelings from men, which can even lead to physical violence in very crowded settings.

Men are generally larger than women, which is a biological difference that gains social and cultural meaning when certain behaviors and norms are associated with it. For example, women are told to sit in a “ladylike” way, which usually means to cross and/or close their legs and keep their limbs close to their body. Men, on the other hand, sprawl out in casual, professional, and formal situations without their use of space being reprimanded or even noticed in many cases.

If you’ll recall our earlier discussion of personal space, we identified two subzones within the personal zone that extends from 1.5 to 4 feet from our body. Men seem to be more comfortable with casual and social interactions that are in the outer subzone, which is 2.5 to 4 feet away, meaning men prefer to interact at an arm’s length from another person. This also plays into the stereotypes of women as more intimate and nurturing and men as more distant and less intimate.

## Self-Presentation

- Men and women present themselves differently, with women, in general, accentuating their physical attractiveness more and men accentuating signs of their status and wealth more.
- Men and women may engage in self-presentation that exaggerates existing biological differences between male and female bodies.

Most people want to present themselves in ways that accentuate their attractiveness, at least in some situations where impression management is important to fulfill certain instrumental, relational, or identity needs. Gender socialization over many years has influenced how we present ourselves in terms of attractiveness. Research shows that women’s physical attractiveness is more important to men than men’s physical attractiveness is to women. Women do take physical attractiveness into account, but a man’s social status and wealth has been shown to be more important.

Men and women also exaggerate biological and socially based sex and gender differences on their own. In terms of biology, men and women’s bodies are generally different, which contributes to the nonverbal area related to personal appearance. Many men and women choose clothing that accentuates these bodily differences. For example, women may accentuate their curves with specific clothing choices and men may accentuate their size—for example, by wearing a suit with shoulder padding to enhance the appearance of broad shoulders. These choices vary in terms of the level of consciousness at which they are made. Men are also hairier than women, and although it isn’t always the case and grooming varies by culture, many women

shave their legs and remove body hair while men may grow beards or go to great lengths to reverse baldness to accentuate these differences. Of course, the more recent trend of “manscaping” now has some men trimming or removing body hair from their chests, arms, and/or legs.

### Key Takeaways

- A central function of nonverbal communication is the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Nonverbal communication helps initiate relationships through impression management and self-disclosure and then helps maintain relationships as it aids in emotional expressions that request and give emotional support.
- Professionals indicate that nonverbal communication is an important part of their jobs. Organizational leaders can use nonverbal decoding skills to tell when employees are under stress and in need of support and can then use encoding skills to exhibit nonverbal sensitivity. Nonverbal signals can aid in impression management in professional settings, such as in encoding an appropriate amount of enthusiasm and professionalism.
- Although some of our nonverbal signals appear to be more innate and culturally universal, many others vary considerably among cultures, especially in terms of the use of space (proxemics), eye contact (oculesics), and touch (haptics). Rather than learning a list of rules for cultural variations in nonverbal cues, it is better to develop more general knowledge about how nonverbal norms vary based on cultural values and to view this knowledge as tools that can be adapted for use in many different cultural contexts.
- In terms of gender, most of the nonverbal differences between men and women are exaggerations of biological differences onto which we have imposed certain meanings and values. Men and women’s nonverbal communication, as with other aspects of communication, is much more similar than different. Research has consistently found, however, that women gesture, make eye contact, touch and stand close to same-gender conversational partners, and use positive facial expressions more than men.

### Exercises

1. Identify some nonverbal behaviors that would signal a positive interaction on a first date and on a job interview. Then identify some nonverbal behaviors that would signal a negative interaction in each of those contexts.
2. Discuss an experience where you have had some kind of miscommunication or misunderstanding because of cultural or gender differences in encoding and decoding nonverbal messages. What did you learn in this chapter that could help you in similar future interactions?

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# Chapter 5: Listening

In our sender-oriented society, listening is often overlooked as an important part of the communication process. Yet research shows that adults spend about 45 percent of their time listening, which is more than any other communicative activity. In some contexts, we spend even more time listening than that. On average, workers spend 55 percent of their workday listening, and managers spend about 63 percent of their day listening.

Listening is a primary means through which we learn new information, which can help us meet instrumental needs as we learn things that helps us complete certain tasks at work or school and get things done in general. The act of listening to our relational partners provides support, which is an important part of relational maintenance and helps us meet our relational needs. Listening to what others say about us helps us develop an accurate self-concept, which can help us more strategically communicate for identity needs in order to project to others our desired self. Overall, improving our listening skills can help us be better students, better relational partners, and more successful professionals.

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## 5.1 Understanding How & Why We Listen

### Learning Objectives

- Describe the stages of the listening process.
- Discuss the four main types of listening.
- Compare and contrast the four main listening styles.

Listening is the learned process of receiving, interpreting, recalling, evaluating, and responding to verbal and nonverbal messages. We begin to engage with the listening process long before we engage in any recognizable verbal or nonverbal communication. It is only after listening for months as infants that we begin to consciously practice our own forms of expression. In this section we will learn more about each stage of the listening process, the main types of listening, and the main listening styles.

### The Listening Process

Listening is a process and as such doesn't have a defined start and finish. Like the communication process, listening has cognitive, behavioral, and relational elements and doesn't unfold in a linear, step-by-step fashion. Models of processes are informative in that they help us

visualize specific components, but keep in mind that they do not capture the speed, overlapping nature, or overall complexity of the actual process in action. The stages of the listening process are receiving, interpreting, recalling, evaluating, and responding.

## Receiving

Before we can engage other steps in the listening process, we must take in stimuli through our senses. In any given communication encounter, it is likely that we will return to the receiving stage many times as we process incoming feedback and new messages. This part of the listening process is more physiological than other parts, which include cognitive and relational elements. We primarily take in information needed for listening through auditory and visual channels. Although we don't often think about visual cues as a part of listening, they influence how we interpret messages. For example, seeing a person's face when we hear their voice allows us to take in nonverbal cues from facial expressions and eye contact. The fact that these visual cues are missing in e-mail, text, and phone interactions presents some difficulties for reading contextual clues into meaning received through only auditory channels.

Our chapter on perception discusses some of the ways in which incoming stimuli are filtered. These perceptual filters also play a role in listening. Some stimuli never make it in, some are filtered into subconsciousness, and others are filtered into various levels of consciousness based on their salience. Recall that salience is the degree to which something attracts our attention in a particular context and that we tend to find salient things that are visually or audibly stimulating and things that meet our needs or interests. Think about how it's much easier to listen to a lecture on a subject that you find very interesting.

It is important to consider noise as a factor that influences how we receive messages. Some noise interferes primarily with hearing, which is the physical process of receiving stimuli through internal and external components of the ears and eyes, and some interferes with listening, which is the cognitive process of processing the stimuli taken in during hearing. While hearing leads to listening, they are not the same thing. Environmental noise such as other people talking, the sounds of traffic, and music interfere with the physiological aspects of hearing. Psychological noise like stress and anger interfere primarily with the cognitive processes of listening. We can enhance our ability to receive, and in turn listen, by trying to minimize noise.

## Interpreting

During the interpreting stage of listening, we combine the visual and auditory information we receive and try to make meaning out of that information using schemata. The interpreting stage engages cognitive and relational processing as we take in informational, contextual, and relational cues and try to connect them in meaningful ways to previous experiences. It is through the interpreting stage that we may begin to understand the stimuli we have received. When we understand something, we are able to attach meaning by connecting information to previous experiences. Through the process of comparing new information with old information, we may also update or revise particular schemata if we find the new information relevant and credible. If we have difficulty interpreting information, meaning we don't have previous experience or

information in our existing schemata to make sense of it, then it is difficult to transfer the information into our long-term memory for later recall. In situations where understanding the information we receive isn't important or isn't a goal, this stage may be fairly short or even skipped. After all, we can move something to our long-term memory by repetition and then later recall it without ever having understood it. I remember earning perfect scores on exams in my anatomy class in college because I was able to memorize and recall, for example, all the organs in the digestive system. In fact, I might still be able to do that now over a decade later. But neither then nor now could I tell you the significance or function of most of those organs, meaning I didn't really get to a level of understanding but simply stored the information for later recall.

## Recalling

Our ability to recall information is dependent on some of the physiological limits of how memory works. Overall, our memories are known to be fallible. We forget about half of what we hear immediately after hearing it, recall 35 percent after eight hours, and recall 20 percent after a day. Our memory consists of multiple "storage units," including sensory storage, short-term memory, working memory, and long-term memory.

Our sensory storage is very large in terms of capacity but limited in terms of length of storage. We can hold large amounts of unsorted visual information but only for about a tenth of a second. By comparison, we can hold large amounts of unsorted auditory information for longer—up to four seconds. This initial memory storage unit doesn't provide much use for our study of communication, as these large but quickly expiring chunks of sensory data are primarily used in reactionary and instinctual ways.

As stimuli are organized and interpreted, they make their way to short-term memory where they either expire and are forgotten or are transferred to long-term memory. Short-term memory is a mental storage capability that can retain stimuli for twenty seconds to one minute. Long-term memory is a mental storage capability to which stimuli in short-term memory can be transferred if they are connected to existing schema and in which information can be stored indefinitely. Working memory is a temporarily accessed memory storage space that is activated during times of high cognitive demand. When using working memory, we can temporarily store information and process and use it at the same time. This is different from our typical memory function in that information usually has to make it to long-term memory before we can call it back up to apply to a current situation. People with good working memories are able to keep recent information in mind and process it and apply it to other incoming information. This can be very useful during high-stress situations. A person in control of a command center like the White House Situation Room should have a good working memory in order to take in, organize, evaluate, and then immediately use new information instead of having to wait for that information to make it to long-term memory and then be retrieved and used.

Although recall is an important part of the listening process, there isn't a direct correlation between being good at recalling information and being a good listener. Some people have excellent memories and recall abilities and can tell you a very accurate story from many years earlier during a situation in which they should actually be listening and not showing off their

recall abilities. Recall is an important part of the listening process because it is most often used to assess listening abilities and effectiveness. Many quizzes and tests in school are based on recall and are often used to assess how well students comprehended information presented in class, which is seen as an indication of how well they listened. When recall is our only goal, we excel at it. Experiments have found that people can memorize and later recall a set of faces and names with near 100 percent recall when sitting in a quiet lab and asked to do so. But throw in external noise, more visual stimuli, and multiple contextual influences, and we can't remember the name of the person we were just introduced to one minute earlier. Even in interpersonal encounters, we rely on recall to test whether or not someone was listening. Imagine that Azam is talking to his friend Belle, who is sitting across from him in a restaurant booth. Azam, annoyed that Belle keeps checking her phone, stops and asks, "Are you listening?" Belle inevitably replies, "Yes," since we rarely fess up to our poor listening habits, and Azam replies, "Well, what did I just say?"

## Evaluating

When we evaluate something, we make judgments about its credibility, completeness, and worth. In terms of credibility, we try to determine the degree to which we believe a speaker's statements are correct and/or true. In terms of completeness, we try to "read between the lines" and evaluate the message in relation to what we know about the topic or situation being discussed. We evaluate the worth of a message by making a value judgment about whether we think the message or idea is good/bad, right/wrong, or desirable/undesirable. All these aspects of evaluating require critical thinking skills, which we aren't born with but must develop over time through our own personal and intellectual development.

Studying communication is a great way to build your critical thinking skills, because you learn much more about the taken-for-granted aspects of how communication works, which gives you tools to analyze and critique messages, senders, and contexts. Critical thinking and listening skills also help you take a more proactive role in the communication process rather than being a passive receiver of messages that may not be credible, complete, or worthwhile. One danger within the evaluation stage of listening is to focus your evaluative lenses more on the speaker than the message. This can quickly become a barrier to effective listening if we begin to prejudge a speaker based on his or her identity or characteristics rather than on the content of his or her message. We will learn more about how to avoid slipping into a person-centered rather than message-centered evaluative stance later in the chapter.

## Responding

Responding entails sending verbal and nonverbal messages that indicate attentiveness and understanding or a lack thereof. From our earlier discussion of the communication model, you may be able to connect this part of the listening process to feedback. Later, we will learn more specifics about how to encode and decode the verbal and nonverbal cues sent during the responding stage, but we all know from experience some signs that indicate whether a person is paying attention and understanding a message or not.

We send verbal and nonverbal feedback while another person is talking and after they are done. Back-channel cues are the verbal and nonverbal signals we send while someone is talking and can consist of verbal cues like “uh-huh,” “oh,” and “right,” and/or nonverbal cues like direct eye contact, head nods, and leaning forward. Back-channel cues are generally a form of positive feedback that indicates others are actively listening. People also send cues intentionally and unintentionally that indicate they aren’t listening. If another person is looking away, fidgeting, texting, or turned away, we will likely interpret those responses negatively.

Paraphrasing is a responding behavior that can also show that you understand what was communicated. When you paraphrase information, you rephrase the message into your own words. For example, you might say the following to start off a paraphrased response: “What I heard you say was...” or “It seems like you’re saying...” You can also ask clarifying questions to get more information. It is often a good idea to pair a paraphrase with a question to keep a conversation flowing. For example, you might pose the following paraphrase and question pair: “It seems like you believe you were treated unfairly. Is that right?” Or you might ask a standalone question like “What did your boss do that made you think he was ‘playing favorites?’” Make sure to paraphrase and/or ask questions once a person’s turn is over, because interrupting can also be interpreted as a sign of not listening. Paraphrasing is also a good tool to use in computer-mediated communication, especially since miscommunication can occur due to a lack of nonverbal and other contextual cues.

## The Importance of Listening

Understanding how listening works provides the foundation we need to explore why we listen, including various types and styles of listening. In general, listening helps us achieve all the communication goals (physical, instrumental, relational, and identity) that we learned about in Chapter 1 “[Introduction to Communication Studies](#)“. Listening is also important in academic, professional, and personal contexts.

In terms of academics, poor listening skills were shown to contribute significantly to failure in a person’s first year of college. In general, students with high scores for listening ability have greater academic achievement. Interpersonal communication skills including listening are also highly sought after by potential employers, consistently ranking in the top ten in national surveys.

Poor listening skills, lack of conciseness, and inability to give constructive feedback have been identified as potential communication challenges in professional contexts. Even though listening education is lacking in our society, research has shown that introductory communication courses provide important skills necessary for functioning in entry-level jobs, including listening, writing, motivating/persuading, interpersonal skills, informational interviewing, and small-group problem solving. Training and improvements in listening will continue to pay off, as employers desire employees with good communication skills, and employees who have good listening skills are more likely to get promoted.

Listening also has implications for our personal lives and relationships. We shouldn’t underestimate the power of listening to make someone else feel better and to open our perceptual

field to new sources of information. Empathetic listening can help us expand our self and social awareness by learning from other people's experiences and by helping us take on different perspectives. Emotional support in the form of empathetic listening and validation during times of conflict can help relational partners manage common stressors of relationships that may otherwise lead a partnership to deteriorate. The following list reviews some of the main functions of listening that are relevant in multiple contexts.

The main purposes of listening are:

- to focus on messages sent by other people or noises coming from our surroundings;
- to better our understanding of other people's communication;
- to critically evaluate other people's messages;
- to monitor nonverbal signals;
- to indicate that we are interested or paying attention;
- to empathize with others and show we care for them (relational maintenance); and
- to engage in negotiation, dialogue, or other exchanges that result in shared understanding of or agreement on an issue.

## **Listening Types**

Listening serves many purposes, and different situations require different types of listening. The type of listening we engage in affects our communication and how others respond to us. For example, when we listen to empathize with others, our communication will likely be supportive and open, which will then lead the other person to feel "heard" and supported and hopefully view the interaction positively. The main types of listening we will discuss are discriminative, informational, critical, and empathetic.

### **Discriminative Listening**

Discriminative listening is a focused and usually instrumental type of listening that is primarily physiological and occurs mostly at the receiving stage of the listening process. Here we engage in listening to scan and monitor our surroundings in order to isolate particular auditory or visual stimuli. For example, we may focus our listening on a dark part of the yard while walking the dog at night to determine if the noise we just heard presents us with any danger. Or we may look for a particular nonverbal cue to let us know our conversational partner received our message. In the absence of a hearing impairment, we have an innate and physiological ability to engage in discriminative listening. Although this is the most basic form of listening, it provides the foundation on which more intentional listening skills are built. This type of listening can be refined and honed. Think of how musicians, singers, and mechanics exercise specialized discriminative listening to isolate specific aural stimuli and how actors, detectives, and sculptors discriminate visual cues that allow them to analyze, make meaning from, or recreate nuanced behavior.

### **Informational Listening**

Informational listening entails listening with the goal of comprehending and retaining information. This type of listening is not evaluative and is common in teaching and learning contexts ranging from a student listening to an informative speech to an out-of-towner listening to directions to the nearest gas station. We also use informational listening when we listen to news reports, voice mail, and briefings at work. Since retention and recall are important components of informational listening, good concentration and memory skills are key. These also happen to be skills that many college students struggle with, at least in the first years of college, but will be expected to have mastered once they get into professional contexts. In many professional contexts, informational listening is important, especially when receiving instructions. I caution my students that they will be expected to process verbal instructions more frequently in their profession than they are in college. Most college professors provide detailed instructions and handouts with assignments so students can review them as needed, but many supervisors and managers will expect you to take the initiative to remember or record vital information. Additionally, many bosses are not as open to questions or requests to repeat themselves as professors are.

## **Critical Listening**

Critical listening entails listening with the goal of analyzing or evaluating a message based on information presented verbally and information that can be inferred from context. A critical listener evaluates a message and accepts it, rejects it, or decides to withhold judgment and seek more information. As constant consumers of messages, we need to be able to assess the credibility of speakers and their messages and identify various persuasive appeals and faulty logic (known as fallacies). Critical listening is important during persuasive exchanges, but I recommend always employing some degree of critical listening, because you may find yourself in a persuasive interaction that you thought was informative. As is noted in Chapter 4 “[Nonverbal Communication](#)“, people often disguise inferences as facts. Critical-listening skills are useful when listening to a persuasive speech in this class and when processing any of the persuasive media messages we receive daily. You can see judges employ critical listening, with varying degrees of competence, on talent competition shows like Rupaul’s Drag Race, America’s Got Talent, and The Voice. While the exchanges between judge and contestant on these shows is expected to be subjective and critical, critical listening is also important when listening to speakers that have stated or implied objectivity, such as parents, teachers, political leaders, doctors, and religious leaders. We will learn more about how to improve your critical thinking skills later in this chapter.

## **Empathetic Listening**

Empathetic listening is the most challenging form of listening and occurs when we try to understand or experience what a speaker is thinking or feeling. Empathetic listening is distinct from sympathetic listening. While the word empathy means to “feel into” or “feel with” another person, sympathy means to “feel for” someone. Sympathy is generally more self-oriented and distant than empathy. Empathetic listening is other oriented and should be genuine. Because of our own centrality in our perceptual world, empathetic listening can be difficult. It’s often much easier for us to tell our own story or to give advice than it is to really listen to and empathize with

someone else. We should keep in mind that sometimes others just need to be heard and our feedback isn't actually desired.

Empathetic listening is key for dialogue and helps maintain interpersonal relationships. In order to reach dialogue, people must have a degree of open-mindedness and a commitment to civility that allows them to be empathetic while still allowing them to believe in and advocate for their own position. An excellent example of critical and empathetic listening in action is the international Truth and Reconciliation movement. The most well-known example of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) occurred in South Africa as a way to address the various conflicts that occurred during apartheid. The first TRC in the United States occurred in Greensboro, North Carolina, as a means of processing the events and aftermath of November 3, 1979, when members of the Ku Klux Klan shot and killed five members of the Communist Worker's Party during a daytime confrontation witnessed by news crews and many bystanders. The goal of such commissions is to allow people to tell their stories, share their perspectives in an open environment, and be listened to. The Greensboro TRC states its purpose as such:

The truth and reconciliation process seeks to heal relations between opposing sides by uncovering all pertinent facts, distinguishing truth from lies, and allowing for acknowledgement, appropriate public mourning, forgiveness and healing...The focus often is on giving victims, witnesses and even perpetrators a chance to publicly tell their stories without fear of prosecution.

## Listening Styles

Just as there are different types of listening, there are also different styles of listening. People may be categorized as one or more of the following listeners: people-oriented, action-oriented, content-oriented, and time-oriented listeners. Research finds that 40 percent of people have more than one preferred listening style, and that they choose a style based on the listening situation. Other research finds that people often still revert back to a single preferred style in times of emotional or cognitive stress, even if they know a different style of listening would be better. Following a brief overview of each listening style, we will explore some of their applications, strengths, and weaknesses.

- People-oriented listeners are concerned about the needs and feelings of others and may get distracted from a specific task or the content of a message in order to address feelings.
- Action-oriented listeners prefer well-organized, precise, and accurate information. They can become frustrated with they perceive communication to be unorganized or inconsistent, or a speaker to be "long-winded."
- Content-oriented listeners are analytic and enjoy processing complex messages. They like in-depth information and like to learn about multiple sides of a topic or hear multiple perspectives on an issue. Their thoroughness can be difficult to manage if there are time constraints.
- Time-oriented listeners are concerned with completing tasks and achieving goals. They do not like information perceived as irrelevant and like to stick to a timeline. They may cut people off and make quick decisions (taking short cuts or cutting corners) when they think they have enough information.

## **People-Oriented Listeners**

People-oriented listeners are concerned about the emotional states of others and listen with the purpose of offering support in interpersonal relationships. People-oriented listeners can be characterized as “supporters” who are caring and understanding. These listeners are sought out because they are known as people who will “lend an ear.” They may or may not be valued for the advice they give, but all people often want is a good listener. This type of listening may be especially valuable in interpersonal communication involving emotional exchanges, as a person-oriented listener can create a space where people can make themselves vulnerable without fear of being cut off or judged. People-oriented listeners are likely skilled empathetic listeners and may find success in supportive fields like counseling, social work, or nursing. Interestingly, such fields are typically feminized, in that people often associate the characteristics of people-oriented listeners with roles filled by women.

## **Action-Oriented Listeners**

Action-oriented listeners focus on what action needs to take place in regards to a received message and try to formulate an organized way to initiate that action. These listeners are frustrated by disorganization, because it detracts from the possibility of actually doing something. Action-oriented listeners can be thought of as “builders”—like an engineer, a construction site foreperson, or a skilled project manager. This style of listening can be very effective when a task needs to be completed under time, budgetary, or other logistical constraints. One research study found that people prefer an action-oriented style of listening in instructional contexts. In other situations, such as interpersonal communication, action-oriented listeners may not actually be very interested in listening, instead taking a “What do you want me to do?” approach. A friend and colleague of mine who exhibits some qualities of an action-oriented listener once told me about an encounter she had with a close friend who had a stillborn baby. My friend said she immediately went into “action mode.” Although it was difficult for her to connect with her friend at an emotional/empathetic level, she was able to use her action-oriented approach to help out in other ways as she helped make funeral arrangements, coordinated with other family and friends, and handled the details that accompanied this tragic emotional experience. As you can see from this example, the action-oriented listening style often contrasts with the people-oriented listening style.

## **Content-Oriented Listeners**

Content-oriented listeners like to listen to complex information and evaluate the content of a message, often from multiple perspectives, before drawing conclusions. These listeners can be thought of as “learners,” and they also ask questions to solicit more information to fill out their understanding of an issue. Content-oriented listeners often enjoy high perceived credibility because of their thorough, balanced, and objective approach to engaging with information. Content-oriented listeners are likely skilled informational and critical listeners and may find success in academic careers in the humanities, social sciences, or sciences. Ideally, judges and politicians would also possess these characteristics.

## Time-Oriented Listeners

Time-oriented listeners are more concerned about time limits and timelines than they are with the content or senders of a message. These listeners can be thought of as “executives,” and they tend to actually verbalize the time constraints under which they are operating.

For example, a time-oriented supervisor may say the following to an employee who has just entered his office and asked to talk: “Sure, I can talk, but I only have about five minutes.” These listeners may also exhibit nonverbal cues that indicate time and/or attention shortages, such as looking at a clock, avoiding eye contact, or nonverbally trying to close down an interaction. Time-oriented listeners are also more likely to interrupt others, which may make them seem insensitive to emotional/personal needs. People often get action-oriented and time-oriented listeners confused. Action-oriented listeners would be happy to get to a conclusion or decision quickly if they perceive that they are acting on well-organized and accurate information. They would, however, not mind taking longer to reach a conclusion when dealing with a complex topic, and they would delay making a decision if the information presented to them didn’t meet their standards of organization. Unlike time-oriented listeners, action-oriented listeners are not as likely to cut people off (especially if people are presenting relevant information) and are not as likely to take short cuts.

### Key Takeaways

- Getting integrated: Listening is a learned process and skill that we can improve on with concerted effort. Improving our listening skills can benefit us in academic, professional, personal, and civic contexts.
- Listening is the process of receiving, interpreting, recalling, evaluating, and responding to verbal and nonverbal messages. In the receiving stage, we select and attend to various stimuli based on salience. We then interpret auditory and visual stimuli in order to make meaning out of them based on our existing schemata. Short-term and long-term memory store stimuli until they are discarded or processed for later recall. We then evaluate the credibility, completeness, and worth of a message before responding with verbal and nonverbal signals.
- Discriminative listening is the most basic form of listening, and we use it to distinguish between and focus on specific sounds. We use informational listening to try to comprehend and retain information. Through critical listening, we analyze and evaluate messages at various levels. We use empathetic listening to try to understand or experience what a speaker is feeling.
- People-oriented listeners are concerned with others’ needs and feelings, which may distract from a task or the content of a message. Action-oriented listeners prefer listening to well-organized and precise information and are more concerned about solving an issue than they are about supporting the speaker. Content-oriented listeners enjoy processing complicated information and are typically viewed as credible because they view an issue from multiple perspectives before making a decision. Although content-oriented listeners may not be very effective in situations with time constraints, time-oriented listeners are fixated on time limits and listen in limited segments regardless of the complexity of the

information or the emotions involved, which can make them appear cold and distant to some.

## Exercises

1. The recalling stage of the listening process is a place where many people experience difficulties. What techniques do you use or could you use to improve your recall of certain information such as people's names, key concepts from your classes, or instructions or directions given verbally?
2. Getting integrated: Identify how critical listening might be useful for you in each of the following contexts: academic, professional, personal, and civic.
3. Listening scholars have noted that empathetic listening is the most difficult type of listening. Do you agree? Why or why not?
4. Which style of listening best describes you and why? Which style do you have the most difficulty with or like the least and why?

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## 5.2 Barriers to Effective Listening

### Learning Objectives

- Discuss some of the environmental and physical barriers to effective listening.
- Explain how cognitive and personal factors can present barriers to effective listening.
- Discuss common bad listening practices.

Barriers to effective listening are present at every stage of the listening process. At the receiving stage, noise can block or distort incoming stimuli. At the interpreting stage, complex or abstract information may be difficult to relate to previous experiences, making it difficult to reach understanding. At the recalling stage, natural limits to our memory and challenges to concentration can interfere with remembering. At the evaluating stage, personal biases and prejudices can lead us to block people out or assume we know what they are going to say. At the responding stage, a lack of paraphrasing and questioning skills can lead to misunderstanding. In the following section, we will explore how environmental and physical factors, cognitive and personal factors, and bad listening practices present barriers to effective listening.

### Environmental and Physical Barriers to Listening

Environmental factors such as lighting, temperature, and furniture affect our ability to listen. A room that is too dark can make us sleepy, just as a room that is too warm or cool can raise awareness of our physical discomfort to a point that it is distracting. Some seating arrangements facilitate listening, while others separate people. In general, listening is easier when listeners can make direct eye contact with and are in close physical proximity to a speaker. You may recall from Chapter 4 “[Nonverbal Communication](#)” that when group members are allowed to choose a leader, they often choose the person who is sitting at the center or head of the table. Even though the person may not have demonstrated any leadership abilities, people subconsciously gravitate toward speakers that are nonverbally accessible. The ability to effectively see and hear a person increases people’s confidence in their abilities to receive and process information. Eye contact and physical proximity can still be affected by noise. As we learned in Chapter 1 “Introduction to Communication Studies”, environmental noises such as a whirring air conditioner, barking dogs, or a ringing fire alarm can obviously interfere with listening despite direct lines of sight and well-placed furniture.

Physiological noise, like environmental noise, can interfere with our ability to process incoming information. This is considered a physical barrier to effective listening because it emanates from our physical body. Physiological noise is noise stemming from a physical illness, injury, or bodily stress. Ailments such as a cold, a broken leg, a headache, or a poison ivy outbreak can range from annoying to unbearably painful and impact our listening relative to their intensity. Another type of noise, psychological noise, bridges physical and cognitive barriers to effective listening. Psychological noise, or noise stemming from our psychological states including moods and level of arousal, can facilitate or impede listening. Any mood or state of arousal, positive or

negative, that is too far above or below our regular baseline creates a barrier to message reception and processing. The generally positive emotional state of being in love can be just as much of a barrier as feeling hatred. Excited arousal can also distract as much as anxious arousal. Stress about an upcoming events ranging from losing a job, to having surgery, to wondering about what to eat for lunch can overshadow incoming messages. While we will explore cognitive barriers to effective listening more in the next section, psychological noise is relevant here given that the body and mind are not completely separate. In fact, they can interact in ways that further interfere with listening. Fatigue, for example, is usually a combination of psychological and physiological stresses that manifests as stress (psychological noise) and weakness, sleepiness, and tiredness (physiological noise). Additionally, mental anxiety (psychological noise) can also manifest itself in our bodies through trembling, sweating, blushing, or even breaking out in rashes (physiological noise).

## **Cognitive and Personal Barriers to Listening**

Aside from the barriers to effective listening that may be present in the environment or emanate from our bodies, cognitive limits, a lack of listening preparation, difficult or disorganized messages, and prejudices can interfere with listening. Whether you call it multitasking, daydreaming, glazing over, or drifting off, we all cognitively process other things while receiving messages. If you think of your listening mind as a wall of ten televisions, you may notice that in some situations five of the ten televisions are tuned into one channel. If that one channel is a lecture being given by your professor, then you are exerting about half of your cognitive processing abilities on one message. In another situation, all ten televisions may be on different channels. The fact that we have the capability to process more than one thing at a time offers some advantages and disadvantages. But unless we can better understand how our cognitive capacities and personal preferences affect our listening, we are likely to experience more barriers than benefits.

## **Difference between Speech and Thought Rate**

Our ability to process more information than what comes from one speaker or source creates a barrier to effective listening. While people speak at a rate of 125 to 175 words per minute, we can process between 400 and 800 words per minute. This gap between speech rate and thought rate gives us an opportunity to side-process any number of thoughts that can be distracting from a more important message. Because of this gap, it is impossible to give one message our “undivided attention,” but we can occupy other channels in our minds with thoughts related to the central message. For example, using some of your extra cognitive processing abilities to repeat, rephrase, or reorganize messages coming from one source allows you to use that extra capacity in a way that reinforces the primary message.

The difference between speech and thought rate connects to personal barriers to listening, as personal concerns are often the focus of competing thoughts that can take us away from listening and challenge our ability to concentrate on others’ messages. Two common barriers to concentration are self-centeredness and lack of motivation. For example, when our self-consciousness is raised, we may be too busy thinking about how we look, how we’re sitting, or

what others think of us to be attentive to an incoming message. Additionally, we are often challenged when presented with messages that we do not find personally relevant. In general, we employ selective attention, which refers to our tendency to pay attention to the messages that benefit us in some way and filter others out. So the student who is checking his or her Twitter feed during class may suddenly switch his or her attention back to the previously ignored professor when the following words are spoken: “This will be important for the exam.”

Another common barrier to effective listening that stems from the speech and thought rate divide is response preparation. Response preparation refers to our tendency to rehearse what we are going to say next while a speaker is still talking. Rehearsal of what we will say once a speaker’s turn is over is an important part of the listening process that takes place between the recalling and evaluation and/or the evaluation and responding stage. Rehearsal becomes problematic when response preparation begins as someone is receiving a message and hasn’t had time to engage in interpretation or recall. In this sense, we are listening with the goal of responding instead of with the goal of understanding, which can lead us to miss important information that could influence our response.

Examples – “Getting Plugged In”

### **Technology, Multitasking, and Listening**

Do you like to listen to music while you do homework? Do you clean your apartment while talking to your mom on the phone? Do you think students should be allowed to use laptops in all college classrooms? Your answers to these questions will point to your preferences for multitasking. If you answered “yes” to most of them, then you are in line with the general practices of the “net generation” of digital natives for whom multitasking, especially with various forms of media, is a way of life. Multitasking is a concept that has been around for a while and emerged along with the increasing expectation that we will fill multiple role demands throughout the day. Multitasking can be pretty straightforward and beneficial—for example, if we listen to motivating music while working out. But multitasking can be very inefficient, especially when one or more of our concurrent tasks are complex or unfamiliar to us.

Media multitasking specifically refers to the use of multiple forms of media at the same time, and it can have positive and negative effects on listening. The negative effects of media multitasking have received much attention in recent years, as people question the decreasing attention span within our society. Media multitasking may promote inefficiency, because it can lead to distractions and plays a prominent role for many in procrastination. The numerous options for media engagement that we have can also lead to a feeling of chaos as our attention is pulled in multiple directions, creating a general sense of disorder. And many of us feel a sense of enslavement when we engage in media multitasking, as we feel like we can’t live without certain personal media outlets.

Media multitasking can also give people a sense of control, as they use multiple technologies to access various points of information to solve a problem or complete a task. An employee may be able to use her iPad to look up information needed to address a concern raised during a business meeting. She could then e-mail that link to the presenter, who could share it with the room

through his laptop and a LCD projector. Media multitasking can also increase efficiency, as people can carry out tasks faster. The links to videos and online articles that I've included in this textbook allow readers like you to quickly access additional information about a particular subject to prepare for a presentation or complete a paper assignment. Media multitasking can also increase engagement. Aside from just reading material in a textbook, students can now access information through an author's blog or Twitter account.

Media multitasking can produce an experience that feels productive, but is it really? What are the consequences of our media- and technology-saturated world? Although many of us like to think that we're good multitaskers, some research indicates otherwise. For example, student laptop use during class has been connected to lower academic performance. This is because media multitasking has the potential to interfere with listening at multiple stages of the process. The study showed that laptop use interfered with receiving, as students using them reported that they paid less attention to the class lectures. This is because students used the laptops for purposes other than taking notes or exploring class content. Of the students using laptops, 81 percent checked e-mail during lectures, 68 percent used instant messaging, and 43 percent surfed the web. Students using laptops also had difficulty with the interpretation stage of listening, as they found less clarity in the parts of the lecture they heard and did not understand the course material as much as students who didn't use a laptop. The difficulties with receiving and interpreting obviously create issues with recall that can lead to lower academic performance in the class. Laptop use also negatively affected the listening abilities of students not using laptops. These students reported that they were distracted, as their attention was drawn to the laptop screens of other students.

1. What are some common ways that you engage in media multitasking? What are some positive and negative consequences of your media multitasking?
2. What strategies do you or could you use to help minimize the negative effects of media multitasking?
3. Should laptops, smartphones, and other media devices be used by students during college classes? Why or why not? What restrictions or guidelines for use could instructors provide that would capitalize on the presence of such media to enhance student learning and help minimize distractions?

## **Lack of Listening Preparation**

Another barrier to effective listening is a general lack of listening preparation. Unfortunately, most people have never received any formal training or instruction related to listening. Although some people think listening skills just develop over time, competent listening is difficult, and enhancing listening skills takes concerted effort. Even when listening education is available, people do not embrace it as readily as they do opportunities to enhance their speaking skills. After teaching communication courses for several years, I have consistently found that students and teachers approach the listening part of the course less enthusiastically than some of the other

parts. Listening is often viewed as an annoyance or a chore, or just ignored or minimized as part of the communication process. In addition, our individualistic society values speaking more than listening, as it's the speakers who are sometimes literally in the spotlight. Although listening competence is a crucial part of social interaction and many of us value others we perceive to be "good listeners," listening just doesn't get the same kind of praise, attention, instruction, or credibility as speaking. Teachers, parents, and relational partners explicitly convey the importance of listening through statements like "You better listen to me," "Listen closely," and "Listen up," but these demands are rarely paired with concrete instruction. So unless you plan on taking more communication courses in the future (and I hope you do), this chapter may be the only instruction you receive on the basics of the listening process, some barriers to effective listening, and how we can increase our listening competence.

## **Bad Messages and/or Speakers**

Bad messages and/or speakers also present a barrier to effective listening. Sometimes our trouble listening originates in the sender. In terms of message construction, poorly structured messages or messages that are too vague, too jargon filled, or too simple can present listening difficulties. In terms of speakers' delivery, verbal fillers, monotone voices, distracting movements, or a disheveled appearance can inhibit our ability to cognitively process a message. As we will learn in Section 5.2.3 "Bad Listening Practices", speakers can employ particular strategies to create listenable messages that take some of the burden off the listener by tailoring a message to be heard and processed easily. Chapter 9 "Preparing a Speech" also discusses many strategies for creating messages tailored for oral delivery, including things like preview and review statements, transitions, and parallel wording. Listening also becomes difficult when a speaker tries to present too much information. Information overload is a common barrier to effective listening that good speakers can help mitigate by building redundancy into their speeches and providing concrete examples of new information to help audience members interpret and understand the key ideas.

## **Prejudice**

Oscar Wilde said, "Listening is a very dangerous thing. If one listens one may be convinced." Unfortunately, some of our default ways of processing information and perceiving others lead us to rigid ways of thinking. When we engage in prejudiced listening, we are usually trying to preserve our ways of thinking and avoid being convinced of something different. This type of prejudice is a barrier to effective listening, because when we prejudge a person based on his or her identity or ideas, we usually stop listening in an active and/or ethical way.

We exhibit prejudice in our listening in several ways, some of which are more obvious than others. For example, we may claim to be in a hurry and only selectively address the parts of a message that we agree with or that aren't controversial. We can also operate from a state of denial where we avoid a subject or person altogether so that our views are not challenged. Prejudices that are based on a person's identity, such as race, age, occupation, or appearance, may lead us to assume that we know what he or she will say, essentially closing down the listening process. Keeping an open mind and engaging in perception checking can help us identify prejudiced listening and hopefully shift into more competent listening practices.

## **Bad Listening Practices**

The previously discussed barriers to effective listening may be difficult to overcome because they are at least partially beyond our control. Physical barriers, cognitive limitations, and perceptual biases exist within all of us, and it is more realistic to believe that we can become more conscious of and lessen them than it is to believe that we can eliminate them altogether. Other “bad listening” practices may be habitual, but they are easier to address with some concerted effort. These bad listening practices include interrupting, distorted listening, eavesdropping, aggressive listening, narcissistic listening, and pseudo-listening.

### **Interrupting**

Conversations unfold as a series of turns, and turn taking is negotiated through a complex set of verbal and nonverbal signals that are consciously and subconsciously received. In this sense, conversational turn taking has been likened to a dance where communicators try to avoid stepping on each other’s toes. One of the most frequent glitches in the turn-taking process is interruption, but not all interruptions are considered “bad listening.” An interruption could be unintentional if we misread cues and think a person is done speaking only to have him or her start up again at the same time we do. Sometimes interruptions are more like overlapping statements that show support (e.g., “I think so too.”) or excitement about the conversation (e.g., “That’s so cool!”). Back-channel cues like “uh-huh,” as we learned earlier, also overlap with a speaker’s message. We may also interrupt out of necessity if we’re engaged in a task with the other person and need to offer directions (e.g., “Turn left here.”), instructions (e.g., “Will you whisk the eggs?”), or warnings (e.g., “Look out behind you!”). All these interruptions are not typically thought of as evidence of bad listening unless they become distracting for the speaker or are unnecessary.

Unintentional interruptions can still be considered bad listening if they result from mindless communication. As we’ve already learned, intended meaning is not as important as the meaning that is generated in the interaction itself. So if you interrupt unintentionally, but because you were only half-listening, then the interruption is still evidence of bad listening. The speaker may form a negative impression of you that can’t just be erased by you noting that you didn’t “mean to interrupt.” Interruptions can also be used as an attempt to dominate a conversation. A person engaging in this type of interruption may lead the other communicator to try to assert dominance, too, resulting in a competition to see who can hold the floor the longest or the most often. More than likely, though, the speaker will form a negative impression of the interrupter and may withdraw from the conversation.

### **Distorted Listening**

Distorted listening occurs in many ways. Sometimes we just get the order of information wrong, which can have relatively little negative effects if we are casually recounting a story, annoying effects if we forget the order of turns (left, right, left or right, left, right?) in our driving directions, or very negative effects if we recount the events of a crime out of order, which leads to faulty testimony at a criminal trial. Rationalization is another form of distorted listening

through which we adapt, edit, or skew incoming information to fit our existing schemata. We may, for example, reattribute the cause of something to better suit our own beliefs. If a professor is explaining to a student why he earned a “D” on his final paper, the student could reattribute the cause from “I didn’t follow the paper guidelines” to “this professor is an unfair grader.” Sometimes we actually change the words we hear to make them better fit what we are thinking. This can easily happen if we join a conversation late, overhear part of a conversation, or are being a lazy listener and miss important setup and context. Passing along distorted information can lead to negative consequences ranging from starting a false rumor about someone to passing along incorrect medical instructions from one health-care provider to the next. Last, the addition of material to a message is a type of distorted listening that actually goes against our normal pattern of listening, which involves reducing the amount of information and losing some meaning as we take it in. The metaphor of “weaving a tall tale” is related to the practice of distorting through addition, as inaccurate or fabricated information is added to what was actually heard. Addition of material is also a common feature of gossip. An excellent example of the result of distorted listening is provided by the character Anthony Crispino on Saturday Night Live, who passes along distorted news on the “Weekend Update” segment. In past episodes, he has noted that LeBron James turned down the Cleveland Show to be on Miami Vice (instead of left the Cleveland Cavaliers to play basketball for the Miami Heat) and that President Obama planned on repealing the “Bush haircuts” (instead of the Bush tax cuts).

## **Eavesdropping**

Eavesdropping is a bad listening practice that involves a calculated and planned attempt to secretly listen to a conversation. There is a difference between eavesdropping on and overhearing a conversation. Many if not most of the interactions we have throughout the day occur in the presence of other people. However, given that our perceptual fields are usually focused on the interaction, we are often unaware of the other people around us or don’t think about the fact that they could be listening in on our conversation. We usually only become aware of the fact that other people could be listening in when we’re discussing something private.

People eavesdrop for a variety of reasons. People might think another person is talking about them behind their back or that someone is engaged in illegal or unethical behavior. Sometimes people eavesdrop to feed the gossip mill or out of curiosity. In any case, this type of listening is considered bad because it is a violation of people’s privacy. Consequences for eavesdropping may include an angry reaction if caught, damage to interpersonal relationships, or being perceived as dishonest and sneaky. Additionally, eavesdropping may lead people to find out information that is personally upsetting or hurtful, especially if the point of the eavesdropping is to find out what people are saying behind their back.

## **Aggressive Listening**

Aggressive listening is a bad listening practice in which people pay attention in order to attack something that a speaker says. Aggressive listeners like to ambush speakers in order to critique their ideas, personality, or other characteristics. Such behavior often results from built-up frustration within an interpersonal relationship. Unfortunately, the more two people know each

other, the better they will be at aggressive listening. Take the following exchange between long-term partners:

**Deb:** I've been thinking about making a salsa garden next to the side porch. I think it would be really good to be able to go pick our own tomatoes and peppers and cilantro to make homemade salsa.

**Summer:** Really? When are you thinking about doing it?

**Deb:** Next weekend. Would you like to help?

**Summer:** I won't hold my breath. Every time you come up with some "idea of the week" you get so excited about it. But do you ever follow through with it? No. We'll be eating salsa from the store next year, just like we are now.

Although Summer's initial response to Deb's idea is seemingly appropriate and positive, she asks the question because she has already planned her upcoming aggressive response. Summer's aggression toward Deb isn't about a salsa garden; it's about a building frustration with what Summer perceives as Deb's lack of follow-through on her ideas. Aside from engaging in aggressive listening because of built-up frustration, such listeners may also attack others' ideas or mock their feelings because of their own low self-esteem and insecurities.

## Narcissistic Listening

Narcissistic listening is a form of self-centered and self-absorbed listening in which listeners try to make the interaction about them. Narcissistic listeners redirect the focus of the conversation to them by interrupting or changing the topic. When the focus is taken off them, narcissistic listeners may give negative feedback by pouting, providing negative criticism of the speaker or topic, or ignoring the speaker. A common sign of narcissistic listening is the combination of a "pivot," when listeners shift the focus of attention back to them, and "one-upping," when listeners try to top what previous speakers have said during the interaction. You can see this narcissistic combination in the following interaction:

**Bryce:** My boss has been really unfair to me lately and hasn't been letting me work around my class schedule. I think I may have to quit, but I don't know where I'll find another job.

**Toby:** Why are you complaining? I've been working with the same stupid boss for two years. He doesn't even care that I'm trying to get my degree and work at the same time. And you should hear the way he talks to me in front of the other employees.

Narcissistic listeners, given their self-centeredness, may actually fool themselves into thinking that they are listening and actively contributing to a conversation. We all have the urge to share our own stories during interactions, because other people's communication triggers our own memories about related experiences. It is generally more competent to withhold sharing our stories until the other person has been able to speak and we have given the appropriate support and response. But we all shift the focus of a conversation back to us occasionally, either because we don't know another way to respond or because we are making an attempt at empathy. Narcissistic listeners consistently interrupt or follow another speaker with statements like "That reminds me of the time...", "Well, if I were you...", and "That's nothing..." As we'll learn later,

matching stories isn't considered empathetic listening, but occasionally doing it doesn't make you a narcissistic listener.

## Pseudo-listening

Do you have a friend or family member who repeats stories? If so, then you've probably engaged in pseudo-listening as a politeness strategy. Pseudo-listening is behaving as if you're paying attention to a speaker when you're actually not. Outwardly visible signals of attentiveness are an important part of the listening process, but when they are just an "act," the pseudo-listener is engaging in bad listening behaviors. She or he is not actually going through the stages of the listening process and will likely not be able to recall the speaker's message or offer a competent and relevant response. Although it is a bad listening practice, we all understandably engage in pseudo-listening from time to time. If a friend needs someone to talk but you're really tired or experiencing some other barrier to effective listening, it may be worth engaging in pseudo-listening as a relational maintenance strategy, especially if the friend just needs a sounding board and isn't expecting advice or guidance. We may also pseudo-listen to a romantic partner or grandfather's story for the fifteenth time to prevent hurting their feelings. We should avoid pseudo-listening when possible and should definitely avoid making it a listening habit. Although we may get away with it in some situations, each time we risk being "found out," which could have negative relational consequences.

### Key Takeaways

- Environmental and physical barriers to effective listening include furniture placement, environmental noise such as sounds of traffic or people talking, physiological noise such as a sinus headache or hunger, and psychological noise such as stress or anger.
- Cognitive barriers to effective listening include the difference between speech and thought rate that allows us "extra room" to think about other things while someone is talking and limitations in our ability or willingness to concentrate or pay attention. Personal barriers to effective listening include a lack of listening preparation, poorly structured and/or poorly delivered messages, and prejudice.
- There are several bad listening practices that we should avoid, as they do not facilitate effective listening:
  - Interruptions that are unintentional or serve an important or useful purpose are not considered bad listening. When interrupting becomes a habit or is used in an attempt to dominate a conversation, then it is a barrier to effective listening.
  - Distorted listening occurs when we incorrectly recall information, skew information to fit our expectations or existing schemata, or add material to embellish or change information.
  - Eavesdropping is a planned attempt to secretly listen to a conversation, which is a violation of the speakers' privacy.
  - Aggressive listening is a bad listening practice in which people pay attention to a speaker in order to attack something they say.
  - Narcissistic listening is self-centered and self-absorbed listening in which listeners try to make the interaction about them by interrupting, changing the subject, or drawing attention away from others.

- Pseudo-listening is “fake listening,” in that people behave like they are paying attention and listening when they actually are not.

## Exercises

1. We are capable of thinking faster than the speed at which the average person speaks, which allows us some room to put mental faculties toward things other than listening. What typically makes your mind wander?
2. Bad speakers and messages are a common barrier to effective listening. Describe a time recently when your ability to listen was impaired by the poor delivery and/or content of another person.
3. Of the bad listening practices listed, which do you use the most? Why do you think you use this one more than the others? What can you do to help prevent or lessen this barrier?

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## 5.3 Improving Listening Competences

### Learning Objectives

- Identify strategies for improving listening competence at each stage of the listening process.
- Summarize the characteristics of active listening.
- Apply critical-listening skills in interpersonal, educational, and mediated contexts.
- Practice empathetic listening skills.
- Discuss ways to improve listening competence in relational, professional, and cultural contexts.

Many people admit that they could stand to improve their listening skills. This section will help us do that. In this section, we will learn strategies for developing and improving competence at each stage of the listening process. We will also define active listening and the behaviors that go along with it. Looking back to the types of listening discussed earlier, we will learn specific strategies for sharpening our critical and empathetic listening skills. In keeping with our focus on integrative learning, we will also apply the skills we have learned in academic, professional, and relational contexts and explore how culture and gender affect listening.

### Listening Competence at Each Stage of the Listening Process

We can develop competence within each stage of the listening process, as the following list indicates:

- To improve listening at the receiving stage, prepare yourself to listen,
  1. discern between intentional messages and noise,
  2. concentrate on stimuli most relevant to your listening purpose(s) or goal(s),
  3. be mindful of the selection and attention process as much as possible,
  4. pay attention to turn-taking signals so you can follow the conversational flow, and
  5. avoid interrupting someone while they are speaking in order to maintain your ability to receive stimuli and listen.
  
- To improve listening at the interpreting stage,
  1. identify main points and supporting points;
  2. use contextual clues from the person or environment to discern additional meaning;
  3. be aware of how a relational, cultural, or situational context can influence meaning;
  4. be aware of the different meanings of silence; and
  5. note differences in tone of voice and other paralinguistic cues that influence meaning.
  
- To improve listening at the recalling stage,
  1. use multiple sensory channels to decode messages and make more complete memories;
  2. repeat, rephrase, and reorganize information to fit your cognitive preferences; and
  3. use mnemonic devices as a gimmick to help with recall.
  
- To improve listening at the evaluating stage,
  1. separate facts, inferences, and judgments;
  2. be familiar with and able to identify persuasive strategies and fallacies of reasoning;
  3. assess the credibility of the speaker and the message; and
  4. be aware of your own biases and how your perceptual filters can create barriers to effective listening.
  
- To improve listening at the responding stage,
  1. ask appropriate clarifying and follow-up questions and paraphrase information to check understanding,
  2. give feedback that is relevant to the speaker's purpose/motivation for speaking,
  3. adapt your response to the speaker and the context, and
  4. do not let the preparation and rehearsal of your response diminish earlier stages of listening.

# Active Listening

Active listening refers to the process of pairing outwardly visible positive listening behaviors with positive cognitive listening practices. Active listening can help address many of the environmental, physical, cognitive, and personal barriers to effective listening that we discussed earlier. The behaviors associated with active listening can also enhance informational, critical, and empathetic listening.

## Active Listening Can Help Overcome Barriers to Effective Listening

Being an active listener starts before you actually start receiving a message. Active listeners make strategic choices and take action in order to set up ideal listening conditions. Physical and environmental noises can often be managed by moving locations or by manipulating the lighting, temperature, or furniture. When possible, avoid important listening activities during times of distracting psychological or physiological noise. For example, we often know when we're going to be hungry, full, more awake, less awake, more anxious, or less anxious, and advance planning can alleviate the presence of these barriers. For college students, who often have some flexibility in their class schedules, knowing when you best listen can help you make strategic choices regarding what class to take when. And student options are increasing, as some colleges are offering classes in the overnight hours to accommodate working students and students who are just "night owls." Of course, we don't always have control over our schedule, in which case we will need to utilize other effective listening strategies that we will learn more about later in this chapter.

In terms of cognitive barriers to effective listening, we can prime ourselves to listen by analyzing a listening situation before it begins. For example, you could ask yourself the following questions:

1. "What are my goals for listening to this message?"
2. "How does this message relate to me / affect my life?"
3. "What listening type and style are most appropriate for this message?"

As we learned earlier, the difference between speech and thought processing rate means listeners' level of attention varies while receiving a message. Effective listeners must work to maintain focus as much as possible and refocus when attention shifts or fades. One way to do this is to find the motivation to listen. If you can identify intrinsic and or extrinsic motivations for listening to a particular message, then you will be more likely to remember the information presented. Ask yourself how a message could impact your life, your career, your intellect, or your relationships. This can help overcome our tendency toward selective attention. As senders of messages, we can help listeners by making the relevance of what we're saying clear and offering well-organized messages that are tailored for our listeners. We will learn much more about establishing relevance, organizing a message, and gaining the attention of an audience in public speaking contexts later in the book.

Given that we can process more words per minute than people can speak, we can engage in internal dialogue, making good use of our intrapersonal communication, to become a better

listener. Three possibilities for internal dialogue include covert coaching, self-reinforcement, and covert questioning; explanations and examples of each follow:

- Covert coaching involves sending yourself messages containing advice about better listening, such as “You’re getting distracted by things you have to do after work. Just focus on what your supervisor is saying now.”
- Self-reinforcement involves sending yourself affirmative and positive messages: “You’re being a good active listener. This will help you do well on the next exam.”
- Covert questioning involves asking yourself questions about the content in ways that focus your attention and reinforce the material: “What is the main idea from that PowerPoint slide?” “Why is he talking about his brother in front of our neighbors?”

Internal dialogue is a more structured way to engage in active listening, but we can use more general approaches as well. I suggest that students occupy the “extra” channels in their mind with thoughts that are related to the primary message being received instead of thoughts that are unrelated. We can use those channels to resort, rephrase, and repeat what a speaker says. When we resort, we can help mentally repair disorganized messages. When we rephrase, we can put messages into our own words in ways that better fit our cognitive preferences. When we repeat, we can help messages transfer from short-term to long-term memory.

Other tools can help with concentration and memory. Mental bracketing refers to the process of intentionally separating out intrusive or irrelevant thoughts that may distract you from listening. This requires that we monitor our concentration and attention and be prepared to let thoughts that aren’t related to a speaker’s message pass through our minds without us giving them much attention. Mnemonic devices are techniques that can aid in information recall. Starting in ancient Greece and Rome, educators used these devices to help people remember information. They work by imposing order and organization on information. Three main mnemonic devices are acronyms, rhymes, and visualization, and examples of each follow:

- **Acronyms.** HOMES—to help remember the Great Lakes (Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, and Superior).
- **Rhyme.** “Righty tighty, lefty loosey”—to remember which way most light bulbs, screws, and other coupling devices turn to make them go in or out.
- **Visualization.** Imagine seeing a glass of port wine (which is red) and the red navigation light on a boat to help remember that the red light on a boat is always on the port side, which will also help you remember that the blue light must be on the starboard side.

## Active Listening Behaviors

From the suggestions discussed previously, you can see that we can prepare for active listening in advance and engage in certain cognitive strategies to help us listen better. We also engage in active listening behaviors as we receive and process messages.

Eye contact is a key sign of active listening. Speakers usually interpret a listener’s eye contact as a signal of attentiveness. While a lack of eye contact may indicate inattentiveness, it can also signal cognitive processing. When we look away to process new information, we usually do it

unconsciously. Be aware, however, that your conversational partner may interpret this as not listening. If you really do need to take a moment to think about something, you could indicate that to the other person by saying, “That’s new information to me. Give me just a second to think through it.” We already learned the role that back-channel cues play in listening. An occasional head nod and “uh-huh” signal that you are paying attention. However, when we give these cues as a form of “autopilot” listening, others can usually tell that we are pseudo-listening, and whether they call us on it or not, that impression could lead to negative judgments.

A more direct way to indicate active listening is to reference previous statements made by the speaker. Norms of politeness usually call on us to reference a past statement or connect to the speaker’s current thought before starting a conversational turn. Being able to summarize what someone said to ensure that the topic has been satisfactorily covered and understood or being able to segue in such a way that validates what the previous speaker said helps regulate conversational flow. Asking probing questions is another way to directly indicate listening and to keep a conversation going, since they encourage and invite a person to speak more. You can also ask questions that seek clarification and not just elaboration. Speakers should present complex information at a slower speaking rate than familiar information, but many will not. Remember that your nonverbal feedback can be useful for a speaker, as it signals that you are listening but also whether or not you understand. If a speaker fails to read your nonverbal feedback, you may need to follow up with verbal communication in the form of paraphrased messages and clarifying questions.

As active listeners, we want to be excited and engaged, but don’t let excitement manifest itself in interruptions. Being an active listener means knowing when to maintain our role as listener and resist the urge to take a conversational turn. Research shows that people with higher social status are more likely to interrupt others, so keep this in mind and be prepared for it if you are speaking to a high-status person, or try to resist it if you are the high-status person in an interaction (Hargie, 197).

Note-taking can also indicate active listening. Translating information through writing into our own cognitive structures and schemata allows us to better interpret and assimilate information. Of course, note-taking isn’t always a viable option. It would be fairly awkward to take notes during a first date or a casual exchange between new coworkers. But in some situations where we wouldn’t normally consider taking notes, a little awkwardness might be worth it for the sake of understanding and recalling the information. For example, many people don’t think about taking notes when getting information from their doctor or banker. I actually invite students to take notes during informal meetings because I think they sometimes don’t think about it or don’t think it’s appropriate. But many people would rather someone jot down notes instead of having to respond to follow-up questions on information that was already clearly conveyed. To help facilitate your note-taking, you might say something like “Do you mind if I jot down some notes? This seems important.”

In summary, active listening is exhibited through verbal and nonverbal cues, including steady eye contact with the speaker; smiling; slightly raised eyebrows; upright posture; body position that is leaned in toward the speaker; nonverbal back-channel cues such as head nods; verbal

back-channel cues such as “OK,” “mmhum,” or “oh”; and a lack of distracting mannerisms like doodling or fidgeting.

Examples – “Getting Competent”

### **Listening in the Classroom**

The following statistic illustrates the importance of listening in academic contexts: four hundred first-year students were given a listening test before they started classes. At the end of that year, 49 percent of the students with low scores were on academic probation, while only 4 percent of those who scored high were. Listening effectively isn’t something that just happens; it takes work on the part of students and teachers. One of the most difficult challenges for teachers is eliciting good listening behaviors from their students, and the method of instruction teachers use affects how a student will listen and learn. Given that there are different learning styles, we know that to be effective, teachers may have to find some way to appeal to each learning style. Although teachers often make this attempt, it is also not realistic or practical to think that this practice can be used all the time. Therefore, students should also think of ways they can improve their listening competence, because listening is an active process that we can exert some control over. The following tips will help you listen more effectively in the classroom:

- Be prepared to process challenging messages. You can use the internal dialogue strategy we discussed earlier to “mentally repair” messages that you receive to make them more listenable. For example, you might say, “It seems like we’ve moved on to a different main point now. See if you can pull out the subpoints to help stay on track.”
- Act like a good listener. While I’m not advocating that you engage in pseudo-listening, engaging in active listening behaviors can help you listen better when you are having difficulty concentrating or finding motivation to listen. Make eye contact with the instructor and give appropriate nonverbal feedback. Students often take notes only when directed to by the instructor or when there is an explicit reason to do so (e.g., to recall information for an exam or some other purpose). Since you never know what information you may want to recall later, take notes even when it’s not required that you do so. As a caveat, however, do not try to transcribe everything your instructor says or includes on a PowerPoint, because you will likely miss information related to main ideas that is more important than minor details. Instead, listen for main ideas.
- Figure out from where the instructor most frequently speaks and sit close to that area. Being able to make eye contact with an instructor facilitates listening, increases rapport, allows students to benefit more from immediacy behaviors, and minimizes distractions since the instructor is the primary stimulus within the student’s field of vision.
- Figure out your preferred learning style and adopt listening strategies that complement it.
- Let your instructor know when you don’t understand something. Instead of giving a quizzical look that says “What?” or pretending you know what’s going on, let your instructor know when you don’t understand something. Instead of asking the instructor to simply repeat something, ask her or him to rephrase it or provide an example. When you ask questions, ask specific clarifying questions that request a definition, an explanation, or an elaboration.

1. What are some listening challenges that you face in the classroom? What can you do to overcome them?
2. Take a Learning Styles Inventory survey to determine what your primary learning style. Do some research to identify specific listening/studying strategies that work well for your learning style.

## Becoming a Better Critical Listener

Critical listening involves evaluating the credibility, completeness, and worth of a speaker's message. Some listening scholars note that critical listening represents the deepest level of listening. Critical listening is also important in a democracy that values free speech. The US Constitution grants US citizens the right to free speech, and many people duly protect that right for you and me. Since people can say just about anything they want, we are surrounded by countless messages that vary tremendously in terms of their value, degree of ethics, accuracy, and quality. Therefore it falls on us to responsibly and critically evaluate the messages we receive. Some messages are produced by people who are intentionally misleading, ill informed, or motivated by the potential for personal gain, but such messages can be received as honest, credible, or altruistic even though they aren't. Being able to critically evaluate messages helps us have more control over and awareness of the influence such people may have on us. In order to critically evaluate messages, we must enhance our critical-listening skills.

Some critical-listening skills include distinguishing between facts and inferences, evaluating supporting evidence, discovering your own biases, and listening beyond the message. Chapter 3 "[Verbal Communication](#)" noted that part of being an ethical communicator is being accountable for what we say by distinguishing between facts and inferences. This is an ideal that is not always met in practice, so a critical listener should also make these distinctions, since the speaker may not. Since facts are widely agreed-on conclusions, they can be verified as such through some extra research. Take care in your research to note the context from which the fact emerged, as speakers may take a statistic or quote out of context, distorting its meaning. Inferences are not as easy to evaluate, because they are based on unverifiable thoughts of a speaker or on speculation. Inferences are usually based at least partially on something that is known, so it is possible to evaluate whether an inference was made carefully or not. In this sense, you may evaluate an inference based on several known facts as more credible than an inference based on one fact and more speculation. Asking a question like "What led you to think this?" is a good way to get information needed to evaluate the strength of an inference.

Distinguishing among facts and inferences and evaluating the credibility of supporting material are critical-listening skills that also require good informational-listening skills. In more formal speaking situations, speakers may cite published or publicly available sources to support their messages. When speakers verbally cite their sources, you can use the credibility of the source to help evaluate the credibility of the speaker's message. For example, a national newspaper would likely be more credible on a major national event than a tabloid magazine or an anonymous blog.

In regular interactions, people also have sources for their information but are not as likely to note them within their message. Asking questions like “Where’d you hear that?” or “How do you know that?” can help get information needed to make critical evaluations.

Discovering your own biases can help you recognize when they interfere with your ability to fully process a message. Unfortunately, most people aren’t asked to critically reflect on their identities and their perspectives unless they are in college, and even people who were once critically reflective in college or elsewhere may no longer be so. Biases are also difficult to discover, because we don’t see them as biases; we see them as normal or “the way things are.” Asking yourself “What led you to think this?” and “How do you know that?” can be a good start toward acknowledging your biases. We will also learn more about self-reflection and critical thinking in Chapter 8 “[Culture and Communication](#)“.

Last, to be a better critical listener, think beyond the message. A good critical listener asks the following questions: What is being said and what is not being said? In whose interests are these claims being made? Whose voices/ideas are included and excluded? These questions take into account that speakers intentionally and unintentionally slant, edit, or twist messages to make them fit particular perspectives or for personal gain. Also ask yourself questions like “What are the speaker’s goals?” You can also rephrase that question and direct it toward the speaker, asking them, “What is your goal in this interaction?” When you feel yourself nearing an evaluation or conclusion, pause and ask yourself what influenced you. Although we like to think that we are most often persuaded through logical evidence and reasoning, we are susceptible to persuasive shortcuts that rely on the credibility or likability of a speaker or on our emotions rather than the strength of his or her evidence. So keep a check on your emotional involvement to be aware of how it may be influencing your evaluation. Also, be aware that how likable, attractive, or friendly you think a person is may also lead you to more positively evaluate his or her messages.

### **Other Tips to Help You Become a Better Critical Listener**

- Ask questions to help get more information and increase your critical awareness when you get answers like “Because that’s the way things are,” “It’s always been like that,” “I don’t know; I just don’t like it,” “Everyone believes that,” or “It’s just natural/normal.” These are not really answers that are useful in your critical evaluation and may be an indication that speakers don’t really know why they reached the conclusion they did or that they reached it without much critical thinking on their part.
- Be especially critical of speakers who set up “either/or” options, because they artificially limit an issue or situation to two options when there are always more. Also be aware of people who overgeneralize, especially when those generalizations are based on stereotypical or prejudiced views. For example, the world is not just Republican or Democrat, male or female, pro-life or pro-choice, or Christian or atheist.
- Evaluate the speaker’s message instead of his or her appearance, personality, or other characteristics. Unless someone’s appearance, personality, or behavior is relevant to an interaction, direct your criticism to the message.
- Be aware that critical evaluation isn’t always quick or easy. Sometimes you may have to withhold judgment because your evaluation will take more time. Also keep in mind your

evaluation may not be final, and you should be open to critical reflection and possible revision later.

- Avoid mind reading, which is assuming you know what the other person is going to say or that you know why they reached the conclusion they did. This leads to jumping to conclusions, which shortcuts the critical evaluation process.

Examples – “Getting Critical”

### **Critical Listening and Political Spin**

In just the past twenty years, the rise of political fact checking occurred as a result of the increasingly sophisticated rhetoric of politicians and their representatives. As political campaigns began to adopt communication strategies employed by advertising agencies and public relations firms, their messages became more ambiguous, unclear, and sometimes outright misleading. While there are numerous political fact-checking sources now to which citizens can turn for an analysis of political messages, it is important that we are able to use our own critical-listening skills to see through some of the political spin that now characterizes politics in the United States.

Since we get most of our political messages through the media rather than directly from a politician, the media is a logical place to turn for guidance on fact checking. Unfortunately, the media is often manipulated by political communication strategies as well. Sometimes media outlets transmit messages even though a critical evaluation of the message shows that it lacks credibility, completeness, or worth. Journalists who engage in political fact checking have been criticized for putting their subjective viewpoints into what is supposed to be objective news coverage. These journalists have fought back against what they call the norm of “false equivalence.” One view of journalism sees the reporter as an objective conveyor of political messages. This could be described as the “We report; you decide” brand of journalism. Other reporters see themselves as “truth seekers.” In this sense, the journalists engage in some critical listening and evaluation on the part of the citizen, who may not have the time or ability to do so.

Michael Dobbs, who started the political fact-checking program at the Washington Post, says, “Fairness is preserved not by treating all sides of an argument equally, but through an independent, open-minded approach to the evidence.” He also notes that outright lies are much less common in politics than are exaggeration, spin, and insinuation. This fact puts much of political discourse into an ethical gray area that can be especially difficult for even professional fact checkers to evaluate. Instead of simple “true/false” categories, fact checkers like the Washington Post issue evaluations such as “Half true, mostly true, half-flip, or full-flop” to political statements. Although we all don’t have the time and resources to fact check all the political statements we hear, it may be worth employing some of the strategies used by these professional fact checkers on issues that are very important to us or have major implications for others. Some fact-checking resources include [PolitiFact](#), [FactCheck](#) (Annenberg Public Policy Center), and [The Fact Checker](#) (Washington Post blog by Glen Kessler). The caution here for any critical listener is to be aware of our tendency to gravitate toward messages with which we agree and avoid or automatically reject messages with which we disagree. In short, it’s often easier for us to critically evaluate the messages of politicians with whom we disagree and

uncritically accept messages from those with whom we agree. Exploring the fact-check websites above can help expose ourselves to critical evaluation that we might not otherwise encounter.

- One school of thought in journalism says it's up to the reporters to convey information as it is presented and then up to the viewer/reader to evaluate the message. The other school of thought says that the reporter should investigate and evaluate claims made by those on all sides of an issue equally and share their findings with viewers/readers. Which approach do you think is better and why?
- In the lead-up to the war in Iraq, journalists and news outlets did not critically evaluate claims from the Bush administration that there was clear evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Many now cite this as an instance of failed fact checking that had global repercussions. Visit one of the fact-checking resources mentioned previously to find other examples of fact checking that exposed manipulated messages. To enhance your critical thinking, find one example that critiques a viewpoint, politician, or political party that you typically agree with and one that you disagree with. Discuss what you learned from the examples you found.

## **Becoming a Better Empathetic Listener**

A prominent scholar of empathetic listening describes it this way: "Empathetic listening is to be respectful of the dignity of others. Empathetic listening is a caring, a love of the wisdom to be found in others whoever they may be." This quote conveys that empathetic listening is more philosophical than the other types of listening. It requires that we are open to subjectivity and that we engage in it because we genuinely see it as worthwhile.

Combining active and empathetic listening leads to active-empathetic listening. During active-empathetic listening a listener becomes actively and emotionally involved in an interaction in such a way that it is conscious on the part of the listener and perceived by the speaker. To be a better empathetic listener, we need to suspend or at least attempt to suppress our judgment of the other person or their message so we can fully attend to both. Paraphrasing is an important part of empathetic listening, because it helps us put the other person's words into our frame of experience without making it about us. In addition, speaking the words of someone else in our own way can help evoke within us the feelings that the other person felt while saying them. Active-empathetic listening is more than echoing back verbal messages. We can also engage in mirroring, which refers to a listener's replication of the nonverbal signals of a speaker. Therapists, for example, are often taught to adopt a posture and tone similar to their patients in order to build rapport and project empathy.

Paraphrasing and questioning are useful techniques for empathetic listening because they allow us to respond to a speaker without taking "the floor," or the attention, away for long. Specifically, questions that ask for elaboration act as "verbal door openers," and inviting someone to speak more and then validating their speech through active listening cues can help a person feel "listened to." I've found that paraphrasing and asking questions are also useful when we feel tempted to share our own stories and experiences rather than maintaining our listening

role. These questions aren't intended to solicit more information, so we can guide or direct the speaker toward a specific course of action. Although it is easier for us to slip into an advisory mode—saying things like “Well if I were you, I would...”—we have to resist the temptation to give unsolicited advice.

Empathetic listening can be worthwhile, but it also brings challenges. In terms of costs, empathetic listening can use up time and effort. Since this type of listening can't be contained within a proscribed time frame, it may be especially difficult for time-oriented listeners. Empathetic listening can also be a test of our endurance, as its orientation toward and focus on supporting the other requires the processing and integration of much verbal and nonverbal information. Because of this potential strain, it's important to know your limits as an empathetic listener. While listening can be therapeutic, it is not appropriate for people without training and preparation to try to serve as a therapist. Some people have chronic issues that necessitate professional listening for the purposes of evaluation, diagnosis, and therapy. Lending an ear is different from diagnosing and treating. If you have a friend who is exhibiting signs of a more serious issue that needs attention, listen to the extent that you feel comfortable and then be prepared to provide referrals to other resources that have training to help. To face these challenges, good empathetic listeners typically have a generally positive self-concept and self-esteem, are nonverbally sensitive and expressive, and are comfortable with embracing another person's subjectivity and refraining from too much analytic thought.

## **Becoming a Better Contextual Listener**

Active, critical, and empathetic listening skills can be helpful in a variety of contexts. Understanding the role that listening plays in professional, relational, cultural, and gendered contexts can help us more competently apply these skills. Whether we are listening to or evaluating messages from a supervisor, parent, or intercultural conversational partner, we have much to gain or lose based on our ability to apply listening skills and knowledge in various contexts.

### **Listening in Professional Contexts**

Listening and organizational-communication scholars note that listening is one of the most neglected aspects of organizational-communication research. Aside from a lack of research, a study also found that business schools lack curriculum that includes instruction and/or training in communication skills like listening in their master of business administration (MBA) programs. This lack of a focus on listening persists, even though we know that more effective listening skills have been shown to enhance sales performance and that managers who exhibit good listening skills help create open communication climates that can lead to increased feelings of supportiveness, motivation, and productivity. Specifically, empathetic listening and active listening can play key roles in organizational communication. Managers are wise to enhance their empathetic listening skills, as being able to empathize with employees contributes to a positive communication climate. Active listening among organizational members also promotes involvement and increases motivation, which leads to more cohesion and enhances the communication climate.

Organizational scholars have examined various communication climates specific to listening. Listening environment refers to characteristics and norms of an organization and its members that contribute to expectations for and perceptions about listening. Positive listening environments are perceived to be more employee centered, which can improve job satisfaction and cohesion. But how do we create such environments?

Positive listening environments are facilitated by the breaking down of barriers to concentration, the reduction of noise, the creation of a shared reality (through shared language, such as similar jargon or a shared vision statement), intentional spaces that promote listening, official opportunities that promote listening, training in listening for all employees, and leaders who model good listening practices and praise others who are successful listeners. Policies and practices that support listening must go hand in hand. After all, what does an “open-door” policy mean if it is not coupled with actions that demonstrate the sincerity of the policy?

Examples – “Getting Real”

### **Becoming a “Listening Leader”**

Dr. Rick Bommelje has popularized the concept of the “listening leader.” As a listening coach, he offers training and resources to help people in various career paths increase their listening competence. For people who are very committed to increasing their listening skills, the International Listening Association has now endorsed a program to become a Certified Listening Professional (CLP), which entails advanced independent study, close work with a listening mentor, and the completion of a written exam. There are also training programs to help with empathetic listening that are offered through the Compassionate Listening Project. These programs evidence the growing focus on the importance of listening in all professional contexts.

Scholarly research has consistently shown that listening ability is a key part of leadership in professional contexts and competence in listening aids in decision making. A survey sent to hundreds of companies in the United States found that poor listening skills create problems at all levels of an organizational hierarchy, ranging from entry-level positions to CEOs. Leaders such as managers, team coaches, department heads, and executives must be versatile in terms of listening type and style in order to adapt to the diverse listening needs of employees, clients/customers, colleagues, and other stakeholders.

Even if we don’t have the time or money to invest in one of these professional-listening training programs, we can draw inspiration from the goal of becoming a listening leader. By reading this book, you are already taking an important step toward improving a variety of communication competencies, including listening, and you can always take it upon yourself to further your study and increase your skills in a particular area to better prepare yourself to create positive communication climates and listening environments. You can also use these skills to make yourself a more desirable employee.

1. Make a list of the behaviors that you think a listening leader would exhibit. Which of these do you think you do well? Which do you need to work on?

2. What do you think has contributed to the perceived shortage of listening skills in professional contexts?
3. Given your personal career goals, what listening skills do you think you will need to possess and employ in order to be successful?

## **Listening in Relational Contexts**

Listening plays a central role in establishing and maintaining our relationships. Without some listening competence, we wouldn't be able to engage in the self-disclosure process, which is essential for the establishment of relationships. Newly acquainted people get to know each other through increasingly personal and reciprocal disclosures of personal information. In order to reciprocate a conversational partner's disclosure, we must process it through listening. Once relationships are formed, listening to others provides a psychological reward, through the simple act of recognition, that helps maintain our relationships. Listening to our relational partners and being listened to in return is part of the give-and-take of any interpersonal relationship. Our thoughts and experiences "back up" inside of us, and getting them out helps us maintain a positive balance. So something as routine and seemingly pointless as listening to our romantic partner debrief the events of his or her day or our roommate recount his or her weekend back home shows that we are taking an interest in their lives and are willing to put our own needs and concerns aside for a moment to attend to their needs. Listening also closely ties to conflict, as a lack of listening often plays a large role in creating conflict, while effective listening helps us resolve it.

Listening has relational implications throughout our lives, too. Parents who engage in competent listening behaviors with their children from a very young age make their children feel worthwhile and appreciated, which affects their development in terms of personality and character.

A lack of listening leads to feelings of loneliness, which results in lower self-esteem and higher degrees of anxiety. In fact, by the age of four or five years old, the empathy and recognition shown by the presence or lack of listening has molded children's personalities in noticeable ways. Children who have been listened to grow up expecting that others will be available and receptive to them. These children are therefore more likely to interact confidently with teachers, parents, and peers in ways that help develop communication competence that will be built on throughout their lives. Children who have not been listened to may come to expect that others will not want to listen to them, which leads to a lack of opportunities to practice, develop, and hone foundational communication skills. Fortunately for the more-listened-to children and unfortunately for the less-listened-to children, these early experiences become predispositions that don't change much as the children get older and may actually reinforce themselves and become stronger.

## **Listening and Culture**

Some cultures place more importance on listening than other cultures. In general, collectivistic cultures tend to value listening more than individualistic cultures that are more speaker oriented. The value placed on verbal and nonverbal meaning also varies by culture and influences how we communicate and listen. A low-context communication style is one in which much of the meaning generated within an interaction comes from the verbal communication used rather than nonverbal or contextual cues. Conversely, much of the meaning generated by a high-context communication style comes from nonverbal and contextual cues. For example, US Americans of European descent generally use a low-context communication style, while people in East Asian and Latin American cultures use a high-context communication style.

Contextual communication styles affect listening in many ways. Cultures with a high-context orientation generally use less verbal communication and value silence as a form of communication, which requires listeners to pay close attention to nonverbal signals and consider contextual influences on a message. Cultures with a low-context orientation must use more verbal communication and provide explicit details, since listeners aren't expected to derive meaning from the context. Note that people from low-context cultures may feel frustrated by the ambiguity of speakers from high-context cultures, while speakers from high-context cultures may feel overwhelmed or even insulted by the level of detail used by low-context communicators. Cultures with a low-context communication style also tend to have a monochronic orientation toward time, while high-context cultures have a polychronic time orientation, which also affects listening.

As Chapter 8 "[Culture and Communication](#)" discusses, cultures that favor a structured and commodified orientation toward time are said to be monochronic, while cultures that favor a more flexible orientation are polychronic. Monochronic cultures like the United States value time and action-oriented listening styles, especially in professional contexts, because time is seen as a commodity that is scarce and must be managed. This is evidenced by leaders in businesses and organizations who often request "executive summaries" that only focus on the most relevant information and who use statements like "Get to the point." Polychronic cultures value people and content-oriented listening styles, which makes sense when we consider that polychronic cultures also tend to be more collectivistic and use a high-context communication style. In collectivistic cultures, indirect communication is preferred in cases where direct communication would be considered a threat to the other person's face (desired public image). For example, flatly turning down a business offer would be too direct, so a person might reply with a "maybe" instead of a "no." The person making the proposal, however, would be able to draw on contextual clues that they implicitly learned through socialization to interpret the "maybe" as a "no."

## Listening and Gender

Research on gender and listening has produced mixed results. As we've already learned, much of the research on gender differences and communication has been influenced by gender stereotypes and falsely connected to biological differences. More recent research has found that people communicate in ways that conform to gender stereotypes in some situations and not in others, which shows that our communication is more influenced by societal expectations than by innate or gendered "hard-wiring." For example, through socialization, men are generally

discouraged from expressing emotions in public. A woman sharing an emotional experience with a man may perceive the man's lack of emotional reaction as a sign of inattentiveness, especially if he typically shows more emotion during private interactions. The man, however, may be listening but withholding nonverbal expressiveness because of social norms. He may not realize that withholding those expressions could be seen as a lack of empathetic or active listening. Researchers also dispelled the belief that men interrupt more than women do, finding that men and women interrupt each other with similar frequency in cross-gender encounters. So men may interrupt each other more in same-gender interactions as a conscious or subconscious attempt to establish dominance because such behaviors are expected, as men are generally socialized to be more competitive than women. However, this type of competitive interrupting isn't as present in cross-gender interactions because the contexts have shifted.

### Key Takeaways

- You can improve listening competence at the receiving stage by preparing yourself to listen and distinguishing between intentional messages and noise; at the interpreting stage by identifying main points and supporting points and taking multiple contexts into consideration; at the recalling stage by creating memories using multiple senses and repeating, rephrasing, and reorganizing messages to fit cognitive preferences; at the evaluating stage by separating facts from inferences and assessing the credibility of the speaker's message; and at the responding stage by asking appropriate questions, offering paraphrased messages, and adapting your response to the speaker and the situation.
- Active listening is the process of pairing outwardly visible positive listening behaviors with positive cognitive listening practices and is characterized by mentally preparing yourself to listen, working to maintain focus on concentration, using appropriate verbal and nonverbal back-channel cues to signal attentiveness, and engaging in strategies like note taking and mentally reorganizing information to help with recall.
- In order to apply critical-listening skills in multiple contexts, we must be able to distinguish between facts and inferences, evaluate a speaker's supporting evidence, discover our own biases, and think beyond the message.
- In order to practice empathetic listening skills, we must be able to support others' subjective experience; temporarily set aside our own needs to focus on the other person; encourage elaboration through active listening and questioning; avoid the temptation to tell our own stories and/or give advice; effectively mirror the nonverbal communication of others; and acknowledge our limits as empathetic listeners.
- Getting integrated: Different listening strategies may need to be applied in different listening contexts.
  - In professional contexts, listening is considered a necessary skill, but most people do not receive explicit instruction in listening. Members of an organization should consciously create a listening environment that promotes and rewards competent listening behaviors.
  - In relational contexts, listening plays a central role in initiating relationships, as listening is required for mutual self-disclosure, and in maintaining relationships, as listening to our relational partners provides a psychological reward in the form of recognition. When people aren't or don't feel listened to, they may experience

feelings of isolation or loneliness that can have negative effects throughout their lives.

- In cultural contexts, high- or low-context communication styles, monochronic or polychronic orientations toward time, and individualistic or collectivistic cultural values affect listening preferences and behaviors.
- Research regarding listening preferences and behaviors of men and women has been contradictory. While some differences in listening exist, many of them are based more on societal expectations for how men and women should listen rather than biological differences.

## Exercises

1. Keep a “listening log” for part of your day. Note times when you feel like you exhibited competent listening behaviors and note times when listening became challenging. Analyze the log based on what you have learned in this section. Which positive listening skills helped you listen? What strategies could you apply to your listening challenges to improve your listening competence?
2. Apply the strategies for effective critical listening to a political message (a search for “political speech” or “partisan speech” on YouTube should provide you with many options). As you analyze the speech, make sure to distinguish between facts and inferences, evaluate a speaker’s supporting evidence, discuss how your own biases may influence your evaluation, and think beyond the message.
3. Discuss and analyze the listening environment of a place you have worked or an organization with which you were involved. Overall, was it positive or negative? What were the norms and expectations for effective listening that contributed to the listening environment? Who helped set the tone for the listening environment?

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# Chapter 6: Interpersonal Communication Processes

Taking an interpersonal communication course as an undergraduate is what made me change my major from music to communication studies. I was struck by the clear practicality of key interpersonal communication concepts in my everyday life and in my relationships. I found myself thinking, “Oh, that’s what it’s called!” or “My mom does that to me all the time!” I hope that you will have similar reactions as we learn more about how we communicate with the people in our daily lives.

## 6.3 Emotions & Interpersonal Communication

### Learning Objectives

- Define emotions.
- Explain the evolutionary and cultural connections to emotions.
- Discuss how we can more effectively manage our own and respond to others’ emotions.

Have you ever been at a movie and let out a bellowing laugh and snort only to realize no one else is laughing? Have you ever gotten uncomfortable when someone cries in class or in a public place? Emotions are clearly personal, as they often project what we’re feeling on the inside to those around us whether we want it to show or not. Emotions are also interpersonal in that another person’s show of emotion usually triggers a reaction from us—perhaps support if the person is a close friend or awkwardness if the person is a stranger. Emotions are central to any interpersonal relationship, and it’s important to know what causes and influences emotions so we can better understand our own emotions and better respond to others when they display emotions.

Emotions are physiological, behavioral, and/or communicative reactions to stimuli that are cognitively processed and experienced as emotional. This definition includes several important dimensions of emotions. First, emotions are often internally experienced through physiological changes such as increased heart rate, a tense stomach, or a cold chill. These physiological reactions may not be noticeable by others and are therefore intrapersonal unless we exhibit some change in behavior that clues others into our internal state or we verbally or nonverbally communicate our internal state. Sometimes our behavior is voluntary—we ignore someone, which may indicate we are angry with them—or involuntary—we fidget or avoid eye contact while talking because we are nervous. When we communicate our emotions, we call attention to

ourselves and provide information to others that may inform how they should react. For example, when someone we care about displays behaviors associated with sadness, we are likely to know that we need to provide support. We learn, through socialization, how to read and display emotions, although some people are undoubtedly better at reading emotions than others. However, as with most aspects of communication, we can all learn to become more competent with increased knowledge and effort.

Primary emotions are innate emotions that are experienced for short periods of time and appear rapidly, usually as a reaction to an outside stimulus, and are experienced similarly across cultures. The primary emotions are joy, distress, anger, fear, surprise, and disgust. Members of a remote tribe in New Guinea, who had never been exposed to Westerners, were able to identify these basic emotions when shown photographs of US Americans making corresponding facial expressions (Evans, 5-6).

Secondary emotions are not as innate as primary emotions, and they do not have a corresponding facial expression that makes them universally recognizable. Secondary emotions are processed by a different part of the brain that requires higher order thinking; therefore, they are not reflexive. These emotions develop over time, take longer to fade away, and are interpersonal because they are most often experienced in relation to real or imagined others. You can be fearful of the dark but feel guilty about an unkind comment made to your mother or embarrassed at the thought of doing poorly on a presentation in front of an audience. Since these emotions require more processing, they are more easily influenced by thoughts and can be managed, which means we can become more competent communicators by becoming more aware of how we experience and express secondary emotions. Although there is more cultural variation in the meaning and expression of secondary emotions, they are still universal in that they are experienced by all cultures. It's hard to imagine what our lives would be like without emotions, and in fact many scientists believe we wouldn't be here without them.

## **Perspectives on Emotion**

How did you learn to express your emotions? Like many aspects of communication and interaction, you likely never received any formal instruction on expressing emotions. Instead, we learn through observation, trial and error, and through occasional explicit guidance (e.g., "boys don't cry" or "smile when you meet someone"). To better understand how and why we express our emotions, we'll discuss the evolutionary function of emotions and how they are affected by social and cultural norms.

### **Evolution and Emotions**

Human beings grouping together and creating interpersonal bonds was a key element in the continuation and success of our species, and the ability to express emotions played a role in this success. For example, unlike other species, most of us are able to control our anger, and we have the capacity for empathy. Emotional regulation can help manage conflict, and empathy allows us to share the emotional state of someone else, which increases an interpersonal bond. These capacities were important as early human society grew increasingly complex and people needed to deal with living with more people.

Attachment theory ties into the evolutionary perspective, because researchers claim that it is in our nature, as newborns, to create social bonds with our primary caretaker. This drive for attachment became innate through the process of evolution as early humans who were more successful at attachment were more likely to survive and reproduce—repeating the cycle. Attachment theory proposes that people develop one of the following three attachment styles as a result of interactions with early caretakers: secure, avoidant, or anxious attachment. It is worth noting that much of the research on attachment theory has been based on some societal norms that are shifting. For example, although women for much of human history have played the primary caregiver role, men are increasingly taking on more caregiver responsibilities. Additionally, although the following examples presume that a newborn's primary caregivers are his or her parents, extended family, foster parents, or others may also play that role.

Individuals with a secure attachment style report that their relationship with their parents is warm and that their parents also have a positive and caring relationship with each other. People with this attachment style are generally comfortable with intimacy, feel like they can depend on others when needed, and have few self-doubts. As a result, they are generally more effective at managing their emotions, and they are less likely to experience intense negative emotions in response to a negative stimulus like breaking up with a romantic partner.

People with the avoidant attachment style report discomfort with closeness and a reluctance to depend on others. They quickly develop feelings of love for others, but those feelings lose intensity just as fast. As a result, people with this attachment style do not view love as long lasting or enduring and have a general fear of intimacy because of this. This attachment style might develop due to a lack of bonding with a primary caregiver.

People with the anxious attachment style report a desire for closeness but anxieties about being abandoned. They regularly experience self-doubts and may blame their lack of love on others' unwillingness to commit rather than their own anxiety about being left. They are emotionally volatile and more likely to experience intense negative emotions such as anxiety and anger. This attachment style might develop because primary caregivers were not dependable or were inconsistent—alternating between caring or nurturing and neglecting or harming.

This process of attachment leads us to experience some of our first intense emotions, such as love, trust, joy, anxiety, or anger, and we learn to associate those emotions with closely bonded relationships. For example, the child who develops a secure attachment style and associates feelings of love and trust with forming interpersonal bonds will likely experience similar emotions as an adult entering into a romantic partnership. Conversely, a child who develops an anxious attachment style and associates feelings of anxiety and mistrust with forming interpersonal bonds will likely experience similar emotions in romantic relationships later in life. In short, whether we form loving and secure bonds or unpredictable and insecure bonds influences our emotional tendencies throughout our lives, which inevitably affects our relationships. Of course, later in life, we have more control over and conscious thoughts about this process. Although it seems obvious that developing a secure attachment style is the ideal scenario, it is also inevitable that not every child will have the same opportunity to do so. But while we do not have control over the style we develop as babies, we can exercise more control over our emotions and relationships as adults if we take the time to develop self-awareness and

communication competence—both things this book will help you do if you put what you learn into practice.

## **Culture and Emotions**

While our shared evolutionary past dictates some universal similarities in emotions, triggers for emotions and norms for displaying emotions vary widely. Certain emotional scripts that we follow are socially, culturally, and historically situated. Take the example of “falling in love.” Westerners may be tempted to critique the practice of arranged marriages in other cultures and question a relationship that isn’t based on falling in love. However, arranged marriages have been a part of Western history, and the emotional narrative of falling in love has only recently become a part of our culture. Even though we know that compatible values and shared social networks are more likely to predict the success of a long-term romantic relationship than “passion,” Western norms privilege the emotional role of falling in love in our courtship narratives and practices. While this example shows how emotions tie into larger social and cultural narratives, rules and norms for displaying emotions affect our day-to-day interactions.

Display rules are sociocultural norms that influence emotional expression. Display rules influence who can express emotions, which emotions can be expressed, and how intense the expressions can be. In individualistic cultures, where personal experience and self-determination are values built into cultural practices and communication, expressing emotions is viewed as a personal right. In fact, the outward expression of our inner states may be exaggerated, since getting attention from those around you is accepted and even expected in individualistic cultures like the United States. In collectivistic cultures, emotions are viewed as more interactional and less individual, which ties them into social context rather than into an individual right to free expression. An expression of emotion reflects on the family and cultural group rather than only on the individual. Therefore, emotional displays are more controlled, because maintaining group harmony and relationships is a primary cultural value, which is very different from the more individualistic notion of having the right to get something off your chest.

There are also cultural norms regarding which types of emotions can be expressed. In individualistic cultures, especially in the United States, there is a cultural expectation that people will exhibit positive emotions. Recent research has documented the culture of cheerfulness in the United States. People seek out happy situations and communicate positive emotions even when they do not necessarily feel positive emotions. Being positive implicitly communicates that you have achieved your personal goals, have a comfortable life, and have a healthy inner self. In a culture of cheerfulness, failure to express positive emotions could lead others to view you as a failure or to recommend psychological help or therapy. The cultural predisposition to express positive emotions is not universal. The people who live on the Pacific islands of Ifaluk do not encourage the expression of happiness, because they believe it will lead people to neglect their duties. Similarly, collectivistic cultures may view expressions of positive emotion negatively because someone is bringing undue attention to himself or herself, which could upset group harmony and potentially elicit jealous reactions from others.

Emotional expressions of grief also vary among cultures and are often tied to religious or social expectations. Thai and Filipino funeral services often include wailing, a more intense and loud

form of crying, which shows respect for the deceased. The intensity of the wailing varies based on the importance of the individual who died and the closeness of the relationship between the mourner and the deceased. Therefore, close relatives like spouses, children, or parents would be expected to wail louder than distant relatives or friends. In Filipino culture, wailers may even be hired by the family to symbolize the importance of the person who died. In some Latino cultures, influenced by the concept of machismo or manliness, men are not expected or allowed to cry. Even in the United States, there are gendered expectations regarding grieving behaviors that lead some men to withhold emotional displays such as crying even at funerals. On the other hand, as you can see in the video of the 2011 death of North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il brought out public mourners who some suspected were told and/or paid to wail in front of television cameras.

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## Expressing Emotions

Emotion sharing involves communicating the circumstances, thoughts, and feelings surrounding an emotional event. Emotion sharing usually starts immediately following an emotional episode. The intensity of the emotional event corresponds with the frequency and length of the sharing, with high-intensity events being told more often and over a longer period of time. Research shows that people communicate with others after almost any emotional event, positive or negative, and that emotion sharing offers intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits, as individuals feel inner satisfaction and relief after sharing, and social bonds are strengthened through the interaction.

Our social bonds are enhanced through emotion sharing because the support we receive from our relational partners increases our sense of closeness and interdependence. We should also be aware that our expressions of emotion are infectious due to emotional contagion, or the spreading of emotion from one person to another. Think about a time when someone around you got the giggles and you couldn't help but laugh along with them, even if you didn't know what was funny. While those experiences can be uplifting, the other side of emotional contagion can be unpleasant. One of my favorite skits from Saturday Night Live, called "[Debbie Downer](#)," clearly illustrates the positive and negative aspects of emotional contagion. In the skit, a group of friends and family have taken a trip to an amusement park. One of the people in the group, Debbie, interjects depressing comments into the happy dialogue of the rest of the group. Within the first two minutes of the skit, Debbie mentions mad cow disease after someone orders steak and eggs for breakfast, a Las Vegas entertainer being mauled by his tiger after someone gets excited about seeing Tigger, and a train explosion in North Korea after someone mentions going to the Epcot center. We've probably all worked with someone or had that family member who can't seem to say anything positive, and Debbie's friends react, as we would, by getting increasingly frustrated with her. The skit also illustrates the sometimes uncontrollable aspects of emotional contagion. As you know, the show is broadcast live and the characters occasionally "break character" after getting caught up in the comedy. After the comment about North Korea, Rachel Dratch, who plays Debbie, and Jimmy Fallon, another actor in the scene, briefly break character and laugh a little bit. Their character slip leads other actors to break character and over the next few minutes the laughter spreads (which was not scripted and not supposed to happen)

until all the actors in the skit are laughing, some of them uncontrollably, and the audience is also roaring with laughter. This multilayered example captures the positive, negative, and interpersonal aspects of emotional contagion.

In order to verbally express our emotions, it is important that we develop an emotional vocabulary. The more specific we can be when we are verbally communicating our emotions, the less ambiguous they will be for the person decoding our message. As we expand our emotional vocabulary, we are able to convey the intensity of the emotion we're feeling whether it is mild, moderate, or intense. For example, happy is mild, delighted is moderate, and ecstatic is intense, and ignored is mild, rejected is moderate, and abandoned is intense. Aside from conveying the intensity of your emotions, you can also verbally frame your emotions in a way that allows you to have more control over them.

We can communicate ownership of our emotions through the use of "I" language. This may allow us to feel more in control, but it may also facilitate emotion sharing by not making our conversational partner feel at fault or defensive. For example, instead of saying "You're making me crazy!" you could say, "I'm starting to feel really anxious because we can't make a decision." However, there may be times when face-to-face communication isn't possible or desired, which can complicate how we express emotions.

In a time when so much of our communication is electronically mediated, it is likely that we will communicate emotions through the written word in an e-mail, text, or instant message. We may also still resort to pen and paper when sending someone a thank-you note, a birthday card, or a sympathy card. Communicating emotions through the written (or typed) word can have advantages such as time to compose your thoughts and convey the details of what you're feeling. There are also disadvantages, in that important context and nonverbal communication can't be included. Things like facial expressions and tone of voice offer much insight into emotions that may not be expressed verbally. There is also a lack of immediate feedback. Sometimes people respond immediately to a text or e-mail, but think about how frustrating it is when you text someone and they don't get back to you right away. If you're in need of emotional support or want validation of an emotional message you just sent, waiting for a response could end up negatively affecting your emotional state and your relationship.

Examples – "Getting Critical"

### **Politicians, Apologies, and Emotions**

Politicians publicly apologizing for wrongdoings have been features in the news for years. In June of 2011, Representative Anthony Weiner, a member of the US Congress, apologized to his family, constituents, and friends for posting an explicit photo on Twitter that was intended to go to a woman with whom he had been chatting and then lying about it. He resigned from Congress a little over a week later. Emotions like guilt and shame are often the driving forces behind an apology, and research shows that apologies that communicate these emotions are viewed as more sincere. However, admitting and expressing guilt doesn't automatically lead to forgiveness, as such admissions may expose character flaws of an individual. Rep. Weiner communicated these emotions during his speech, which you can view in Video Clip 6.2. He said he was "deeply

sorry,” expressed “regret” for the pain he caused, and said, “I am deeply ashamed of my terrible judgment and actions.”

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://textbooks.whatcom.edu/cmst210/?p=401#oembed-2>

1. After viewing Rep. Weiner’s apology, do you feel like he was sincere? Why or why not?
2. Do you think politicians have a higher ethical responsibility to apologize for wrongdoing than others? Why or why not?

## **Managing and Responding to Emotions**

The notion of emotional intelligence emerged in the early 1990s and has received much attention in academic scholarship, business and education, and the popular press. Emotional intelligence “involves the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and action.” As was noted earlier, improving our emotional vocabulary and considering how and when to verbally express our emotions can help us better distinguish between and monitor our emotions. However, as the definition of emotional intelligence states, we must then use the results of that cognitive process to guide our thoughts and actions.

Just as we are likely to engage in emotion sharing following an emotional event, we are likely to be on the receiving end of that sharing. Another part of emotional intelligence is being able to appraise others’ expressions of emotions and communicatively adapt. A key aspect in this process is empathy, which is the ability to comprehend the emotions of others and to elicit those feelings in ourselves. Being empathetic has important social and physical implications. By expressing empathy, we will be more likely to attract and maintain supportive social networks, which has positive physiological effects like lower stress and less anxiety and psychological effects such as overall life satisfaction and optimism.

When people share emotions, they may expect a variety of results such as support, validation, or advice. If someone is venting, they may just want your attention. When people share positive emotions, they may want recognition or shared celebration. Remember too that you are likely to coexperience some of the emotion with the person sharing it and that the intensity of their share may dictate your verbal and nonverbal reaction. Research has shown that responses to low-intensity episodes are mostly verbal. For example, if someone describes a situation where they were frustrated with their car shopping experience, you may validate their emotion by saying, “Car shopping can be really annoying. What happened?” Conversely, more intense episodes involve nonverbal reactions such as touching, body contact (scooting close together), or embracing. These reactions may or may not accompany verbal communication. You may have been in a situation where someone shared an intense emotion, such as learning of the death of a close family member, and the only thing you could think to do was hug them. Although being on the receiving end of emotional sharing can be challenging, your efforts will likely result in positive gains in your interpersonal communication competence and increased relational bonds.

### **Key Takeaways**

- Emotions result from outside stimuli or physiological changes that influence our behaviors and communication.
- Emotions developed in modern humans to help us manage complex social life including interpersonal relations.
- The expression of emotions is influenced by sociocultural norms and display rules.
- Emotion sharing includes verbal expression, which is made more effective with an enhanced emotional vocabulary, and nonverbal expression, which may or may not be voluntary.
- Emotional intelligence helps us manage our own emotions and effectively respond to the emotions of others.

## Exercises

1. In what situations would you be more likely to communicate emotions through electronic means rather than in person? Why?
2. Can you think of a display rule for emotions that is not mentioned in the chapter? What is it and why do you think this norm developed?
3. When you are trying to determine someone's emotional state, what nonverbal communication do you look for and why?
4. Think of someone in your life who you believe has a high degree of emotional intelligence. What have they done that brought you to this conclusion?

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## 6.2 Conflict & Interpersonal Communication

### Learning Objectives

- Define interpersonal conflict.
- Compare and contrast the five styles of interpersonal conflict management.
- Explain how perception and culture influence interpersonal conflict.
- List strategies for effectively managing conflict.

Who do you have the most conflict with right now? Your answer to this question probably depends on the various contexts in your life. If you still live at home with a parent or parents, you may have daily conflicts with your family as you try to balance your autonomy, or desire for independence, with the practicalities of living under your family’s roof. If you’ve recently moved away to go to college, you may be negotiating roommate conflicts as you adjust to living with someone you may not know at all. You probably also have experiences managing conflict in romantic relationships and in the workplace. So think back and ask yourself, “How well do I handle conflict?” As with all areas of communication, we can improve if we have the background knowledge to identify relevant communication phenomena and the motivation to reflect on and enhance our communication skills.

Interpersonal conflict occurs in interactions where there are real or perceived incompatible goals, scarce resources, or opposing viewpoints. Interpersonal conflict may be expressed verbally or nonverbally along a continuum ranging from a nearly imperceptible cold shoulder to a very obvious blowout. Interpersonal conflict is, however, distinct from interpersonal violence, which goes beyond communication to include abuse. Domestic violence is a serious issue and is discussed in the section “The Dark Side of Relationships.”

Conflict is an inevitable part of close relationships and can take a negative emotional toll. It takes effort to ignore someone or be passive aggressive, and the anger or guilt we may feel after blowing up at someone are valid negative feelings. However, conflict isn't always negative or unproductive. In fact, numerous research studies have shown that quantity of conflict in a relationship is not as important as how the conflict is handled. Additionally, when conflict is well managed, it has the potential to lead to more rewarding and satisfactory relationships.

Improving your competence in dealing with conflict can yield positive effects in the real world. Since conflict is present in our personal and professional lives, the ability to manage conflict and negotiate desirable outcomes can help us be more successful at both. Whether you and your partner are trying to decide what brand of flat-screen television to buy or discussing the upcoming political election with your mother, the potential for conflict is present. In professional settings, the ability to engage in conflict management, sometimes called conflict resolution, is a necessary and valued skill. However, many professionals do not receive training in conflict management even though they are expected to do it as part of their job. A lack of training and a lack of competence could be a recipe for disaster, which is illustrated in an episode of *The Office* titled "Conflict Resolution." In the episode, Toby, the human-resources officer, encourages office employees to submit anonymous complaints about their coworkers. Although Toby doesn't attempt to resolve the conflicts, the employees feel like they are being heard. When Michael, the manager, finds out there is unresolved conflict, he makes the anonymous complaints public in an attempt to encourage resolution, which backfires, creating more conflict within the office. As usual, Michael doesn't demonstrate communication competence; however, there are career paths for people who do have an interest in or talent for conflict management. In fact, being a mediator was named one of the best careers for 2011 by U.S. News and World Report. Many colleges and universities now offer undergraduate degrees, graduate degrees, or certificates in conflict resolution, such as this one at [the University of North Carolina Greensboro](#). Being able to manage conflict situations can make life more pleasant rather than letting a situation stagnate or escalate. The negative effects of poorly handled conflict could range from an awkward last few weeks of the semester with a college roommate to violence or divorce. However, there is no absolute right or wrong way to handle a conflict. Remember that being a competent communicator doesn't mean that you follow a set of absolute rules. Rather, a competent communicator assesses multiple contexts and applies or adapts communication tools and skills to fit the dynamic situation.

## Conflict Management Styles

Would you describe yourself as someone who prefers to avoid conflict? Do you like to get your way? Are you good at working with someone to reach a solution that is mutually beneficial? Odds are that you have been in situations where you could answer yes to each of these questions, which underscores the important role context plays in conflict and conflict management styles in particular. The way we view and deal with conflict is learned and contextual. Is the way you handle conflicts similar to the way your parents handle conflict? If you're of a certain age, you are likely predisposed to answer this question with a certain "No!" It wasn't until my late twenties and early thirties that I began to see how similar I am to my parents, even though I, like many, spent years trying to distinguish myself from them. Research does show that there is intergenerational transmission of traits related to conflict management. As children, we test out

different conflict resolution styles we observe in our families with our parents and siblings. Later, as we enter adolescence and begin developing platonic and romantic relationships outside the family, we begin testing what we've learned from our parents in other settings. If a child has observed and used negative conflict management styles with siblings or parents, he or she is likely to exhibit those behaviors with non-family members.

There has been much research done on different types of conflict management styles, which are communication strategies that attempt to avoid, address, or resolve a conflict. Keep in mind that we don't always consciously choose a style. We may instead be caught up in emotion and become reactionary. The strategies for more effectively managing conflict that will be discussed later may allow you to slow down the reaction process, become more aware of it, and intervene in the process to improve your communication. A powerful tool to mitigate conflict is information exchange. Asking for more information before you react to a conflict-triggering event is a good way to add a buffer between the trigger and your reaction. Another key element is whether or not a communicator is oriented toward self-centered or other-centered goals. For example, if your goal is to "win" or make the other person "lose," you show a high concern for self and a low concern for other. If your goal is to facilitate a "win/win" resolution or outcome, you show a high concern for self and other. In general, strategies that facilitate information exchange and include concern for mutual goals will be more successful at managing conflict.

The five strategies for managing conflict we will discuss are competing, avoiding, accommodating, compromising, and collaborating. Each of these conflict styles accounts for the concern we place on self versus other.

**Figure 6.1 Five Styles of Interpersonal Conflict Management**



Source: Adapted from M. Afzalur Rahim, "A Measure of Styles of Handling Interpersonal Conflict," *Academy of Management Journal* 26, no. 2 (1983): 368–76.

In order to better understand the elements of the five styles of conflict management, we will apply each to the follow scenario. Rosa and D'Shaun have been partners for seventeen years.

Rosa is growing frustrated because D'Shaun continues to give money to their teenage daughter, Casey, even though they decided to keep the teen on a fixed allowance to try to teach her more responsibility. While conflicts regarding money and child rearing are very common, we will see the numerous ways that Rosa and D'Shaun could address this problem.

## Competing

The competing style indicates a high concern for self and a low concern for other. When we compete, we are striving to “win” the conflict, potentially at the expense or “loss” of the other person. One way we may gauge our win is by being granted or taking concessions from the other person. For example, if D'Shaun gives Casey extra money behind Rosa's back, he is taking an indirect competitive route resulting in a “win” for him because he got his way. The competing style also involves the use of power, which can be noncoercive or coercive. Noncoercive strategies include requesting and persuading. When requesting, we suggest the conflict partner change a behavior. Requesting doesn't require a high level of information exchange. When we persuade, however, we give our conflict partner reasons to support our request or suggestion, meaning there is more information exchange, which may make persuading more effective than requesting. Rosa could try to persuade D'Shaun to stop giving Casey extra allowance money by bringing up their fixed budget or reminding him that they are saving for a summer vacation. Coercive strategies violate standard guidelines for ethical communication and may include aggressive communication directed at rousing your partner's emotions through insults, profanity, and yelling, or through threats of punishment if you do not get your way. If Rosa is the primary income earner in the family, she could use that power to threaten to take D'Shaun's ATM card away if he continues giving Casey money. In all these scenarios, the “win” that could result is only short term and can lead to conflict escalation. Interpersonal conflict is rarely isolated, meaning there can be ripple effects that connect the current conflict to previous and future conflicts. D'Shaun's behind-the-scenes money giving or Rosa's confiscation of the ATM card could lead to built-up negative emotions that could further test their relationship.

Competing has been linked to aggression, although the two are not always paired. If assertiveness does not work, there is a chance it could escalate to hostility. There is a pattern of verbal escalation: requests, demands, complaints, angry statements, threats, harassment, and verbal abuse. Aggressive communication can become patterned, which can create a volatile and hostile environment. The reality television show *The Bad Girls Club* is a prime example of a chronically hostile and aggressive environment. If you do a Google video search for clips from the show, you will see yelling, screaming, verbal threats, and some examples of physical violence. The producers of the show choose houseguests who have histories of aggression, and when the “bad girls” are placed in a house together, they fall into typical patterns, which creates dramatic television moments. Obviously, living in this type of volatile environment would create stressors in any relationship, so it's important to monitor the use of competing as a conflict resolution strategy to ensure that it does not lapse into aggression.

The competing style of conflict management is not the same thing as having a competitive personality. Competition in relationships isn't always negative, and people who enjoy engaging in competition may not always do so at the expense of another person's goals. In fact, research has shown that some couples engage in competitive shared activities like sports or games to

maintain and enrich their relationship. And although we may think that competitiveness is gendered, research has often shown that women are just as competitive as men.

## Avoiding

The avoiding style of conflict management often indicates a low concern for self and a low concern for other, and no direct communication about the conflict takes place. However, as we will discuss later, in some cultures that emphasize group harmony over individual interests, and even in some situations in the United States, avoiding a conflict can indicate a high level of concern for the other. In general, avoiding doesn't mean that there is no communication about the conflict. Remember, you cannot not communicate. Even when we try to avoid conflict, we may intentionally or unintentionally give our feelings away through our verbal and nonverbal communication. Rosa's sarcastic tone as she tells D'Shaun that he's "Soooo good with money!" and his subsequent eye roll both bring the conflict to the surface without specifically addressing it. The avoiding style is either passive or indirect, meaning there is little information exchange, which may make this strategy less effective than others. We may decide to avoid conflict for many different reasons, some of which are better than others. If you view the conflict as having little importance to you, it may be better to ignore it. If the person you're having conflict with will only be working in your office for a week, you may perceive a conflict to be temporary and choose to avoid it and hope that it will solve itself. If you are not emotionally invested in the conflict, you may be able to reframe your perspective and see the situation in a different way, therefore resolving the issue. In all these cases, avoiding doesn't really require an investment of time, emotion, or communication skill, so there is not much at stake to lose.

Avoidance is not always an easy conflict management choice, because sometimes the person we have conflict with isn't a temp in our office or a weekend houseguest. While it may be easy to tolerate a problem when you're not personally invested in it or view it as temporary, when faced with a situation like Rosa and D'Shaun's, avoidance would just make the problem worse. For example, avoidance could first manifest as changing the subject, then progress from avoiding the issue to avoiding the person altogether, to even ending the relationship.

Indirect strategies of hinting and joking also fall under the avoiding style. While these indirect avoidance strategies may lead to a buildup of frustration or even anger, they allow us to vent a little of our built-up steam and may make a conflict situation more bearable. When we hint, we drop clues that we hope our partner will find and piece together to see the problem and hopefully change, thereby solving the problem without any direct communication. In almost all the cases of hinting that I have experienced or heard about, the person dropping the hints overestimates their partner's detective abilities. For example, when Rosa leaves the bank statement on the kitchen table in hopes that D'Shaun will realize how much extra money he is giving Casey, D'Shaun may simply ignore it or even get irritated with Rosa for not putting the statement with all the other mail. We also overestimate our partner's ability to decode the jokes we make about a conflict situation. It is more likely that the receiver of the jokes will think you're genuinely trying to be funny or feel provoked or insulted than realize the conflict situation that you are referencing. So more frustration may develop when the hints and jokes are not decoded, which often leads to a more extreme form of hinting/joking: passive-aggressive behavior.

Passive-aggressive behavior is a way of dealing with conflict in which one person indirectly communicates their negative thoughts or feelings through nonverbal behaviors, such as not completing a task. For example, Rosa may wait a few days to deposit money into the bank so D'Shaun can't withdraw it to give to Casey, or D'Shaun may cancel plans for a romantic dinner because he feels like Rosa is questioning his responsibility with money. Although passive-aggressive behavior can feel rewarding in the moment, it is one of the most unproductive ways to deal with conflict. These behaviors may create additional conflicts and may lead to a cycle of passive-aggressiveness in which the other partner begins to exhibit these behaviors as well, while never actually addressing the conflict that originated the behavior. In most avoidance situations, both parties lose. However, as noted above, avoidance can be the most appropriate strategy in some situations—for example, when the conflict is temporary, when the stakes are low or there is little personal investment, or when there is the potential for violence or retaliation.

## **Accommodating**

The accommodating conflict management style indicates a low concern for self and a high concern for other and is often viewed as passive or submissive, in that someone complies with or obliges another without providing personal input. The context for and motivation behind accommodating play an important role in whether or not it is an appropriate strategy. Generally, we accommodate because we are being generous, we are obeying, or we are yielding. If we are being generous, we accommodate because we genuinely want to; if we are obeying, we don't have a choice but to accommodate (perhaps due to the potential for negative consequences or punishment); and if we yield, we may have our own views or goals but give up on them due to fatigue, time constraints, or because a better solution has been offered. Accommodating can be appropriate when there is little chance that our own goals can be achieved, when we don't have much to lose by accommodating, when we feel we are wrong, or when advocating for our own needs could negatively affect the relationship. The occasional accommodation can be useful in maintaining a relationship—remember earlier we discussed putting another's needs before your own as a way to achieve relational goals. For example, Rosa may say, "It's OK that you gave Casey some extra money; she did have to spend more on gas this week since the prices went up." However, being a team player can slip into being a pushover, which people generally do not appreciate. If Rosa keeps telling D'Shaun, "It's OK this time," they may find themselves short on spending money at the end of the month. At that point, Rosa and D'Shaun's conflict may escalate as they question each other's motives, or the conflict may spread if they direct their frustration at Casey and blame it on her irresponsibility.

Research has shown that the accommodating style is more likely to occur when there are time restraints and less likely to occur when someone does not want to appear weak. If you're standing outside the movie theater and two movies are starting, you may say, "Let's just have it your way," so you don't miss the beginning. If you're a new manager at an electronics store and an employee wants to take Sunday off to watch a football game, you may say no to set an example for the other employees. As with avoiding, there are certain cultural influences we will discuss later that make accommodating a more effective strategy.

## **Compromising**

The compromising style shows a moderate concern for self and other and may indicate that there is a low investment in the conflict and/or the relationship. Even though we often hear that the best way to handle a conflict is to compromise, the compromising style isn't a win/win solution; it is a partial win/lose. In essence, when we compromise, we give up some or most of what we want. It's true that the conflict gets resolved temporarily, but lingering thoughts of what you gave up could lead to a future conflict. Compromising may be a good strategy when there are time limitations or when prolonging a conflict may lead to relationship deterioration. Compromise may also be good when both parties have equal power or when other resolution strategies have not worked.

A negative of compromising is that it may be used as an easy way out of a conflict. The compromising style is most effective when both parties find the solution agreeable. Rosa and D'Shaun could decide that Casey's allowance does need to be increased and could each give ten more dollars a week by committing to taking their lunch to work twice a week instead of eating out. They are both giving up something, and if neither of them have a problem with taking their lunch to work, then the compromise was equitable. If the couple agrees that the twenty extra dollars a week should come out of D'Shaun's golf budget, the compromise isn't as equitable, and D'Shaun, although he agreed to the compromise, may end up with feelings of resentment. Wouldn't it be better to both win?

## **Collaborating**

The collaborating style involves a high degree of concern for self and other and usually indicates investment in the conflict situation and the relationship. Although the collaborating style takes the most work in terms of communication competence, it ultimately leads to a win/win situation in which neither party has to make concessions because a mutually beneficial solution is discovered or created. The obvious advantage is that both parties are satisfied, which could lead to positive problem solving in the future and strengthen the overall relationship. For example, Rosa and D'Shaun may agree that Casey's allowance needs to be increased and may decide to give her twenty more dollars a week in exchange for her babysitting her little brother one night a week. In this case, they didn't make the conflict personal but focused on the situation and came up with a solution that may end up saving them money. The disadvantage is that this style is often time consuming, and only one person may be willing to use this approach while the other person is eager to compete to meet their goals or willing to accommodate.

Here are some tips for collaborating and achieving a win/win outcome:

- Do not view the conflict as a contest you are trying to win.
- Remain flexible and realize there are solutions yet to be discovered.
- Distinguish the people from the problem (don't make it personal).
- Determine what the underlying needs are that are driving the other person's demands (needs can still be met through different demands).
- Identify areas of common ground or shared interests that you can work from to develop solutions.
- Ask questions to allow them to clarify and to help you understand their perspective.
- Listen carefully and provide verbal and nonverbal feedback.

## Examples – “Getting Competent”

### Handling Roommate Conflicts

Whether you have a roommate by choice, by necessity, or through the random selection process of your school’s housing office, it’s important to be able to get along with the person who shares your living space. While having a roommate offers many benefits such as making a new friend, having someone to experience a new situation like college life with, and having someone to split the cost on your own with, there are also challenges. Some common roommate conflicts involve neatness, noise, having guests, sharing possessions, value conflicts, money conflicts, and personality conflicts. Read the following scenarios and answer the following questions for each one:

1. Which conflict management style, from the five discussed, would you use in this situation?
2. What are the potential strengths of using this style?
3. What are the potential weaknesses of using this style?

Scenario 1: Neatness. Your college dorm has bunk beds, and your roommate takes a lot of time making his bed (the bottom bunk) each morning. He has told you that he doesn’t want anyone sitting on or sleeping in his bed when he is not in the room. While he is away for the weekend, your friend comes to visit and sits on the bottom bunk bed. You tell him what your roommate said, and you try to fix the bed back before he returns to the dorm. When he returns, he notices that his bed has been disturbed and he confronts you about it.

Scenario 2: Noise and having guests. Your roommate has a job waiting tables and gets home around midnight on Thursday nights. She often brings a couple friends from work home with her. They watch television, listen to music, or play video games and talk and laugh. You have an 8 a.m. class on Friday mornings and are usually asleep when she returns. Last Friday, you talked to her and asked her to keep it down in the future. Tonight, their noise has woken you up and you can’t get back to sleep.

Scenario 3: Sharing possessions. When you go out to eat, you often bring back leftovers to have for lunch the next day during your short break between classes. You didn’t have time to eat breakfast, and you’re really excited about having your leftover pizza for lunch until you get home and see your roommate sitting on the couch eating the last slice.

Scenario 4: Money conflicts. Your roommate got mono and missed two weeks of work last month. Since he has a steady job and you have some savings, you cover his portion of the rent and agree that he will pay your portion next month. The next month comes around and he informs you that he only has enough to pay his half.

Scenario 5: Value and personality conflicts. You like to go out to clubs and parties and have friends over, but your roommate is much more of an introvert. You’ve tried to get her to come out with you or join the party at your place, but she’d rather study. One day she tells you that she wants to break the lease so she can move out early to live with one of her friends. You both

signed the lease, so you have to agree or she can't do it. If you break the lease, you automatically lose your portion of the security deposit.

## Culture and Conflict

Culture is an important context to consider when studying conflict, and recent research has called into question some of the assumptions of the five conflict management styles discussed so far, which were formulated with a Western bias. For example, while the avoiding style of conflict has been cast as negative, with a low concern for self and other or as a lose/lose outcome, this research found that participants in the United States, Germany, China, and Japan all viewed avoiding strategies as demonstrating a concern for the other. While there are some generalizations we can make about culture and conflict, it is better to look at more specific patterns of how interpersonal communication and conflict management are related. We can better understand some of the cultural differences in conflict management by further examining the concept of face.

What does it mean to “save face?” This saying generally refers to preventing embarrassment or preserving our reputation or image, which is similar to the concept of face in interpersonal and intercultural communication. Our face is the projected self we desire to put into the world, and facework refers to the communicative strategies we employ to project, maintain, or repair our face or maintain, repair, or challenge another's face. Face negotiation theory argues that people in all cultures negotiate face through communication encounters, and that cultural factors influence how we engage in facework, especially in conflict situations. These cultural factors influence whether we are more concerned with self-face or other-face and what types of conflict management strategies we may use. One key cultural influence on face negotiation is the distinction between individualistic and collectivistic cultures.

The distinction between individualistic and collectivistic cultures is an important dimension across which all cultures vary. Individualistic cultures like the United States and most of Europe emphasize individual identity over group identity and encourage competition and self-reliance. Collectivistic cultures like Taiwan, Colombia, China, Japan, Vietnam, and Peru value in-group identity over individual identity and value conformity to social norms of the in-group. However, within the larger cultures, individuals will vary in the degree to which they view themselves as part of a group or as a separate individual, which is called self-construal. Independent self-construal indicates a perception of the self as an individual with unique feelings, thoughts, and motivations. Interdependent self-construal indicates a perception of the self as interrelated with others. Not surprisingly, people from individualistic cultures are more likely to have higher levels of independent self-construal, and people from collectivistic cultures are more likely to have higher levels of interdependent self-construal. Self-construal and individualistic or collectivistic cultural orientations affect how people engage in facework and the conflict management styles they employ.

Self-construal alone does not have a direct effect on conflict style, but it does affect face concerns, with independent self-construal favoring self-face concerns and interdependent self-construal favoring other-face concerns. There are specific facework strategies for different

conflict management styles, and these strategies correspond to self-face concerns or other-face concerns.

- **Accommodating.** Giving in (self-face concern).
- **Avoiding.** Pretending conflict does not exist (other-face concern).
- **Competing.** Defending your position, persuading (self-face concern).
- **Collaborating.** Apologizing, having a private discussion, remaining calm (other-face concern).

Research done on college students in Germany, Japan, China, and the United States found that those with independent self-construal were more likely to engage in competing, and those with interdependent self-construal were more likely to engage in avoiding or collaborating. And in general, this research found that members of collectivistic cultures were more likely to use the avoiding style of conflict management and less likely to use the integrating or competing styles of conflict management than were members of individualistic cultures. The following examples bring together facework strategies, cultural orientations, and conflict management style: Someone from an individualistic culture may be more likely to engage in competing as a conflict management strategy if they are directly confronted, which may be an attempt to defend their reputation (self-face concern). Someone in a collectivistic culture may be more likely to engage in avoiding or accommodating in order not to embarrass or anger the person confronting them (other-face concern) or out of concern that their reaction could reflect negatively on their family or cultural group (other-face concern). While these distinctions are useful for categorizing large-scale cultural patterns, it is important not to essentialize or arbitrarily group countries together, because there are measurable differences within cultures. For example, expressing one's emotions was seen as demonstrating a low concern for other-face in Japan, but this was not so in China, which shows there is variety between similarly collectivistic cultures. Culture always adds layers of complexity to any communication phenomenon, but experiencing and learning from other cultures also enriches our lives and makes us more competent communicators.

## Handling Conflict Better

Conflict is inevitable and it is not inherently negative. A key part of developing interpersonal communication competence involves being able to effectively manage the conflict you will encounter in all your relationships. One key part of handling conflict better is to notice patterns of conflict in specific relationships and to generally have an idea of what causes you to react negatively and what your reactions usually are.

### Identifying Conflict Patterns

Much of the research on conflict patterns has been done on couples in romantic relationships, but the concepts and findings are applicable to other relationships. Four common triggers for conflict are criticism, demand, cumulative annoyance, and rejection. We all know from experience that criticism, or comments that evaluate another person's personality, behavior, appearance, or life choices, may lead to conflict. Comments do not have to be meant as criticism to be perceived as such. If Gary comes home from college for the weekend and his mom says, "Looks like you put on a few pounds," she may view this as a statement of fact based on observation. Gary, however,

may take the comment personally and respond negatively back to his mom, starting a conflict that will last for the rest of his visit. A simple but useful strategy to manage the trigger of criticism is to follow the old adage “Think before you speak.” In many cases, there are alternative ways to phrase things that may be taken less personally, or we may determine that our comment doesn’t need to be spoken at all. I’ve learned that a majority of the thoughts that we have about another person’s physical appearance, whether positive or negative, do not need to be verbalized. Ask yourself, “What is my motivation for making this comment?” and “Do I have anything to lose by not making this comment?” If your underlying reasons for asking are valid, perhaps there is another way to phrase your observation. If Gary’s mom is worried about his eating habits and health, she could wait until they’re eating dinner and ask him how he likes the food choices at school and what he usually eats.

Demands also frequently trigger conflict, especially if the demand is viewed as unfair or irrelevant. It’s important to note that demands rephrased as questions may still be or be perceived as demands. Tone of voice and context are important factors here. When you were younger, you may have asked a parent, teacher, or elder for something and heard back “Ask nicely.” As with criticism, thinking before you speak and before you respond can help manage demands and minimize conflict episodes. As we discussed earlier, demands are sometimes met with withdrawal rather than a verbal response. If you are doing the demanding, remember a higher level of information exchange may make your demand clearer or more reasonable to the other person. If you are being demanded of, responding calmly and expressing your thoughts and feelings are likely more effective than withdrawing, which may escalate the conflict.

Cumulative annoyance is a building of frustration or anger that occurs over time, eventually resulting in a conflict interaction. For example, your friend shows up late to drive you to class three times in a row. You didn’t say anything the previous times, but on the third time you say, “You’re late again! If you can’t get here on time, I’ll find another way to get to class.” Cumulative annoyance can build up like a pressure cooker, and as it builds up, the intensity of the conflict also builds. Criticism and demands can also play into cumulative annoyance. We have all probably let critical or demanding comments slide, but if they continue, it becomes difficult to hold back, and most of us have a breaking point. The problem here is that all the other incidents come back to your mind as you confront the other person, which usually intensifies the conflict. You’ve likely been surprised when someone has blown up at you due to cumulative annoyance or surprised when someone you have blown up at didn’t know there was a problem building. A good strategy for managing cumulative annoyance is to monitor your level of annoyance and occasionally let some steam out of the pressure cooker by processing through your frustration with a third party or directly addressing what is bothering you with the source.

No one likes the feeling of rejection. Rejection can lead to conflict when one person’s comments or behaviors are perceived as ignoring or invalidating the other person. Vulnerability is a component of any close relationship. When we care about someone, we verbally or nonverbally communicate. We may tell our best friend that we miss them, or plan a home-cooked meal for our partner who is working late. The vulnerability that underlies these actions comes from the possibility that our relational partner will not notice or appreciate them. When someone feels exposed or rejected, they often respond with anger to mask their hurt, which ignites a conflict. Managing feelings of rejection is difficult because it is so personal, but controlling the impulse to

assume that your relational partner is rejecting you, and engaging in communication rather than reflexive reaction, can help put things in perspective. If your partner doesn't get excited about the meal you planned and cooked, it could be because he or she is physically or mentally tired after a long day. Concepts discussed in Chapter 2 "[Communication and Perception](#)" can be useful here, as perception checking, taking inventory of your attributions, and engaging in information exchange to help determine how each person is punctuating the conflict are useful ways of managing all four of the triggers discussed.

Interpersonal conflict may take the form of serial arguing, which is a repeated pattern of disagreement over an issue. Serial arguments do not necessarily indicate negative or troubled relationships, but any kind of patterned conflict is worth paying attention to. There are three patterns that occur with serial arguing: repeating, mutual hostility, and arguing with assurances. The first pattern is repeating, which means reminding the other person of your complaint (what you want them to start/stop doing). The pattern may continue if the other person repeats their response to your reminder. For example, if Marita reminds Kate that she doesn't appreciate her sarcastic tone, and Kate responds, "I'm soooo sorry, I forgot how perfect you are," then the reminder has failed to effect the desired change. A predictable pattern of complaint like this leads participants to view the conflict as irresolvable. The second pattern within serial arguments is mutual hostility, which occurs when the frustration of repeated conflict leads to negative emotions and increases the likelihood of verbal aggression. Again, a predictable pattern of hostility makes the conflict seem irresolvable and may lead to relationship deterioration. Whereas the first two patterns entail an increase in pressure on the participants in the conflict, the third pattern offers some relief. If people in an interpersonal conflict offer verbal assurances of their commitment to the relationship, then the problems associated with the other two patterns of serial arguing may be ameliorated. Even though the conflict may not be solved in the interaction, the verbal assurances of commitment imply that there is a willingness to work on solving the conflict in the future, which provides a sense of stability that can benefit the relationship. Although serial arguing is not inherently bad within a relationship, if the pattern becomes more of a vicious cycle, it can lead to alienation, polarization, and an overall toxic climate, and the problem may seem so irresolvable that people feel trapped and terminate the relationship. There are some negative, but common, conflict reactions we can monitor and try to avoid, which may also help prevent serial arguing.

Two common conflict pitfalls are one-upping and mindreading. One-upping is a quick reaction to communication from another person that escalates the conflict. If Sam comes home late from work and Nicki says, "I wish you would call when you're going to be late" and Sam responds, "I wish you would get off my back," the reaction has escalated the conflict. Mindreading is communication in which one person attributes something to the other using generalizations. If Sam says, "You don't care whether I come home at all or not!" she is presuming to know Nicki's thoughts and feelings. Nicki is likely to respond defensively, perhaps saying, "You don't know how I'm feeling!" One-upping and mindreading are often reactions that are more reflexive than deliberate. Remember concepts like attribution and punctuation in these moments. Nicki may have received bad news and was eager to get support from Sam when she arrived home. Although Sam perceives Nicki's comment as criticism and justifies her comments as a reaction to Nicki's behavior, Nicki's comment could actually be a sign of their closeness, in that Nicki appreciates Sam's emotional support. Sam could have said, "I know, I'm sorry, I was on my cell

phone for the past hour with a client who had a lot of problems to work out.” Taking a moment to respond mindfully rather than react with a knee-jerk reflex can lead to information exchange, which could deescalate the conflict.

Validating the person with whom you are in conflict can be an effective way to deescalate conflict. While avoiding or retreating may seem like the best option in the moment, one of the key negative traits found in research on married couples’ conflicts was withdrawal, which as we learned before may result in a demand-withdrawal pattern of conflict. Often validation can be as simple as demonstrating good listening skills discussed earlier in this book by making eye contact and giving verbal and nonverbal back-channel cues like saying “mmm-hmm” or nodding your head. This doesn’t mean that you have to give up your own side in a conflict or that you agree with what the other person is saying; rather, you are hearing the other person out, which validates them and may also give you some more information about the conflict that could minimize the likelihood of a reaction rather than a response.

As with all the aspects of communication competence we have discussed so far, you cannot expect that everyone you interact with will have the same knowledge of communication that you have after reading this book. But it often only takes one person with conflict management skills to make an interaction more effective. Remember that it’s not the quantity of conflict that determines a relationship’s success; it’s how the conflict is managed, and one person’s competent response can deescalate a conflict. Now we turn to a discussion of negotiation steps and skills as a more structured way to manage conflict.

## **Negotiation Steps and Skills**

We negotiate daily. We may negotiate with a professor to make up a missed assignment or with our friends to plan activities for the weekend. Negotiation in interpersonal conflict refers to the process of attempting to change or influence conditions within a relationship. The negotiation skills discussed next can be adapted to all types of relational contexts, from romantic partners to coworkers. The stages of negotiating are prenegotiation, opening, exploration, bargaining, and settlement.

In the prenegotiation stage, you want to prepare for the encounter. If possible, let the other person know you would like to talk to them, and preview the topic, so they will also have the opportunity to prepare. While it may seem awkward to “set a date” to talk about a conflict, if the other person feels like they were blindsided, their reaction could be negative. Make your preview simple and nonthreatening by saying something like “I’ve noticed that we’ve been arguing a lot about who does what chores around the house. Can we sit down and talk tomorrow when we both get home from class?” Obviously, it won’t always be feasible to set a date if the conflict needs to be handled immediately because the consequences are immediate or if you or the other person has limited availability. In that case, you can still prepare, but make sure you allot time for the other person to digest and respond. During this stage you also want to figure out your goals for the interaction by reviewing your instrumental, relational, and self-presentation goals. Is getting something done, preserving the relationship, or presenting yourself in a certain way the most important? For example, you may highly rank the instrumental goal of having a clean house, or the relational goal of having pleasant interactions with your roommate, or the self-

presentation goal of appearing nice and cooperative. Whether your roommate is your best friend from high school or a stranger the school matched you up with could determine the importance of your relational and self-presentation goals. At this point, your goal analysis may lead you away from negotiation—remember, as we discussed earlier, avoiding can be an appropriate and effective conflict management strategy. If you decide to proceed with the negotiation, you will want to determine your ideal outcome and your bottom line, or the point at which you decide to break off negotiation. It's very important that you realize there is a range between your ideal and your bottom line and that remaining flexible is key to a successful negotiation—remember, through collaboration a new solution could be found that you didn't think of.

In the opening stage of the negotiation, you want to set the tone for the interaction because the other person will be likely to reciprocate. Generally, it is good to be cooperative and pleasant, which can help open the door for collaboration. You also want to establish common ground by bringing up overlapping interests and using “we” language. It would not be competent to open the negotiation with “You're such a slob! Didn't your mom ever teach you how to take care of yourself?” Instead, you may open the negotiation by making small talk about classes that day and then move into the issue at hand. You could set a good tone and establish common ground by saying, “We both put a lot of work into setting up and decorating our space, but now that classes have started, I've noticed that we're really busy and some chores are not getting done.” With some planning and a simple opening like that, you can move into the next stage of negotiation.

There should be a high level of information exchange in the exploration stage. The overarching goal in this stage is to get a panoramic view of the conflict by sharing your perspective and listening to the other person. In this stage, you will likely learn how the other person is punctuating the conflict. Although you may have been mulling over the mess for a few days, your roommate may just now be aware of the conflict. She may also inform you that she usually cleans on Sundays but didn't get to last week because she unexpectedly had to visit her parents. The information that you gather here may clarify the situation enough to end the conflict and cease negotiation. If negotiation continues, the information will be key as you move into the bargaining stage.

The bargaining stage is where you make proposals and concessions. The proposal you make should be informed by what you learned in the exploration stage. Flexibility is important here, because you may have to revise your ideal outcome and bottom line based on new information. If your plan was to have a big cleaning day every Thursday, you may now want to propose to have the roommate clean on Sunday while you clean on Wednesday. You want to make sure your opening proposal is reasonable and not presented as an ultimatum. “I don't ever want to see a dish left in the sink” is different from “When dishes are left in the sink too long, they stink and get gross. Can we agree to not leave any dishes in the sink overnight?” Through the proposals you make, you could end up with a win/win situation. If there are areas of disagreement, however, you may have to make concessions or compromise, which can be a partial win or a partial loss. If you hate doing dishes but don't mind emptying the trash and recycling, you could propose to assign those chores based on preference. If you both hate doing dishes, you could propose to be responsible for washing your own dishes right after you use them. If you really hate dishes and have some extra money, you could propose to use disposable (and hopefully recyclable) dishes, cups, and utensils.

In the settlement stage, you want to decide on one of the proposals and then summarize the chosen proposal and any related concessions. It is possible that each party can have a different view of the agreed solution. If your roommate thinks you are cleaning the bathroom every other day and you plan to clean it on Wednesdays, then there could be future conflict. You could summarize and ask for confirmation by saying, “So, it looks like I’ll be in charge of the trash and recycling, and you’ll load and unload the dishwasher. Then I’ll do a general cleaning on Wednesdays and you’ll do the same on Sundays. Is that right?” Last, you’ll need to follow up on the solution to make sure it’s working for both parties. If your roommate goes home again next Sunday and doesn’t get around to cleaning, you may need to go back to the exploration or bargaining stage.

### Key Takeaways

- Interpersonal conflict is an inevitable part of relationships that, although not always negative, can take an emotional toll on relational partners unless they develop skills and strategies for managing conflict.
- Although there is no absolute right or wrong way to handle a conflict, there are five predominant styles of conflict management, which are competing, avoiding, accommodating, compromising, and collaborating.
- Perception plays an important role in conflict management because we are often biased in determining the cause of our own and others’ behaviors in a conflict situation, which necessitates engaging in communication to gain information and perspective.
- Culture influences how we engage in conflict based on our cultural norms regarding individualism or collectivism and concern for self-face or other-face.
- We can handle conflict better by identifying patterns and triggers such as demands, cumulative annoyance, and rejection and by learning to respond mindfully rather than reflexively.

### Exercises

1. Of the five conflict management strategies, is there one that you use more often than others? Why or why not? Do you think people are predisposed to one style over the others based on their personality or other characteristics? If so, what personality traits do you think would lead a person to each style?
2. Review the example of D’Shaun and Rosa. If you were in their situation, what do you think the best style to use would be and why?
3. Of the conflict triggers discussed (demands, cumulative annoyance, rejection, one-upping, and mindreading) which one do you find most often triggers a negative reaction from you? What strategies can you use to better manage the trigger and more effectively manage conflict?

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## 6.1 Principles of Interpersonal Communication

### Learning Objectives

- Define interpersonal communication.
- Discuss the functional aspects of interpersonal communication.
- Discuss the cultural aspects of interpersonal communication.

In order to understand interpersonal communication, we must understand how interpersonal communication functions to meet our needs and goals and how our interpersonal communication connects to larger social and cultural systems. Interpersonal communication is the process of exchanging messages between people whose lives mutually influence one another in unique ways in relation to social and cultural norms. This definition highlights the fact that interpersonal communication involves two or more people who are interdependent to some degree and who build a unique bond based on the larger social and cultural contexts to which they belong. So a brief exchange with a grocery store clerk who you don't know wouldn't be considered interpersonal communication, because you and the clerk are not influencing each other in significant ways. Obviously, if the clerk were a friend, family member, coworker, or romantic partner, the communication would fall into the interpersonal category. In this section, we discuss the importance of studying interpersonal communication and explore its functional and cultural aspects.

### Why Study Interpersonal Communication?

Interpersonal communication has many implications for us in the real world. Did you know that interpersonal communication played an important role in human evolution? Early humans who lived in groups, rather than alone, were more likely to survive, which meant that those with the capability to develop interpersonal bonds were more likely to pass these traits on to the next generation. Did you know that interpersonal skills have a measurable impact on psychological and physical health? People with higher levels of interpersonal communication skills are better able to adapt to stress, have greater satisfaction in relationships and more friends, and have less depression and anxiety. In fact, prolonged isolation has been shown to severely damage a human. Have you ever heard of the boy or girl who was raised by wolves? There have been documented cases of abandoned or neglected children, sometimes referred to as feral children, who survived using their animalistic instincts but suffered psychological and physical trauma as a result of

their isolation. There are also examples of solitary confinement, which has become an ethical issue in many countries. In “supermax” prisons, which now operate in at least forty-four states, prisoners spend 22.5 to 24 hours a day in their cells and have no contact with the outside world or other prisoners.

Aside from making your relationships and health better, interpersonal communication skills are highly sought after by potential employers, consistently ranking in the top ten in national surveys. Each of these examples illustrates how interpersonal communication meets our basic needs as humans for security in our social bonds, health, and careers. But we are not born with all the interpersonal communication skills we’ll need in life. So in order to make the most out of our interpersonal relationships, we must learn some basic principles.

Think about a time when a short communication exchange affected a relationship almost immediately. Did you mean for it to happen? Many times we engage in interpersonal communication to fulfill certain goals we may have, but sometimes we are more successful than others. This is because interpersonal communication is strategic, meaning we intentionally create messages to achieve certain goals that help us function in society and our relationships. Goals vary based on the situation and the communicators, but ask yourself if you are generally successful at achieving the goals with which you enter a conversation or not. If so, you may already possess a high degree of interpersonal communication competence, or the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in personal relationships. This chapter will help you understand some key processes that can make us more effective and appropriate communicators. You may be asking, “Aren’t effectiveness and appropriateness the same thing?” The answer is no. Imagine that you are the manager of a small department of employees at a marketing agency where you often have to work on deadlines. As a deadline approaches, you worry about your team’s ability to work without your supervision to complete the tasks, so you interrupt everyone’s work and assign them all individual tasks and give them a bulleted list of each subtask with a deadline to turn each part in to you. You meet the deadline and have effectively accomplished your goal. Over the next month, one of your employees puts in her two-weeks’ notice, and you learn that she and a few others have been talking about how they struggle to work with you as a manager. Although your strategy was effective, many people do not respond well to strict hierarchy or micromanaging and may have deemed your communication inappropriate. A more competent communicator could have implemented the same detailed plan to accomplish the task in a manner that included feedback, making the employees feel more included and heard. In order to be competent interpersonal communicators, we must learn to balance being effective and appropriate.

## **Functional Aspects of Interpersonal Communication**

We have different needs that are met through our various relationships. Whether we are aware of it or not, we often ask ourselves, “What can this relationship do for me?” In order to understand how relationships achieve strategic functions, we will look at instrumental goals, relationship-maintenance goals, and self-presentation goals.

What motivates you to communicate with someone? We frequently engage in communication designed to achieve instrumental goals such as gaining compliance (getting someone to do

something for us), getting information we need, or asking for support. In short, instrumental talk helps us “get things done” in our relationships. Our instrumental goals can be long term or day to day. The following are examples of communicating for instrumental goals:

- You ask your friend to help you move this weekend (gaining/resisting compliance).
- You ask your coworker to remind you how to balance your cash register till at the end of your shift (requesting or presenting information).
- You console your roommate after he loses his job (asking for or giving support).

When we communicate to achieve relational goals, we are striving to maintain a positive relationship. Engaging in relationship-maintenance communication is like taking your car to be serviced at the repair shop. To have a good relationship, just as to have a long-lasting car, we should engage in routine maintenance. For example, have you ever wanted to stay in and order a pizza and watch a movie, but your friend suggests that you go to a local restaurant and then to the theatre? Maybe you don’t feel like being around a lot of people or spending money (or changing out of your pajamas), but you decide to go along with his or her suggestion. In that moment, you are putting your relational partner’s needs above your own, which will likely make him or her feel valued. It is likely that your friend has made or will also make similar concessions to put your needs first, which indicates that there is a satisfactory and complimentary relationship. Obviously, if one partner always insists on having his or her way or always concedes, becoming the martyr, the individuals are not exhibiting interpersonal-communication competence. Other routine relational tasks include celebrating special occasions or honoring accomplishments, spending time together, and checking in regularly by phone, e-mail, text, social media, or face-to-face communication. The following are examples of communicating for relational goals:

- You organize an office party for a coworker who has just become a US citizen (celebrating/honoring accomplishments).
- You make breakfast with your mom while you are home visiting (spending time together).
- You post a message on your long-distance friend’s Facebook wall saying you miss him (checking in).

Another form of relational talk that I have found very useful is what I call the DTR talk, which stands for “defining-the-relationship talk” and serves a relationship-maintenance function. In the early stages of a romantic relationship, you may have a DTR talk to reduce uncertainty about where you stand by deciding to use the term boyfriend, girlfriend, or partner. In a DTR talk, you may proactively define your relationship by saying, “I’m glad I’m with you and no one else.” Your romantic interest may respond favorably, echoing or rephrasing your statement, which gives you an indication that he or she agrees with you. The talk may continue on from there, and you may talk about what to call your relationship, set boundaries, or not. It is not unusual to have several DTR talks as a relationship progresses. At times, you may have to define the relationship when someone steps over a line by saying, “I think we should just be friends.” This more explicit and reactive (rather than proactive) communication can be especially useful in situations where a relationship may be unethical, inappropriate, or create a conflict of interest—for example, in a supervisor-supervisee, mentor-mentee, professional-client, or collegial relationship.

We also pursue self-presentation goals by adapting our communication in order to be perceived in particular ways. Just as many companies, celebrities, and politicians create a public image, we desire to present different faces in different contexts. The well-known scholar [Erving Goffman](#) compared self-presentation to a performance and suggested we all perform different roles in different contexts. Indeed, competent communicators can successfully manage how others perceive them by adapting to situations and contexts. A parent may perform the role of stern head of household, supportive shoulder to cry on, or hip and culturally aware friend to his or her child. A newly hired employee may initially perform the role of serious and agreeable coworker. Sometimes people engage in communication that doesn't necessarily present them in a positive way. For example, Haley, the oldest daughter in the television show *Modern Family*, often presents herself as incapable in order to get her parents to do her work. In one episode she pretended she didn't know how to crack open an egg so her mom Claire would make the brownies for her school bake sale. Here are some other examples of communicating to meet self-presentation goals:

- As your boss complains about struggling to format the company newsletter, you tell her about your experience with Microsoft Word and editing and offer to look over the newsletter once she's done to fix the formatting (presenting yourself as competent).
- You and your new college roommate stand in your dorm room full of boxes. You let him choose which side of the room he wants and then invite him to eat lunch with you (presenting yourself as friendly).
- You say, "I don't know," in response to a professor's question even though you have an idea of the answer (presenting yourself as aloof, or "too cool for school").

Examples – "Getting Real"

### **Image Consultants**

The [Association of Image Consultants International](#) (AICI) states that appearance, behavior, and communication are the "ABC's of image." Many professional image consultants are licensed by this organization and provide a variety of services to politicians, actors, corporate trainers, public speakers, organizations, corporations, and television personalities such as news anchors. Visit the website and read about image consulting, including the "How to Choose," "How to Become," and "FAQs" sections. Then consider the following questions:

1. If you were to hire an image consultant for yourself, what would you have them "work on" for you? Why?
2. What communication skills that you've learned about in the book so far would be most important for an image consultant to possess?
3. Many politicians use image consultants to help them connect to voters and win elections. Do you think this is ethical? Why or why not?

As if managing instrumental, relational, and self-presentation goals isn't difficult enough when we consider them individually, we must also realize that the three goal types are always working together. In some situations we may privilege instrumental goals over relational or self-presentation goals. For example, if your partner is offered a great job in another state and you

decided to go with him or her, which will move you away from your job and social circle, you would be focusing on relational goals over instrumental or self-presentation goals. When you're facing a stressful situation and need your best friend's help and call saying, "Hurry and bring me a gallon of gas or I'm going to be late to work!" you are privileging instrumental goals over relational goals. Of course, if the person really is your best friend, you can try to smooth things over or make up for your shortness later. However, you probably wouldn't call your boss and bark a request to bring you a gallon of gas so you can get to work, because you likely want your boss to see you as dependable and likable, meaning you have focused on self-presentation goals.

The functional perspective of interpersonal communication indicates that we communicate to achieve certain goals in our relationships. We get things done in our relationships by communicating for instrumental goals. We maintain positive relationships through relational goals. We also strategically present ourselves in order to be perceived in particular ways. As our goals are met and our relationships build, they become little worlds we inhabit with our relational partners, complete with their own relationship cultures.

## **Cultural Aspects of Interpersonal Communication**

Aside from functional aspects of interpersonal communication, communicating in relationships also helps establish relationship cultures. Just as large groups of people create cultures through shared symbols (language), values, and rituals, people in relationships also create cultures at a smaller level. Relationship cultures are the climates established through interpersonal communication that are unique to the relational partners but based on larger cultural and social norms. We also enter into new relationships with expectations based on the schemata we have developed in previous relationships and learned from our larger society and culture. Think of relationship schemata as blueprints or plans that show the inner workings of a relationship. Just like a schematic or diagram for assembling a new computer desk helps you put it together, relationship schemata guide us in how we believe our interpersonal relationships should work and how to create them. So from our life experiences in our larger cultures, we bring building blocks, or expectations, into our relationships, which fundamentally connect our relationships to the outside world. Even though we experience our relationships as unique, they are at least partially built on preexisting cultural norms.

Some additional communicative acts that create our relational cultures include relational storytelling, personal idioms, routines and rituals, and rules and norms. Storytelling is an important part of how we create culture in larger contexts and how we create a uniting and meaningful storyline for our relationships. In fact, an anthropologist coined the term *homo narrans* to describe the unique storytelling capability of modern humans. We often rely on relationship storytelling to create a sense of stability in the face of change, test the compatibility of potential new relational partners, or create or maintain solidarity in established relationships. Think of how you use storytelling among your friends, family, coworkers, and other relational partners. If you recently moved to a new place for college, you probably experienced some big changes. One of the first things you started to do was reestablish a social network—remember, human beings are fundamentally social creatures. As you began to encounter new people in your classes, at your new job, or in your new housing, you most likely told some stories of your life before—about your friends, job, or teachers back home. One of the functions of this type of

storytelling, early in forming interpersonal bonds, is a test to see if the people you are meeting have similar stories or can relate to your previous relationship cultures. In short, you are testing the compatibility of your schemata with the new people you encounter. Although storytelling will continue to play a part in your relational development with these new people, you may be surprised at how quickly you start telling stories with your new friends about things that have happened since you met. You may recount stories about your first trip to the dance club together, the weird geology professor you had together, or the time you all got sick from eating the cafeteria food. In short, your old stories will start to give way to new stories that you've created. Storytelling within relationships helps create solidarity, or a sense of belonging and closeness. This type of storytelling can be especially meaningful for relationships that don't fall into the dominant culture. For example, research on a gay male friendship circle found that the gay men retold certain dramatic stories frequently to create a sense of belonging and to also bring in new members to the group.

We also create personal idioms in our relationships. If you've ever studied foreign languages, you know that idiomatic expressions like "I'm under the weather today" are basically nonsense when translated. For example, the equivalent of this expression in French translates to "I'm not in my plate today." When you think about it, it doesn't make sense to use either expression to communicate that you're sick, but the meaning would not be lost on English or French speakers, because they can decode their respective idiom. This is also true of idioms we create in our interpersonal relationships. Just as idioms are unique to individual cultures and languages, personal idioms are unique to certain relationships, and they create a sense of belonging due to the inside meaning shared by the relational partners. In romantic relationships, for example, it is common for individuals to create nicknames for each other that may not directly translate for someone who overhears them. You and your partner may find that calling each other "booger" is sweet, while others may think it's gross. Researchers have found that personal idioms are commonly used in the following categories: activities, labels for others, requests, and sexual references. The recent cultural phenomenon *Jersey Shore* on MTV has given us plenty of examples of personal idioms created by the friends on the show. GTL is an activity idiom that stands for "gym, tan, laundry"—a common routine for the cast of the show. There are many examples of idioms labeling others, including grenade for an unattractive female, gorilla juice head for a very muscular man, and backpack for a clingy boyfriend/girlfriend or a clingy person at a club. There are also many idioms for sexual references, such as smush, meaning to hook up / have sex, and smush room, which is the room set aside for these activities. Idioms help create cohesiveness, or solidarity in relationships, because they are shared cues between cultural insiders. They also communicate the uniqueness of the relationship and create boundaries, since meaning is only shared within the relationship.

Routines and rituals help form relational cultures through their natural development in repeated or habitual interaction. While "routine" may connote boring in some situations, relationship routines are communicative acts that create a sense of predictability in a relationship that is comforting. Some communicative routines may develop around occasions or conversational topics.

For example, it is common for long-distance friends or relatives to schedule a recurring phone conversation or for couples to review the day's events over dinner. When I studied abroad in

Sweden, my parents and I talked on the phone at the same time every Sunday, which established a comfortable routine for us. Other routines develop around entire conversational episodes. For example, two best friends recounting their favorite spring-break story may seamlessly switch from one speaker to the other, finish each other's sentences, speak in unison, or gesture simultaneously because they have told the story so many times. Relationship rituals take on more symbolic meaning than do relationship routines and may be variations on widely recognized events—such as birthdays, anniversaries, Passover, Christmas, or Thanksgiving—or highly individualized and original. Relational partners may personalize their traditions by eating mussels and playing Yahtzee on Christmas Eve or going hiking on their anniversary. Other rituals may be more unique to the relationship, such as celebrating a dog's birthday or going to opening day at the amusement park. The following highly idiosyncratic ritual was reported by a participant in a research study:

I would check my husband's belly button for fuzz on a daily basis at bedtime. It originated when I noticed some blanket fuzz in his belly button one day and thought it was funny... We both found it funny and teased often about the fuzz. If there wasn't any fuzz for a few days my husband would put some in his belly button for me to find. It's been happening for about 10 years now.

Whether the routines and rituals involve phone calls, eating certain foods, or digging for belly button fuzz, they all serve important roles in building relational cultures. However, as with storytelling, rituals and routines can be negative. For example, verbal and nonverbal patterns to berate or belittle your relational partner will not have healthy effects on a relational culture. Additionally, visiting your in-laws during the holidays loses its symbolic value when you dislike them and comply with the ritual because you feel like you have to. In this case, the ritual doesn't enrich the relational culture, but it may reinforce norms or rules that have been created in the relationship.

Relationship rules and norms help with the daily function of the relationship. They help create structure and provide boundaries for interacting in the relationship and for interacting with larger social networks. Relationship rules are explicitly communicated guidelines for what should and should not be done in certain contexts. A couple could create a rule to always confer with each other before letting their child spend the night somewhere else. If a mother lets her son sleep over at a friend's house without consulting her partner, a more serious conflict could result. Relationship norms are similar to routines and rituals in that they develop naturally in a relationship and generally conform to or are adapted from what is expected and acceptable in the larger culture or society. For example, it may be a norm that you and your coworkers do not "talk shop" at your Friday happy-hour gathering. So when someone brings up work at the gathering, his coworkers may remind him that there's no shop talk, and the consequences may not be that serious. In regards to topic of conversation, norms often guide expectations of what subjects are appropriate within various relationships. Do you talk to your boss about your personal finances? Do you talk to your father about your sexual activity? Do you tell your classmates about your medical history? In general, there are no rules that say you can't discuss any of these topics with anyone you choose, but relational norms usually lead people to answer "no" to the questions above. Violating relationship norms and rules can negatively affect a relationship, but in general, rule violations can lead to more direct conflict, while norm violations can lead to awkward social

interactions. Developing your interpersonal communication competence will help you assess your communication in relation to the many rules and norms you will encounter.

### Key Takeaways

- Getting integrated: Interpersonal communication occurs between two or more people whose lives are interdependent and mutually influence one another. These relationships occur in academic, professional, personal, and civic contexts, and improving our interpersonal communication competence can also improve our physical and psychological health, enhance our relationships, and make us more successful in our careers.
- There are functional aspects of interpersonal communication.
  - We “get things done” in our relationships by communicating for instrumental goals such as getting someone to do something for us, requesting or presenting information, and asking for or giving support.
  - We maintain our relationships by communicating for relational goals such as putting your relational partner’s needs before your own, celebrating accomplishments, spending time together, and checking in.
  - We strategically project ourselves to be perceived in particular ways by communicating for self-presentation goals such as appearing competent or friendly.
- There are cultural aspects of interpersonal communication.
  - We create relationship cultures based on the relationship schemata we develop through our interactions with our larger society and culture.
  - We engage in relationship storytelling to create a sense of stability in the face of change, to test our compatibility with potential relational partners, and to create a sense of solidarity and belonging in established relationships.
  - We create personal idioms such as nicknames that are unique to our particular relationship and are unfamiliar to outsiders to create cohesiveness and solidarity.
  - We establish relationship routines and rituals to help establish our relational culture and bring a sense of comfort and predictability to our relationships.

### Exercises

1. Getting integrated: In what ways might interpersonal communication competence vary among academic, professional, and civic contexts? What competence skills might be more or less important in one context than in another?
2. Recount a time when you had a DTR talk. At what stage in the relationship was the talk? What motivated you or the other person to initiate the talk? What was the result of the talk?
3. Pick an important relationship and describe its relationship culture. When the relationship started, what relationship schemata guided your expectations? Describe a relationship

story that you tell with this person or about this person. What personal idioms do you use? What routines and rituals do you observe? What norms and rules do you follow?

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## 6.4 Self-Disclosure & Interpersonal Communication

### Learning Objectives

- Define self-disclosure.
- Explain the connection between social penetration theory, social comparison theory, and self-disclosure.
- Discuss the process of self-disclosure, including how we make decisions about what, where, when, and how to disclose.
- Explain how self-disclosure affects relationships.

Have you ever said too much on a first date? At a job interview? To a professor? Have you ever posted something on Facebook only to return later to remove it? When self-disclosure works out well, it can have positive effects for interpersonal relationships. Conversely, self-disclosure that does not work out well can lead to embarrassment, lower self-esteem, and relationship deterioration or even termination. As with all other types of communication, increasing your competence regarding self-disclosure can have many positive effects.

So what is self-disclosure? It could be argued that any verbal or nonverbal communication reveals something about the self. The clothes we wear, a laugh, or an order at the drive-through may offer glimpses into our personality or past, but they are not necessarily self-disclosure. Self-disclosure is purposeful disclosure of personal information to another person. If I purposefully wear the baseball cap of my favorite team to reveal my team loyalty to a new friend, then this clothing choice constitutes self-disclosure. Self-disclosure doesn’t always have to be deep to be

useful or meaningful. Superficial self-disclosure, often in the form of “small talk,” is key in initiating relationships that then move onto more personal levels of self-disclosure. Telling a classmate your major or your hometown during the first week of school carries relatively little risk but can build into a friendship that lasts beyond the class.

## Theories of Self-Disclosure

Social penetration theory states that as we get to know someone, we engage in a reciprocal process of self-disclosure that changes in breadth and depth and affects how a relationship develops. Depth refers to how personal or sensitive the information is, and breadth refers to the range of topics discussed. You may recall Shrek’s declaration that ogres are like onions in the movie *Shrek*. While certain circumstances can lead to a rapid increase in the depth and/or breadth of self-disclosure, the theory states that in most relationships people gradually penetrate through the layers of each other’s personality like we peel the layers from an onion.

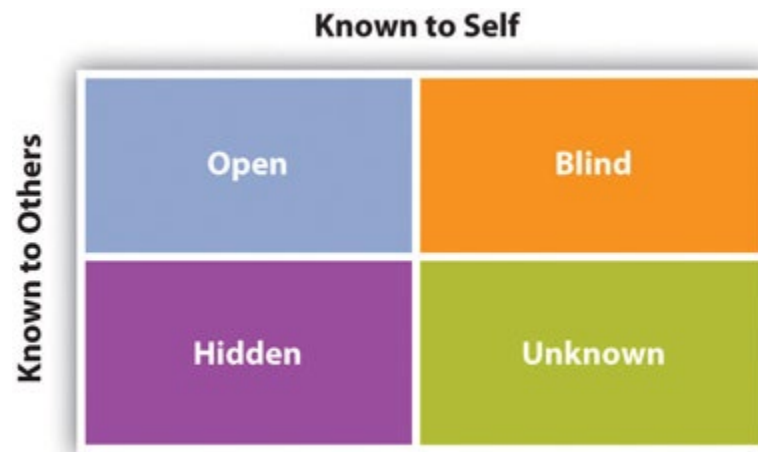
The theory also argues that people in a relationship balance needs that are sometimes in tension, which is a dialectic. Balancing a dialectic is like walking a tightrope. You have to lean to one side and eventually lean to another side to keep yourself balanced and prevent falling. The constant back and forth allows you to stay balanced, even though you may not always be even, or standing straight up. One of the key dialectics that must be negotiated is the tension between openness and closedness. We want to make ourselves open to others, through self-disclosure, but we also want to maintain a sense of privacy.

We may also engage in self-disclosure for the purposes of social comparison. Social comparison theory states that we evaluate ourselves based on how we compare with others. We may disclose information about our intellectual aptitude or athletic abilities to see how we relate to others. This type of comparison helps us decide whether we are superior or inferior to others in a particular area. Disclosures about abilities or talents can also lead to self-validation if the person to whom we disclose reacts positively. By disclosing information about our beliefs and values, we can determine if they are the same as or different from others. Last, we may disclose fantasies or thoughts to another to determine whether they are acceptable or unacceptable. We can engage in social comparison as the discloser or the receiver of disclosures, which may allow us to determine whether or not we are interested in pursuing a relationship with another person.

The final theory of self-disclosure that we will discuss is the Johari window, which is named after its creators Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham. The Johari window can be applied to a variety of interpersonal interactions in order to help us understand what parts of ourselves are open, hidden, blind, and unknown. To help understand the concept, think of a window with four panes. As you can see in Figure 6.2 “Johari Window”, one axis of the window represents things that are known to us, and the other axis represents things that are known to others. The upper left pane contains open information that is known to us and to others. The amount of information that is openly known to others varies based on relational context. When you are with close friends, there is probably a lot of information already in the open pane, and when you are with close family, there is also probably a lot of information in the open pane. The information could differ, though, as your family might know much more about your past and your friends more about your present. Conversely, there isn’t much information in the open pane when we meet someone for

the first time, aside from what the other person can guess based on our nonverbal communication and appearance.

**Figure 6.2 Johari Window**



Source: Joseph Luft, *Of Human Interaction* (Palo Alto, CA: National Press Books, 1969).

The bottom left pane contains hidden information that is known to us but not to others. As we are getting to know someone, we engage in self-disclosure and move information from the “hidden” to the “open” pane. By doing this, we decrease the size of our hidden area and increase the size of our open area, which increases our shared reality. The reactions that we get from people as we open up to them help us form our self-concepts and also help determine the trajectory of the relationship. If the person reacts favorably to our disclosures and reciprocates disclosure, then the cycle of disclosure continues and a deeper relationship may be forged.

The upper right pane contains information that is known to others but not to us. For example, we may be unaware of the fact that others see us as pushy or as a leader. Looking back to self-discrepancy theory from Chapter 2 “[Communication and Perception](#)“, we can see that people who have a disconnect between how they see themselves and how others see them may have more information in their blind pane. Engaging in perception checking and soliciting feedback from others can help us learn more about our blind area.

The bottom right pane represents our unknown area, as it contains information not known to ourselves or others. To become more self-aware, we must solicit feedback from others to learn more about our blind pane, but we must also explore the unknown pane. To discover the unknown, we have to get out of our comfort zones and try new things. We have to pay attention to the things that excite or scare us and investigate them more to see if we can learn something new about ourselves. By being more aware of what is contained in each of these panes and how we can learn more about each one, we can more competently engage in self-disclosure and use this process to enhance our interpersonal relationships.

Examples – “Getting Plugged In”

## Self-Disclosure and Social Media

Facebook and Twitter are undoubtedly dominating the world of online social networking, and the willingness of many users to self-disclose personal information ranging from moods to religious affiliation, relationship status, and personal contact information has led to an increase in privacy concerns. Facebook and Twitter offer convenient opportunities to stay in touch with friends, family, and coworkers, but are people using them responsibly? Some argue that there are fundamental differences between today's digital natives, whose private and public selves are intertwined through these technologies, and older generations. Even though some colleges are offering seminars on managing privacy online, we still hear stories of self-disclosure gone wrong, such as the football player from the University of Texas who was kicked off the team for posting racist comments about the president or the student who was kicked out of his private, Christian college after a picture of him dressed in drag surfaced on Facebook. However, social media experts say these cases are rare and that most students are aware of who can see what they're posting and the potential consequences. The issue of privacy management on Facebook is affecting parent-child relationships, too, and as the website [“Oh Crap. My Parents Joined Facebook.”](#) shows, the results can sometimes be embarrassing for the college student and the parent as they balance the dialectic between openness and closedness once the child has moved away.

1. How do you manage your privacy and self-disclosures online?
2. Do you think it's ethical for school officials or potential employers to make admission or hiring decisions based on what they can learn about you online? Why or why not?
3. Are you or would you be friends with a parent on Facebook? Why or why not? If you already are friends with a parent, did you change your posting habits or privacy settings once they joined? Why or why not?

## The Process of Self-Disclosure

There are many decisions that go into the process of self-disclosure. We have many types of information we can disclose, but we have to determine whether or not we will proceed with disclosure by considering the situation and the potential risks. Then we must decide when, where, and how to disclose. Since all these decisions will affect our relationships, we will examine each one in turn.

Four main categories for disclosure include observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs. Observations include what we have done and experienced. For example, I could tell you that I live in a farmhouse in Illinois. If I told you that I think my move from the city to the country was a good decision, I would be sharing my thoughts, because I included a judgment about my experiences. Sharing feelings includes expressing an emotion—for example, “I'm happy to wake up every morning and look out at the corn fields. I feel lucky.” Last, we may communicate needs or wants by saying something like “My best friend is looking for a job, and I really want him to move here, too.” We usually begin disclosure with observations and thoughts and then move onto feelings and needs as the relationship progresses. There are some exceptions to this. For example, we are more likely to disclose deeply in crisis situations, and we may also disclose more than usual with a stranger if we do not think we'll meet the person again or do not share

social networks. Although we don't often find ourselves in crisis situations, you may recall scenes from movies or television shows where people who are trapped in an elevator or stranded after a plane crash reveal their deepest feelings and desires. I imagine that we have all been in a situation where we said more about ourselves to a stranger than we normally would. To better understand why, let's discuss some of the factors that influence our decision to disclose.

Generally speaking, some people are naturally more transparent and willing to self-disclose, while others are more opaque and hesitant to reveal personal information. Interestingly, recent research suggests that the pervasiveness of reality television, much of which includes participants who are very willing to disclose personal information, has led to a general trend among reality television viewers to engage in self-disclosure through other mediated means such as blogging and video sharing. Whether it is online or face-to-face, there are other reasons for disclosing or not, including self-focused, other-focused, interpersonal, and situational reasons.

Self-focused reasons for disclosure include having a sense of relief or catharsis, clarifying or correcting information, or seeking support. Self-focused reasons for not disclosing include fear of rejection and loss of privacy. In other words, we may disclose to get something off our chest in hopes of finding relief, or we may not disclose out of fear that the other person may react negatively to our revelation. Other-focused reasons for disclosure include a sense of responsibility to inform or educate. Other-focused reasons for not disclosing include feeling like the other person will not protect the information. If someone mentions that their car wouldn't start this morning and you disclose that you are good at working on cars, you've disclosed to help out the other person. On the other side, you may hold back disclosure about your new relationship from your coworker because he or she's known to be loose-lipped with other people's information. Interpersonal reasons for disclosure involve desires to maintain a trusting and intimate relationship. Interpersonal reasons for not disclosing include fear of losing the relationship or deeming the information irrelevant to the particular relationship. Your decision to disclose an affair in order to be open with your partner and hopefully work through the aftermath together or withhold that information out of fear he or she will leave you is based on interpersonal reasons. Finally, situational reasons may be the other person being available, directly asking a question, or being directly involved in or affected by the information being disclosed. Situational reasons for not disclosing include the person being unavailable, a lack of time to fully discuss the information, or the lack of a suitable (i.e., quiet, private) place to talk. For example, finding yourself in a quiet environment where neither person is busy could lead to disclosure, while a house full of company may not.

Deciding when to disclose something in a conversation may not seem as important as deciding whether or not to disclose at all. But deciding to disclose and then doing it at an awkward time in a conversation could lead to negative results. As far as timing goes, you should consider whether to disclose the information early, in the middle, or late in a conversation. If you get something off your chest early in a conversation, you may ensure that there's plenty of time to discuss the issue and that you don't end up losing your nerve. If you wait until the middle of the conversation, you have some time to feel out the other person's mood and set up the tone for your disclosure. For example, if you meet up with your roommate to tell her that you're planning on moving out and she starts by saying, "I've had the most terrible day!" the tone of the conversation has now shifted, and you may not end up making your disclosure. If you start by

asking her how she's doing, and things seem to be going well, you may be more likely to follow through with the disclosure. You may choose to disclose late in a conversation if you're worried about the person's reaction. If you know they have an appointment or you have to go to class at a certain time, disclosing just before that time could limit your immediate exposure to any negative reaction. However, if the person doesn't have a negative reaction, they could still become upset because they don't have time to discuss the disclosure with you.

Sometimes self-disclosure is unplanned. Someone may ask you a direct question or disclose personal information, which leads you to reciprocate disclosure. In these instances you may not manage your privacy well because you haven't had time to think through any potential risks. In the case of a direct question, you may feel comfortable answering, you may give an indirect or general answer, or you may feel enough pressure or uncertainty to give a dishonest answer. If someone unexpectedly discloses, you may feel the need to reciprocate by also disclosing something personal. If you're uncomfortable doing this, you can still provide support for the other person by listening and giving advice or feedback.

Once you've decided when and where to disclose information to another person, you need to figure out the best channel to use. Face-to-face disclosures may feel more genuine or intimate given the shared physical presence and ability to receive verbal and nonverbal communication. There is also an opportunity for immediate verbal and nonverbal feedback, such as asking follow-up questions or demonstrating support or encouragement through a hug. The immediacy of a face-to-face encounter also means you have to deal with the uncertainty of the reaction you'll get. If the person reacts negatively, you may feel uncomfortable, pressured to stay, or even fearful. If you choose a mediated channel such as an e-mail or a letter, text, note, or phone call, you may seem less genuine or personal, but you have more control over the situation in that you can take time to carefully choose your words, and you do not have to immediately face the reaction of the other person. This can be beneficial if you fear a negative or potentially violent reaction. Another disadvantage of choosing a mediated channel, however, is the loss of nonverbal communication that can add much context to a conversation. Although our discussion of the choices involved in self-disclosure so far have focused primarily on the discloser, self-disclosure is an interpersonal process that has much to do with the receiver of the disclosure.

## **Effects of Disclosure on the Relationship**

The process of self-disclosure is circular. An individual self-discloses, the recipient of the disclosure reacts, and the original discloser processes the reaction. How the receiver interprets and responds to the disclosure are key elements of the process. Part of the response results from the receiver's attribution of the cause of the disclosure, which may include dispositional, situational, and interpersonal attributions. Let's say your coworker discloses that she thinks the new boss got his promotion because of favoritism instead of merit. You may make a dispositional attribution that connects the cause of her disclosure to her personality by thinking, for example, that she is outgoing, inappropriate for the workplace, or fishing for information. If the personality trait to which you attribute the disclosure is positive, then your reaction to the disclosure is more likely to be positive. Situational attributions identify the cause of a disclosure with the context or surroundings in which it takes place. For example, you may attribute your coworker's disclosure to the fact that you agreed to go to lunch with her. Interpersonal

attributions identify the relationship between sender and receiver as the cause of the disclosure. So if you attribute your coworker's comments to the fact that you are best friends at work, you think your unique relationship caused the disclosure. If the receiver's primary attribution is interpersonal, relational intimacy and closeness will likely be reinforced more than if the attribution is dispositional or situational, because the receiver feels like they were specially chosen to receive the information.

The receiver's role doesn't end with attribution and response. There may be added burdens if the information shared with you is a secret. As was noted earlier, there are clear risks involved in self-disclosure of intimate or potentially stigmatizing information if the receiver of the disclosure fails to keep that information secure. As the receiver of a secret, you may feel the need to unburden yourself from the co-ownership of the information by sharing it with someone else. This is not always a bad thing. You may strategically tell someone who is removed from the social network of the person who told you the secret to keep the information secure. Although unburdening yourself can be a relief, sometimes people tell secrets they were entrusted to keep for less productive reasons. A research study of office workers found that 77 percent of workers that received a disclosure and were told not to tell anyone else told at least two other people by the end of the day! They reported doing so to receive attention for having inside information or to demonstrate their power or connection. Needless to say, spreading someone's private disclosure without permission for personal gain does not demonstrate communication competence.

When the cycle of disclosure ends up going well for the discloser, there is likely to be a greater sense of relational intimacy and self-worth, and there are also positive psychological effects such as reduced stress and increased feelings of social support. Self-disclosure can also have effects on physical health. Spouses of suicide or accidental death victims who did not disclose information to their friends were more likely to have more health problems such as weight change and headaches and suffer from more intrusive thoughts about the death than those who did talk with friends.

### Key Takeaways

- Through the process of self-disclosure, we disclose personal information and learn about others.
- The social penetration theory argues that self-disclosure increases in breadth and depth as a relationship progresses, like peeling back the layers of an onion.
- We engage in social comparison through self-disclosure, which may determine whether or not we pursue a relationship.
- Getting integrated: The process of self-disclosure involves many decisions, including what, when, where, and how to disclose. All these decisions may vary by context, as we follow different patterns of self-disclosure in academic, professional, personal, and civic contexts.
- The receiver's reaction to and interpretation of self-disclosure are important factors in how the disclosure will affect the relationship.

## Exercises

1. Answer the questions from the beginning of the section: Have you ever said too much on a first date? At a job interview? To a professor? Have you ever posted something on Facebook only to return later to remove it? If you answered yes to any of the questions, what have you learned in this chapter that may have led you to do something differently?
2. Have you experienced negative results due to self-disclosure (as sender or receiver)? If so, what could have been altered in the decisions of what, where, when, or how to disclose that may have improved the situation?
3. Under what circumstances is it OK to share information that someone has disclosed to you? Under what circumstances is it not OK to share the information?

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# Chapter 7: Communications in Relationships

More than 2,300 years ago, Aristotle wrote about the importance of friendships to society, and other Greek philosophers wrote about emotions and their effects on relationships. Although research on relationships has increased dramatically over the past few decades, the fact that these revered ancient philosophers included them in their writings illustrates the important place interpersonal relationships have in human life. But how do we come to form relationships with friends, family, romantic partners, and coworkers? Why are some of these relationships more exciting, stressful, enduring, or short-lived than others? Are we guided by fate, astrology, luck, personality, or other forces to the people we like and love? We'll begin to answer those questions in this chapter.

Daniel Perlman and Steve Duck, "The Seven Seas of the Study of Personal Relationships: From 'The Thousand Islands' to Interconnected Waterways," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships*, eds. Anita L. Vangelisti and Daniel Perlman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 13.

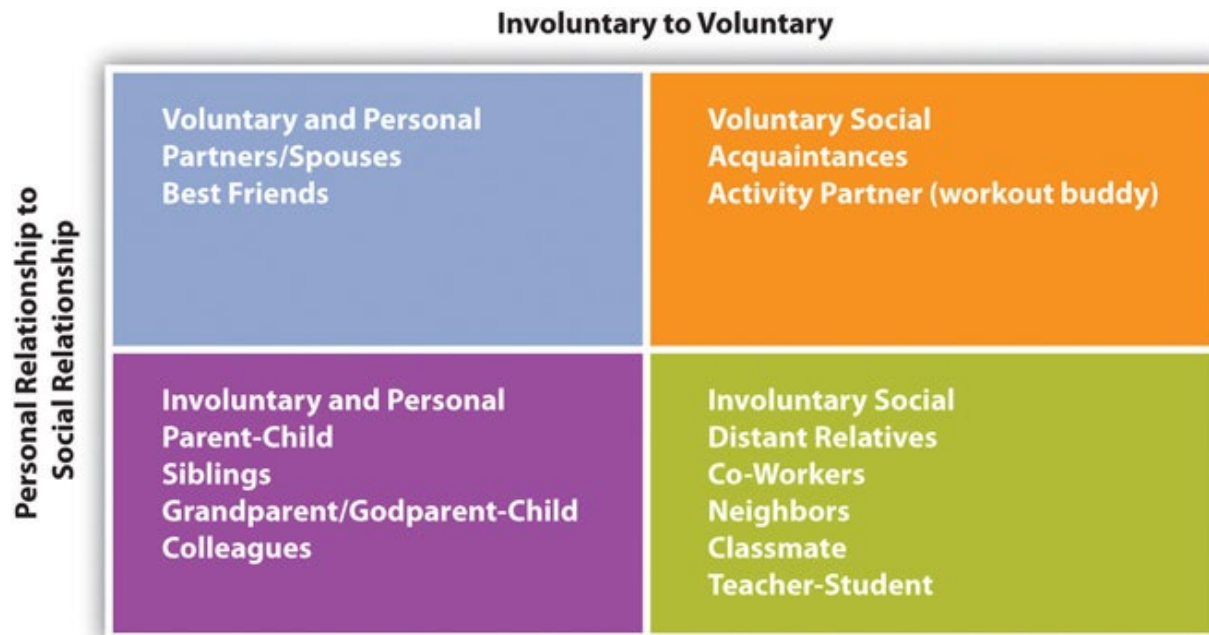
## 7.1 Foundations of Relationships

### Learning Objectives

- Distinguish between personal and social relationships.
- Describe stages of relational interaction.
- Discuss social exchange theory.

We can begin to classify key relationships we have by distinguishing between our personal and our social relationships. Personal relationships meet emotional, relational, and instrumental needs, as they are intimate, close, and interdependent relationships such as those we have with best friends, partners, or immediate family. Social relationships are relationships that occasionally meet our needs and lack the closeness and interdependence of personal relationships. Examples of social relationships include coworkers, distant relatives, and acquaintances. Another distinction useful for categorizing relationships is whether or not they are voluntary. For example, some personal relationships are voluntary, like those with romantic partners, and some are involuntary, like those with close siblings. Likewise, some social relationships are voluntary, like those with acquaintances, and some are involuntary, like those with neighbors or distant relatives. You can see how various relationships fall into each of these dimensions in Figure 7.1 "Types of Relationships". Now that we have a better understanding of how we define relationships, we'll examine the stages that most of our relationships go through as they move from formation to termination.

**Figure 7.1** Types of Relationships



Source: Adapted from C. Arthur VanLear, Ascan Koerner, and Donna M. Allen, "Relationship Typologies," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships*, eds. Anita L. Vangelisti and Daniel Perlman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 95.

## Stages of Relational Interaction

Communication is at the heart of forming our interpersonal relationships. We reach the achievement of relating through the everyday conversations and otherwise trivial interactions that form the fabric of our relationships. It is through our communication that we adapt to the dynamic nature of our relational worlds, given that relational partners do not enter each encounter or relationship with compatible expectations. Communication allows us to test and be tested by our potential and current relational partners. It is also through communication that we respond when someone violates or fails to meet those expectations.

There are ten established stages of interaction that can help us understand how relationships come together and come apart. We will discuss each stage in more detail, but in Table 7.1 "Relationship Stages" you will find a list of the communication stages. We should keep the following things in mind about this model of relationship development: relational partners do not always go through the stages sequentially, some relationships do not experience all the stages, we do not always consciously move between stages, and coming together and coming apart are not inherently good or bad. As we have already discussed, relationships are always changing—they are dynamic. Although this model has been applied most often to romantic relationships, most relationships follow a similar pattern that may be adapted to a particular context.

Table 7.1 Relationship Stages

| Process         | Stage           | Representative Communication                                                                                      |
|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Coming Together | Initiating      | "My name's Rich. It's nice to meet you."                                                                          |
|                 | Experimenting   | "I like to cook and refinish furniture in my spare time. What about you?"                                         |
|                 | Intensifying    | "I feel like we've gotten a lot closer over the past couple months."                                              |
|                 | Integrating     | (To friend) "We just opened a joint bank account."                                                                |
|                 | Bonding         | "I can't wait to tell my parents that we decided to get married!"                                                 |
|                 | Differentiating | "I'd really like to be able to hang out with my friends sometimes."                                               |
| Coming Apart    | Circumscribing  | "Don't worry about problems I'm having at work. I can deal with it."                                              |
|                 | Stagnating      | (To self) "I don't know why I even asked him to go out to dinner. He never wants to go out and have a good time." |
|                 | Avoiding        | "I have a lot going on right now, so I probably won't be home as much."                                           |
|                 | Terminating     | "It's important for us both to have some time apart. I know you'll be fine."                                      |

Source: Adapted from Mark L. Knapp and Anita L. Vangelisti, *Interpersonal Communication and Human Relationships* (Boston, MA: Pearson, 2009), 34.

## Initiating

In the initiating stage, people size each other up and try to present themselves favorably. Whether you run into someone in the hallway at school or in the produce section at the grocery store, you scan the person and consider any previous knowledge you have of them, expectations for the situation, and so on. Initiating is influenced by several factors.

If you encounter a stranger, you may say, "Hi, my name's Rich." If you encounter a person you already know, you've already gone through this before, so you may just say, "What's up?" Time constraints also affect initiation. A quick passing calls for a quick hello, while a scheduled meeting may entail a more formal start. If you already know the person, the length of time that's passed since your last encounter will affect your initiation. For example, if you see a friend from high school while home for winter break, you may set aside a long block of time to catch up; however, if you see someone at work that you just spoke to ten minutes earlier, you may skip initiating communication. The setting also affects how we initiate conversations, as we communicate differently at a crowded bar than we do on an airplane. Even with all this variation, people typically follow typical social scripts for interaction at this stage.

## Experimenting

The scholars who developed these relational stages have likened the experimenting stage, where people exchange information and often move from strangers to acquaintances, to the "sniffing

ritual” of animals. A basic exchange of information is typical as the experimenting stage begins. For example, on the first day of class, you may chat with the person sitting beside you and take turns sharing your year in school, hometown, residence hall, and major. Then you may branch out and see if there are any common interests that emerge. Finding out you’re both St. Louis Cardinals fans could then lead to more conversation about baseball and other hobbies or interests; however, sometimes the experiment may fail. If your attempts at information exchange with another person during the experimenting stage are met with silence or hesitation, you may interpret their lack of communication as a sign that you shouldn’t pursue future interaction.

Experimenting continues in established relationships. Small talk, a hallmark of the experimenting stage, is common among young adults catching up with their parents when they return home for a visit or committed couples when they recount their day while preparing dinner. Small talk can be annoying sometimes, especially if you feel like you have to do it out of politeness. I have found, for example, that strangers sometimes feel the need to talk to me at the gym (even when I have ear buds in). Although I’d rather skip the small talk and just work out, I follow social norms of cheerfulness and politeness and engage in small talk. Small talk serves important functions, such as creating a communicative entry point that can lead people to uncover topics of conversation that go beyond the surface level, helping us audition someone to see if we’d like to talk to them further, and generally creating a sense of ease and community with others. And even though small talk isn’t viewed as very substantive, the authors of this model of relationships indicate that most of our relationships do not progress far beyond this point.

## **Intensifying**

As we enter the intensifying stage, we indicate that we would like or are open to more intimacy, and then we wait for a signal of acceptance before we attempt more intimacy. This incremental intensification of intimacy can occur over a period of weeks, months, or years and may involve inviting a new friend to join you at a party, then to your place for dinner, then to go on vacation with you. It would be seen as odd, even if the experimenting stage went well, to invite a person who you’re still getting to know on vacation with you without engaging in some less intimate interaction beforehand. In order to save face and avoid making ourselves overly vulnerable, steady progression is key in this stage. Aside from sharing more intense personal time, requests for and granting favors may also play into intensification of a relationship. For example, one friend helping the other prepare for a big party on their birthday can increase closeness. However, if one person asks for too many favors or fails to reciprocate favors granted, then the relationship can become unbalanced, which could result in a transition to another stage, such as differentiating.

Other signs of the intensifying stage include creation of nicknames, inside jokes, and personal idioms; increased use of we and our; increased communication about each other’s identities (e.g., “My friends all think you are really laid back and easy to get along with”); and a loosening of typical restrictions on possessions and personal space (e.g., you have a key to your best friend’s apartment and can hang out there if your roommate is getting on your nerves). Navigating the changing boundaries between individuals in this stage can be tricky, which can lead to conflict or

uncertainty about the relationship's future as new expectations for relationships develop. Successfully managing this increasing closeness can lead to relational integration.

## **Integrating**

In the integrating stage, two people's identities and personalities merge, and a sense of interdependence develops. Even though this stage is most evident in romantic relationships, there are elements that appear in other relationship forms. Some verbal and nonverbal signals of the integrating stage are when the social networks of two people merge; those outside the relationship begin to refer to or treat the relational partners as if they were one person (e.g., always referring to them together—"Let's invite Olaf and Bettina"); or the relational partners present themselves as one unit (e.g., both signing and sending one holiday card or opening a joint bank account). Even as two people integrate, they likely maintain some sense of self by spending time with friends and family separately, which helps balance their needs for independence and connection.

## **Bonding**

The bonding stage includes a public ritual that announces formal commitment. These types of rituals include weddings, commitment ceremonies, and civil unions. Obviously, this stage is almost exclusively applicable to romantic couples. In some ways, the bonding ritual is arbitrary, in that it can occur at any stage in a relationship. In fact, bonding rituals are often later annulled or reversed because a relationship doesn't work out, perhaps because there wasn't sufficient time spent in the experimenting or integrating phases. However, bonding warrants its own stage because the symbolic act of bonding can have very real effects on how two people communicate about and perceive their relationship. For example, the formality of the bond may lead the couple and those in their social network to more diligently maintain the relationship if conflict or stress threatens it.

## **Differentiating**

Individual differences can present a challenge at any given stage in the relational interaction model; however, in the differentiating stage, communicating these differences becomes a primary focus. Differentiating is the reverse of integrating, as we and our reverts back to I and my. People may try to reboundary some of their life prior to the integrating of the current relationship, including other relationships or possessions. For example, Carrie may reclaim friends who became "shared" as she got closer to her roommate Julie and their social networks merged by saying, "I'm having my friends over to the apartment and would like to have privacy for the evening." Differentiating may onset in a relationship that bonded before the individuals knew each other in enough depth and breadth. Even in relationships where the bonding stage is less likely to be experienced, such as a friendship, unpleasant discoveries about the other person's past, personality, or values during the integrating or experimenting stage could lead a person to begin differentiating.

## Circumscribing

To circumscribe means to draw a line around something or put a boundary around it. So in the circumscribing stage, communication decreases and certain areas or subjects become restricted as individuals verbally close themselves off from each other. They may say things like “I don’t want to talk about that anymore” or “You mind your business and I’ll mind mine.” If one person was more interested in differentiating in the previous stage, or the desire to end the relationship is one-sided, verbal expressions of commitment may go unechoed—for example, when one person’s statement, “I know we’ve had some problems lately, but I still like being with you,” is met with silence. Passive-aggressive behavior and the demand-withdrawal conflict pattern, which we discussed in Chapter 6 “[Interpersonal Communication Processes](#)“, may occur more frequently in this stage. Once the increase in boundaries and decrease in communication becomes a pattern, the relationship further deteriorates toward stagnation.

## Stagnating

During the stagnating stage, the relationship may come to a standstill, as individuals basically wait for the relationship to end. Outward communication may be avoided, but internal communication may be frequent. The relational conflict flaw of mindreading takes place as a person’s internal thoughts lead them to avoid communication. For example, a person may think, “There’s no need to bring this up again, because I know exactly how he’ll react!” This stage can be prolonged in some relationships. Parents and children who are estranged, couples who are separated and awaiting a divorce, or friends who want to end a relationship but don’t know how to do it may have extended periods of stagnation. Short periods of stagnation may occur right after a failed exchange in the experimental stage, where you may be in a situation that’s not easy to get out of, but the person is still there. Although most people don’t like to linger in this unpleasant stage, some may do so to avoid potential pain from termination, some may still hope to rekindle the spark that started the relationship, or some may enjoy leading their relational partner on.

## Avoiding

Moving to the avoiding stage may be a way to end the awkwardness that comes with stagnation, as people signal that they want to close down the lines of communication. Communication in the avoiding stage can be very direct—“I don’t want to talk to you anymore”—or more indirect—“I have to meet someone in a little while, so I can’t talk long.” While physical avoidance such as leaving a room or requesting a schedule change at work may help clearly communicate the desire to terminate the relationship, we don’t always have that option. In a parent-child relationship, where the child is still dependent on the parent, or in a roommate situation, where a lease agreement prevents leaving, people may engage in cognitive dissociation, which means they mentally shut down and ignore the other person even though they are still physically present.

## Terminating

The terminating stage of a relationship can occur shortly after initiation or after a ten- or twenty-year relational history has been established. Termination can result from outside circumstances such as geographic separation or internal factors such as changing values or personalities that lead to a weakening of the bond. Termination exchanges involve some typical communicative elements and may begin with a summary message that recaps the relationship and provides a reason for the termination (e.g., “We’ve had some ups and downs over our three years together, but I’m getting ready to go to college, and I either want to be with someone who is willing to support me, or I want to be free to explore who I am.”). The summary message may be followed by a distance message that further communicates the relational drift that has occurred (e.g., “We’ve really grown apart over the past year”), which may be followed by a disassociation message that prepares people to be apart by projecting what happens after the relationship ends (e.g., “I know you’ll do fine without me. You can use this time to explore your options and figure out if you want to go to college too or not.”). Finally, there is often a message regarding the possibility for future communication in the relationship (e.g., “I think it would be best if we don’t see each other for the first few months, but text me if you want to.”). These ten stages of relational development provide insight into the complicated processes that affect relational formation and deterioration. We also make decisions about our relationships by weighing costs and rewards.

## Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory essentially entails a weighing of the costs and rewards in a given relationship. Rewards are outcomes that we get from a relationship that benefit us in some way, while costs range from granting favors to providing emotional support. When we do not receive the outcomes or rewards that we think we deserve, then we may negatively evaluate the relationship, or at least a given exchange or moment in the relationship, and view ourselves as being underbenefited. In an equitable relationship, costs and rewards are balanced, which usually leads to a positive evaluation of the relationship and satisfaction.

Commitment and interdependence are important interpersonal and psychological dimensions of a relationship that relate to social exchange theory. Interdependence refers to the relationship between a person’s well-being and involvement in a particular relationship. A person will feel interdependence in a relationship when (1) satisfaction is high or the relationship meets important needs; (2) the alternatives are not good, meaning the person’s needs couldn’t be met without the relationship; or (3) investment in the relationship is high, meaning that resources might decrease or be lost without the relationship.

We can be cautioned, though, to not view social exchange theory as a tit-for-tat accounting of costs and rewards. We wouldn’t be very good relational partners if we carried around a little notepad, notating each favor or good deed we completed so we can expect its repayment. As noted earlier, we all become aware of the balance of costs and rewards at some point in our relationships, but that awareness isn’t persistent. We also have communal relationships, in which members engage in a relationship for mutual benefit and do not expect returns on investments

such as favors or good deeds. As the dynamics in a relationship change, we may engage communally without even being aware of it, just by simply enjoying the relationship. It has been suggested that we become more aware of the costs and rewards balance when a relationship is going through conflict. Overall, relationships are more likely to succeed when there is satisfaction and commitment, meaning that we are pleased in a relationship intrinsically or by the rewards we receive.

### Key Takeaways

- Relationships can be easily distinguished into personal or social and voluntary or involuntary.
  - Personal relationships are close, intimate, and interdependent, meeting many of our interpersonal needs.
  - Social relationships meet some interpersonal needs but lack the closeness of personal relationships.
- There are stages of relational interaction in which relationships come together (initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, and bonding) and come apart (differentiating, circumscribing, stagnating, avoiding, and terminating).
- The weighing of costs and rewards in a relationship affects commitment and overall relational satisfaction.

### Exercises

1. Review the types of relationships in Figure 7.1 “Types of Relationships”. Name at least one person from your relationships that fits into each quadrant. How does your communication differ between each of these people?
2. Pick a relationship important to you and determine what stage of relational interaction you are currently in with that person. What communicative signals support your determination? What other stages from the ten listed have you experienced with this person?
3. How do you weigh the costs and rewards in your relationships? What are some rewards you are currently receiving from your closest relationships? What are some costs?

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## 7.3 Communications and Families

### Learning Objectives

- Compare and contrast the various definitions of family.
- Describe various types of family rituals and explain their importance.

- Explain how conformity and conversation orientations work together to create different family climates.

There is no doubt that the definition and makeup of families are changing in the United States. New data from research organizations and the 2010 US Census show the following: people who choose to marry are waiting longer, more couples are cohabitating (living together) before marriage or instead of marrying, households with more than two generations are increasing, and the average household size is decreasing. Just as the makeup of families changes, so do the definitions.

## Defining Family

Who do you consider part of your family? Many people would initially name people who they are related to by blood. You may also name a person with whom you are in a committed relationship—a partner or spouse. But some people have a person not related by blood that they might refer to as aunt or uncle or even as a brother or sister. We can see from these examples that it's not simple to define a family.

The definitions people ascribe to families usually fall into at least one of the following categories: structural definitions, task-orientation definitions, and transactional definitions. Structural definitions of family focus on form, criteria for membership, and often hierarchy of family members. One example of a structural definition of family is two or more people who live together and are related by birth, marriage, or adoption. From this definition, a father and son, two cousins, or a brother and sister could be considered a family if they live together. However, a single person living alone or with nonrelated friends, or a couple who chooses not to or are not legally able to marry would not be considered a family. These definitions rely on external, “objective” criteria for determining who is in a family and who is not, which makes the definitions useful for groups like the US Census Bureau, lawmakers, and other researchers who need to define family for large-scale data collection. The simplicity and time-saving positives of these definitions are countered by the fact that many family types are left out in general structural definitions; however, more specific structural definitions have emerged in recent years that include more family forms.

Family of origin refers to relatives connected by blood or other traditional legal bonds such as marriage or adoption and includes parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews. Family of orientation refers to people who share the same household and are connected by blood, legal bond, or who act/live as if they are connected by either. Unlike family of origin, this definition is limited to people who share the same household and represents the family makeup we choose. For example, most young people don't get to choose who they live with, but as we get older, we choose our spouse or partner or may choose to have or adopt children.

There are several subdefinitions of families of orientation. A nuclear family includes two heterosexual married parents and one or more children. While this type of family has received a lot of political and social attention, some scholars argue that it was only dominant as a family form for a brief part of human history. A binuclear family is a nuclear family that was split by divorce into two separate households, one headed by the mother and one by the father, with the

original children from the family residing in each home for periods of time. A single-parent family includes a mother or father who may or may not have been previously married with one or more children. A stepfamily includes a heterosexual couple that lives together with children from a previous relationship. A cohabitating family includes a heterosexual couple who lives together in a committed relationship but does not have a legal bond such as marriage. Similarly, a gay or lesbian family includes a couple of the same gender who live together in a committed relationship and may or may not have a legal bond such as marriage, a civil union, or a domestic partnership. Cohabitating families and gay or lesbian families may or may not have children.

Is it more important that the structure of a family matches a definition, or should we define family based on the behavior of people or the quality of their interpersonal interactions? Unlike structural definitions of family, functional definitions focus on tasks or interaction within the family unit. Task-orientation definitions of family recognize that behaviors like emotional and financial support are more important interpersonal indicators of a family-like connection than biology. In short, anyone who fulfills the typical tasks present in families is considered family. For example, in some cases, custody of children has been awarded to a person not biologically related to a child over a living blood relative because that person acted more like a family member to the child. The most common family tasks include nurturing and socializing other family members. Nurturing family members entails providing basic care and support, both emotional and financial. Socializing family members refers to teaching young children how to speak, read, and practice social skills.

Transactional definitions of family focus on communication and subjective feelings of connection. While task-orientation definitions convey the importance of providing for family members, transactional definitions are concerned with the quality of interaction among family members. Specifically, transactional definitions stress that the creation of a sense of home, group identity, loyalty, and a shared past and future makes up a family. Isn't it true that someone could provide food, shelter, and transportation to school for a child but not create a sense of home? Even though there is no one, all-encompassing definition of family, perhaps this is for the best. Given that family is a combination of structural, functional, and communicative elements, it warrants multiple definitions to capture that complexity.

## **Family Communication Processes**

Think about how much time we spend communicating with family members over the course of our lives. As children, most of us spend much of our time talking to parents, grandparents, and siblings. As we become adolescents, our peer groups become more central, and we may even begin to resist communicating with our family during the rebellious teenage years. However, as we begin to choose and form our own families, we once again spend much time engaging in family communication. Additionally, family communication is our primary source of intergenerational communication, or communication between people of different age groups.

### **Family Interaction Rituals**

You may have heard or used the term family time in your own families. What does family time mean? As was discussed earlier, relational cultures are built on interaction routines and rituals.

Families also have interaction norms that create, maintain, and change communication climates. The notion of family time hasn't been around for too long but was widely communicated and represented in the popular culture of the 1950s. When we think of family time, or quality time as it's sometimes called, we usually think of a romanticized ideal of family time spent together.

While family rituals and routines can definitely be fun and entertaining bonding experiences, they can also bring about interpersonal conflict and strife. Just think about Clark W. Griswold's string of well-intentioned but misguided attempts to manufacture family fun in the National Lampoon's Vacation series.

Families engage in a variety of rituals that demonstrate symbolic importance and shared beliefs, attitudes, and values. Three main types of relationship rituals are patterned family interactions, family traditions, and family celebrations. Patterned family interactions are the most frequent rituals and do not have the degree of formality of traditions or celebrations. Patterned interactions may include mealtime, bedtime, receiving guests at the house, or leisure activities. Mealtime rituals may include a rotation of who cooks and who cleans, and many families have set seating arrangements at their dinner table. My family has recently adopted a new leisure ritual for family gatherings by playing corn hole (also known as bags). While this family activity is not formal, it's become something expected that we look forward to.

Family traditions are more formal, occur less frequently than patterned interactions, vary widely from family to family, and include birthdays, family reunions, and family vacations. Birthday traditions may involve a trip to a favorite restaurant, baking a cake, or hanging streamers. Family reunions may involve making t-shirts for the group or counting up the collective age of everyone present. Family road trips may involve predictable conflict between siblings or playing car games like "I spy" or trying to find the most number of license plates from different states.

Last, family celebrations are also formal, have more standardization between families, may be culturally specific, help transmit values and memories through generations, and include rites of passage and religious and secular holiday celebrations. Thanksgiving, for example, is formalized by a national holiday and is celebrated in similar ways by many families in the United States. Rites of passage mark life-cycle transitions such as graduations, weddings, quinceañeras, or bar mitzvahs. While graduations are secular and may vary in terms of how they are celebrated, quinceañeras have cultural roots in Latin America, and bar mitzvahs are a long-established religious rite of passage in the Jewish faith.

## **Conversation and Conformity Orientations**

The amount, breadth, and depth of conversation between family members varies from family to family. Additionally, some families encourage self-exploration and freedom, while others expect family unity and control. This variation can be better understood by examining two key factors that influence family communication: conversation orientation and conformity orientation. A given family can be higher or lower on either dimension, and how a family rates on each of these dimensions can be used to determine a family type.

To determine conversation orientation, we determine to what degree a family encourages members to interact and communicate (converse) about various topics. Members within a family with a high conversation orientation communicate with each other freely and frequently about activities, thoughts, and feelings. This unrestricted communication style leads to all members, including children, participating in family decisions. Parents in high-conversation-orientation families believe that communicating with their children openly and frequently leads to a more rewarding family life and helps to educate and socialize children, preparing them for interactions outside the family. Members of a family with a low conversation orientation do not interact with each other as often, and topics of conversation are more restricted, as some thoughts are considered private. For example, not everyone's input may be sought for decisions that affect everyone in the family, and open and frequent communication is not deemed important for family functioning or for a child's socialization.

Conformity orientation is determined by the degree to which a family communication climate encourages conformity and agreement regarding beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors. A family with a high conformity orientation fosters a climate of uniformity, and parents decide guidelines for what to conform to. Children are expected to be obedient, and conflict is often avoided to protect family harmony. This more traditional family model stresses interdependence among family members, which means space, money, and time are shared among immediate family, and family relationships take precedent over those outside the family. A family with a low conformity orientation encourages diversity of beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors and assertion of individuality. Relationships outside the family are seen as important parts of growth and socialization, as they teach lessons about and build confidence for independence. Members of these families also value personal time and space.

Examples – “Getting Real”

### **Family Therapists**

Family therapists provide counseling to parents, children, romantic partners, and other members of family units. People may seek out a family therapist to deal with difficult past experiences or current problems such as family conflict, emotional processing related to grief or trauma, marriage/relationship stresses, children's behavioral concerns, and so on. Family therapists are trained to assess the systems of interaction within a family through counseling sessions that may be one-on-one or with other family members present. The therapist then evaluates how a family's patterns are affecting the individuals within the family. Whether through social services or private practice, family therapy is usually short term. Once the assessment and evaluation is complete, goals are established and sessions are scheduled to track the progress toward completion. The demand for family therapists remains strong, as people's lives grow more complex, careers take people away from support networks such as family and friends, and economic hardships affect interpersonal relationships. Family therapists usually have bachelor's and master's degrees and must obtain a license to practice in their state. More information about family and marriage therapists can be found through their professional organization, the [American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy](#).

1. List some issues within a family that you think should be addressed through formal therapy. List some issues within a family that you think should be addressed directly with/by family members. What is the line that distinguishes between these two levels?
2. Based on what you've read in this book so far, what communication skills do you think would be most beneficial for a family therapist to possess and why?

Determining where your family falls on the conversation and conformity dimensions is more instructive when you know the family types that result, which are consensual, pluralistic, protective, and laissez-faire (see Figure 7.2 “Family Types Based on Conflict and Conformity Orientations”). A consensual family is high in both conversation and conformity orientations, and they encourage open communication but also want to maintain the hierarchy within the family that puts parents above children. This creates some tension between a desire for both openness and control. Parents may reconcile this tension by hearing their children's opinions, making the ultimate decision themselves, and then explaining why they made the decision they did. A pluralistic family is high in conversation orientation and low in conformity. Open discussion is encouraged for all family members, and parents do not strive to control their children's or each other's behaviors or decisions. Instead, they value the life lessons that a family member can learn by spending time with non-family members or engaging in self-exploration. A protective family is low in conversation orientation and high in conformity, expects children to be obedient to parents, and does not value open communication. Parents make the ultimate decisions and may or may not feel the need to share their reasoning with their children. If a child questions a decision, a parent may simply respond with “Because I said so.” A laissez-faire family is low in conversation and conformity orientations, has infrequent and/or short interactions, and doesn't discuss many topics. Remember that pluralistic families also have a low conformity orientation, which means they encourage children to make their own decisions in order to promote personal exploration and growth. Laissez-faire families are different in that parents don't have an investment in their children's decision making, and in general, members in this type of family are “emotionally divorced” from each other.

Figure 7.2 Family Types Based on Conflict and Conformity Orientations



### Key Takeaways

- There are many ways to define a family.
  - Structural definitions focus on form of families and have narrow criteria for membership.
  - Task-orientation definitions focus on behaviors like financial and emotional support.
  - Transactional definitions focus on the creation of subjective feelings of home, group identity, and a shared history and future.
- Family rituals include patterned interactions like a nightly dinner or bedtime ritual, family traditions like birthdays and vacations, and family celebrations like holidays and weddings.
- Conversation and conformity orientations play a role in the creation of family climates.
  - Conversation orientation refers to the degree to which family members interact and communicate about various topics.
  - Conformity orientation refers to the degree to which a family expects uniformity of beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors.
  - Conversation and conformity orientations intersect to create the following family climates: consensual, pluralistic, protective, and laissez-faire.

### Exercises

1. Of the three types of definitions for families (structural, task-orientation, or transactional), which is most important to you and why?

2. Identify and describe a ritual you have experienced for each of the following: patterned family interaction, family tradition, and family celebration. How did each of those come to be a ritual in your family?
3. Think of your own family and identify where you would fall on the conversation and conformity orientations. Provide at least one piece of evidence to support your decision.

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## 7.2 Communication & Friends

### Learning Objectives

- Compare and contrast different types of friendships.
- Describe the cycle of friendship from formation to maintenance to dissolution/deterioration.
- Discuss how friendships change across the life span, from adolescence to later life.
- Explain how culture and gender influence friendships.

Do you consider all the people you are “friends” with on Facebook to be friends? What’s the difference, if any, between a “Facebook friend” and a real-world friend? Friendships, like other relationship forms, can be divided into categories. What’s the difference between a best friend, a good friend, and an old friend? What about work friends, school friends, and friends of the family? It’s likely that each of you reading this book has a different way of perceiving and categorizing your friendships. In this section, we will learn about the various ways we classify friends, the life cycle of friendships, and how gender affects friendships.

### Defining and Classifying Friends

Friendships are voluntary interpersonal relationships between two people who are usually equals and who mutually influence one another. Friendships are distinct from romantic relationships, family relationships, and acquaintances and are often described as more vulnerable relationships than others due to their voluntary nature, the availability of other friends, and the fact that they lack the social and institutional support of other relationships. The lack of official support for friendships is not universal, though. In rural parts of Thailand, for example, special friendships are recognized by a ceremony in which both parties swear devotion and loyalty to each other. Even though we do not have a formal ritual to recognize friendship in the United States, in general, research shows that people have three main expectations for close friendships. A friend is someone you can talk to, someone you can depend on for help and emotional support, and someone you can participate in activities and have fun with.

Although friendships vary across the life span, three types of friendships are common in adulthood: reciprocal, associative, and receptive. Reciprocal friendships are solid interpersonal relationships between people who are equals with a shared sense of loyalty and commitment. These friendships are likely to develop over time and can withstand external changes such as geographic separation or fluctuations in other commitments such as work and childcare. Reciprocal friendships are what most people would consider the ideal for best friends. Associative friendships are mutually pleasurable relationships between acquaintances or

associates that, although positive, lack the commitment of reciprocal friendships. These friendships are likely to be maintained out of convenience or to meet instrumental goals.

For example, a friendship may develop between two people who work out at the same gym. They may spend time with each other in this setting a few days a week for months or years, but their friendship might end if the gym closes or one person's schedule changes. Receptive friendships include a status differential that makes the relationship asymmetrical. Unlike the other friendship types that are between peers, this relationship is more like that of a supervisor-subordinate or clergy-parishioner. In some cases, like a mentoring relationship, both parties can benefit from the relationship. In other cases, the relationship could quickly sour if the person with more authority begins to abuse it.

A relatively new type of friendship, at least in label, is the "friends with benefits" relationship. Friends with benefits (FWB) relationships have the closeness of a friendship and the sexual activity of a romantic partnership without the expectations of romantic commitment or labels. FWB relationships are hybrids that combine characteristics of romantic and friend pairings, which produces some unique dynamics. In my conversations with students over the years, we have talked through some of the differences between friends, FWB, and hook-up partners, or what we termed "just benefits." Hook-up or "just benefits" relationships do not carry the emotional connection typical in a friendship, may occur as one-night-stands or be regular things, and exist solely for the gratification and/or convenience of sexual activity. So why might people choose to have or avoid FWB relationships?

Various research studies have shown that half of the college students who participated have engaged in heterosexual FWB relationships. Many who engage in FWB relationships have particular views on love and sex—namely, that sex can occur independently of love. Conversely, those who report no FWB relationships often cite religious, moral, or personal reasons for not doing so. Some who have reported FWB relationships note that they value the sexual activity with their friend, and many feel that it actually brings the relationship closer. Despite valuing the sexual activity, they also report fears that it will lead to hurt feelings or the dissolution of a friendship. We must also consider gender differences and communication challenges in FWB relationships.

Gender biases must be considered when discussing heterosexual FWB relationships, given that women in most societies are judged more harshly than men for engaging in casual sex. But aside from dealing with the double standard that women face regarding their sexual activity, there aren't many gender differences in how men and women engage in and perceive FWB relationships. So what communicative patterns are unique to the FWB relationship? Those who engage in FWB relationships have some unique communication challenges. For example, they may have difficulty with labels as they figure out whether they are friends, close friends, a little more than friends, and so on. Research participants currently involved in such a relationship reported that they have more commitment to the friendship than the sexual relationship. But does that mean they would give up the sexual aspect of the relationship to save the friendship? The answer is "no" according to the research study. Most participants reported that they would like the relationship to stay the same, followed closely by the hope that it would turn into a full romantic relationship. Just from this study, we can see that there is often a tension between action

and labels. In addition, those in a FWB relationship often have to engage in privacy management as they decide who to tell and who not to tell about their relationship, given that some mutual friends are likely to find out and some may be critical of the relationship. Last, they may have to establish ground rules or guidelines for the relationship. Since many FWB relationships are not exclusive, meaning partners are open to having sex with other people, ground rules or guidelines may include discussions of safer-sex practices, disclosure of sexual partners, or periodic testing for sexually transmitted infections.

## **The Life Span of Friendships**

Friendships, like most relationships, have a life span ranging from formation to maintenance to deterioration/dissolution. Friendships have various turning points that affect their trajectory. While there are developmental stages in friendships, they may not be experienced linearly, as friends can cycle through formation, maintenance, and deterioration/dissolution together or separately and may experience stages multiple times. Friendships are also diverse, in that not all friendships develop the same level of closeness, and the level of closeness can fluctuate over the course of a friendship. Changes in closeness can be an expected and accepted part of the cycle of friendships, and less closeness doesn't necessarily lead to less satisfaction.

The formation process of friendship development involves two people moving from strangers toward acquaintances and potentially friends. Several factors influence the formation of friendships, including environmental, situational, individual, and interactional factors. Environmental factors lead us to have more day-to-day contact with some people over others. For example, residential proximity and sharing a workplace are catalysts for friendship formation. Thinking back to your childhood, you may have had early friendships with people on your block because they were close by and you could spend time together easily without needing transportation. A similar situation may have occurred later if you moved away from home for college and lived in a residence hall.

You may have formed early relationships, perhaps even before classes started, with hall-mates or dorm-mates. I've noticed that many students will continue to associate and maybe even attempt to live close to friends they made in their first residence hall throughout their college years, even as they move residence halls or off campus. We also find friends through the social networks of existing friends and family. Although these people may not live close to us, they are brought into proximity through people we know, which facilitates our ability to spend time with them. Encountering someone due to environmental factors may lead to a friendship if the situational factors are favorable.

The main situational factor that may facilitate or impede friendship formation is availability. Initially, we are more likely to be interested in a friendship if we anticipate that we'll be able to interact with the other person again in the future without expending more effort than our schedule and other obligations will allow. In order for a friendship to take off, both parties need resources such as time and energy to put into it. Hectic work schedules, family obligations, or personal stresses such as financial problems or family or relational conflict may impair someone's ability to nurture a friendship.

The number of friends we have at any given point is a situational factor that also affects whether or not we are actually looking to add new friends. I have experienced this fluctuation. Since I stayed in the same city for my bachelor's and master's degrees, I had forged many important friendships over those seven years. In the last year of my master's program, I was immersed in my own classes and jobs as a residence hall director and teaching assistant. I was also preparing to move within the year to pursue my doctorate. I recall telling a friend of many years that I was no longer "accepting applications" for new friends. Although I was half-joking, this example illustrates the importance of environmental and situational factors. Not only was I busier than I had ever been; I was planning on moving and therefore knew it wouldn't be easy to continue investing in any friendships I made in my final year. Instead, I focused on the friendships I already had and attended to my other personal obligations. Of course, when I moved to a new city a few months later, I was once again "accepting applications," because I had lost the important physical proximity to all my previous friends. Environmental and situational factors that relate to friendship formation point to the fact that convenience plays a large role in determining whether a relationship will progress or not.

While contact and availability may initiate communication with a potential friend, individual and interactional factors are also important. We are more likely to develop friendships with individuals we deem physically attractive, socially competent, and responsive to our needs. Specifically, we are more attracted to people we deem similar to or slightly above us in terms of attractiveness and competence. Although physical attractiveness is more important in romantic relationships, research shows that we evaluate attractive people more positively, which may influence our willingness to invest more in a friendship. Friendships also tend to form between people with similar demographic characteristics such as race, gender, age, and class, and similar personal characteristics like interests and values. Being socially competent and responsive in terms of empathy, emotion management, conflict management, and self-disclosure also contribute to the likelihood of friendship development.

If a friendship is established in the formation phase, then the new friends will need to maintain their relationship. The maintenance phase includes the most variation in terms of the processes that take place, the commitment to maintenance from each party, and the length of time of the phase. In short, some friendships require more maintenance in terms of shared time together and emotional support than other friendships that can be maintained with only occasional contact. Maintenance is important, because friendships provide important opportunities for social support that take the place of or supplement family and romantic relationships. Sometimes, we may feel more comfortable being open with a friend about something than we would with a family member or romantic partner. Most people expect that friends will be there for them when needed, which is the basis of friendship maintenance. As with other relationships, tasks that help maintain friendships range from being there in a crisis to seemingly mundane day-to-day activities and interactions.

Failure to perform or respond to friendship-maintenance tasks can lead to the deterioration and eventual dissolution of friendships. Causes of dissolution may be voluntary (termination due to conflict), involuntary (death of friendship partner), external (increased family or work commitments), or internal (decreased liking due to perceived lack of support). While there are often multiple, interconnecting causes that result in friendship dissolution, there are three

primary sources of conflict in a friendship that stem from internal/interpersonal causes and may lead to voluntary dissolution: sexual interference, failure to support, and betrayal of trust. Sexual interference generally involves a friend engaging with another friend's romantic partner or romantic interest and can lead to feelings of betrayal, jealousy, and anger. Failure to support may entail a friend not coming to another's aid or defense when criticized. Betrayal of trust can stem from failure to secure private information by telling a secret or disclosing personal information without permission. While these three internal factors may initiate conflict in a friendship, discovery of unfavorable personal traits can also lead to problems.

Have you ever started investing in a friendship only to find out later that the person has some character flaws that you didn't notice before? As was mentioned earlier, we are more likely to befriend someone whose personal qualities we find attractive. However, we may not get to experience the person in a variety of contexts and circumstances before we invest in the friendship. We may later find out that our easygoing friend becomes really possessive once we start a romantic relationship and spend less time with him. Or we may find that our happy-go-lucky friend gets moody and irritable when she doesn't get her way. These individual factors become interactional when our newly realized dissimilarity affects our communication. It is logical that as our liking decreases, as a result of personal reassessment of the friendship, we will engage in less friendship-maintenance tasks such as self-disclosure and supportive communication. In fact, research shows that the main termination strategy employed to end a friendship is avoidance. As we withdraw from the relationship, the friendship fades away and may eventually disappear, which is distinct from romantic relationships, which usually have an official "breakup." Aside from changes based on personal characteristics discovered through communication, changes in the external factors that help form friendships can also lead to their dissolution.

The main change in environmental factors that can lead to friendship dissolution is a loss of proximity, which may entail a large or small geographic move or school or job change. The two main situational changes that affect friendships are schedule changes and changes in romantic relationships. Even without a change in environment, someone's job or family responsibilities may increase, limiting the amount of time one has to invest in friendships. Additionally, becoming invested in a romantic relationship may take away from time previously allocated to friends. For environmental and situational changes, the friendship itself is not the cause of the dissolution. These external factors are sometimes difficult if not impossible to control, and lost or faded friendships are a big part of everyone's relational history.

## **Friendships across the Life Span**

As we transition between life stages such as adolescence, young adulthood, emerging adulthood, middle age, and later life, our friendships change in many ways. Our relationships begin to deepen in adolescence as we negotiate the confusion of puberty. Then, in early adulthood, many people get to explore their identities and diversify their friendship circle. Later, our lives stabilize and we begin to rely more on friendships with a romantic partner and continue to nurture the friendships that have lasted. Let's now learn more about the characteristics of friendships across the life span.

## **Adolescence**

Adolescence begins with the onset of puberty and lasts through the teen years. We typically make our first voluntary close social relationships during adolescence as cognitive and emotional skills develop. At this time, our friendships are usually with others of the same age/grade in school, gender, and race, and friends typically have similar attitudes about academics and similar values. These early friendships allow us to test our interpersonal skills, which affects the relationships we will have later in life. For example, emotional processing, empathy, self-disclosure, and conflict become features of adolescent friendships in new ways and must be managed.

Adolescents begin to see friends rather than parents as providers of social support, as friends help negotiate the various emotional problems often experienced for the first time.

This new dependence on friendships can also create problems. For example, as adolescents progress through puberty and forward on their identity search, they may experience some jealousy and possessiveness in their friendships as they attempt to balance the tensions between their dependence on and independence from friends. Additionally, as adolescents articulate their identities, they look for acceptance and validation of self in their friends, especially given the increase in self-consciousness experienced by most adolescents. Those who do not form satisfying relationships during this time may miss out on opportunities for developing communication competence, leading to lower performance at work or school and higher rates of depression. The transition to college marks a move from adolescence to early adulthood and opens new opportunities for friendship and challenges in dealing with the separation from hometown friends.

## **Early Adulthood**

Early adulthood encompasses the time from around eighteen to twenty-nine years of age, and although not every person in this age group goes to college, most of the research on early adult friendships focuses on college students. Those who have the opportunity to head to college will likely find a canvas for exploration and experimentation with various life and relational choices relatively free from the emotional, time, and financial constraints of starting their own family that may come later in life.

As we transition from adolescence to early adulthood, we are still formulating our understanding of relational processes, but people report that their friendships are more intimate than the ones they had in adolescence. During this time, friends provide important feedback on self-concept, careers, romantic and/or sexual relationships, and civic, social, political, and extracurricular activities. It is inevitable that young adults will lose some ties to their friends from adolescence during this transition, which has positive and negative consequences. Investment in friendships from adolescence provides a sense of continuity during the often rough transition to college. These friendships may also help set standards for future friendships, meaning the old friendships are a base for comparison for new friends. Obviously this is a beneficial situation relative to the quality of the old friendship. If the old friendship was not a healthy one, using it as the standard for new friendships is a bad idea. Additionally, nurturing older friendships at the expense of

meeting new people and experiencing new social situations may impede personal growth during this period.

## **Adulthood**

Adult friendships span a larger period of time than the previous life stages discussed, as adulthood encompasses the period from thirty to sixty-five years old. The exploration that occurs for most middle-class people in early adulthood gives way to less opportunity for friendships in adulthood, as many in this period settle into careers, nourish long-term relationships, and have children of their own. These new aspects of life bring more time constraints and interpersonal and task obligations, and with these obligations comes an increased desire for stability and continuity. Adult friendships tend to occur between people who are similar in terms of career position, race, age, partner status, class, and education level. This is partly due to the narrowed social networks people join as they become more educated and attain higher career positions. Therefore, finding friends through religious affiliation, neighborhood, work, or civic engagement is likely to result in similarity between friends.

Even as social networks narrow, adults are also more likely than young adults to rely on their friends to help them process thoughts and emotions related to their partnerships or other interpersonal relationships. For example, a person may rely on a romantic partner to help process through work relationships and close coworkers to help process through family relationships. Work life and home life become connected in important ways, as career (money making) intersects with and supports the desires for stability (home making). Since home and career are primary focuses, socializing outside of those areas may be limited to interactions with family (parents, siblings, and in-laws) if they are geographically close. In situations where family isn't close by, adults' close or best friends may adopt kinship roles, and a child may call a parent's close friend "Uncle Andy" even if they are not related. Spouses or partners are expected to be friends; it is often expressed that the best partner is one who can also serve as best friend, and having a partner as a best friend can be convenient if time outside the home is limited by parental responsibilities. There is not much research on friendships in late middle age (ages fifty to sixty-five), but it has been noted that relationships with partners may become even more important during this time, as parenting responsibilities diminish with grown children and careers and finances stabilize. Partners who have successfully navigated their middle age may feel a bonding sense of accomplishment with each other and with any close friends with whom they shared these experiences.

## **Later Life**

Friendships in later-life adulthood, which begins in one's sixties, are often remnants of previous friends and friendship patterns. Those who have typically had a gregarious social life will continue to associate with friends if physically and mentally able, and those who relied primarily on a partner, family, or limited close friends will have more limited, but perhaps equally rewarding, interactions. Friendships that have extended from adulthood or earlier are often "old" or "best" friendships that offer a look into a dyad's shared past. Given that geographic relocation is common in early adulthood, these friends may be physically distant, but if investment in occasional contact or visits preserved the friendship, these friends are likely able to pick up

where they left off. However, biological aging and the social stereotypes and stigma associated with later life and aging begin to affect communication patterns.

Obviously, our physical and mental abilities affect our socializing and activities and vary widely from person to person and age to age. Mobility may be limited due to declining health, and retiring limits the social interactions one had at work and work-related events. People may continue to work and lead physically and socially active lives decades past the marker of later life, which occurs around age sixty-five. Regardless of when these changes begin, it is common and normal for our opportunities to interact with wide friendship circles to diminish as our abilities decline. Early later life may be marked by a transition to partial or full retirement if a person is socioeconomically privileged enough to do so. For some, retirement is a time to settle into a quiet routine in the same geographic place, perhaps becoming even more involved in hobbies and civic organizations, which may increase social interaction and the potential for friendships. Others may move to a more desirable place or climate and go through the process of starting over with new friends. For health or personal reasons, some in later life live in assisted-living facilities. Later-life adults in these facilities may make friends based primarily on proximity, just as many college students in early adulthood do in the similarly age-segregated environment of a residence hall.

Friendships in later life provide emotional support that is often only applicable during this life stage. For example, given the general stigma against aging and illness, friends may be able to shield each other from negative judgments from others and help each other maintain a positive self-concept. Friends can also be instrumental in providing support after the death of a partner. Men, especially, may need this type of support, as men are more likely than women to consider their spouse their sole confidante, which means the death of the wife may end a later-life man's most important friendship. Women who lose a partner also go through considerable life changes, and in general more women are left single after the death of a spouse than men due to men's shorter life span and the tendency for men to be a few years older than their wives. Given this fact, it is not surprising that widows in particular may turn to other single women for support. Overall, providing support in later life is important given the likelihood of declining health. In the case of declining health, some may turn to family instead of friends for support to avoid overburdening friends with requests for assistance. However, turning to a friend for support is not completely burdensome, as research shows that feeling needed helps older people maintain a positive well-being.

## **Gender and Friendship**

Gender influences our friendships and has received much attention, as people try to figure out how different men and women's friendships are. There is a conception that men's friendships are less intimate than women's based on the stereotype that men do not express emotions. In fact, men report a similar amount of intimacy in their friendships as women but are less likely than women to explicitly express affection verbally (e.g., saying "I love you") and nonverbally (e.g., through touching or embracing) toward their same-gender friends. This is not surprising, given the societal taboos against same-gender expressions of affection, especially between men, even though an increasing number of men are more comfortable expressing affection toward other men and women. However, researchers have wondered if men communicate affection in more

implicit ways that are still understood by the other friend. Men may use shared activities as a way to express closeness—for example, by doing favors for each other, engaging in friendly competition, joking, sharing resources, or teaching each other new skills. Some scholars have argued that there is a bias toward viewing intimacy as feminine, which may have skewed research on men's friendships. While verbal expressions of intimacy through self-disclosure have been noted as important features of women's friendships, activity sharing has been the focus in men's friendships. This research doesn't argue that one gender's friendships are better than the other's, and it concludes that the differences shown in the research regarding expressions of intimacy are not large enough to impact the actual practice of friendships.

Cross-gender friendships are friendships between a male and a female. These friendships diminish in late childhood and early adolescence as boys and girls segregate into separate groups for many activities and socializing, reemerge as possibilities in late adolescence, and reach a peak potential in the college years of early adulthood. Later, adults with spouses or partners are less likely to have cross-sex friendships than single people. In any case, research studies have identified several positive outcomes of cross-gender friendships. Men and women report that they get a richer understanding of how the other gender thinks and feels. It seems these friendships fulfill interaction needs not as commonly met in same-gender friendships. For example, men reported more than women that they rely on their cross-gender friendships for emotional support. Similarly, women reported that they enjoyed the activity-oriented friendships they had with men.

As discussed earlier regarding friends-with-benefits relationships, sexual attraction presents a challenge in cross-gender heterosexual friendships. Even if the friendship does not include sexual feelings or actions, outsiders may view the relationship as sexual or even encourage the friends to become "more than friends." Aside from the pressures that come with sexual involvement or tension, the exaggerated perceptions of differences between men and women can hinder cross-gender friendships. However, if it were true that men and women are too different to understand each other or be friends, then how could any long-term partnership such as husband/wife, mother/son, father/daughter, or brother/sister be successful or enjoyable?

### Key Takeaways

- Friendships are voluntary interpersonal relationships between two people who are usually equals and who mutually influence one another.
- Friendship formation, maintenance, and deterioration/dissolution are influenced by environmental, situational, and interpersonal factors.
- Friendships change throughout our lives as we transition from adolescence to adulthood to later life.
- Cross-gender friendships may offer perspective into gender relationships that same-gender friendships do not, as both men and women report that they get support or enjoyment from their cross-gender friendships. However, there is a potential for sexual tension that complicates these relationships.

## Exercises

1. Have you ever been in a situation where you didn't feel like you could "accept applications" for new friends or were more eager than normal to "accept applications" for new friends? What were the environmental or situational factors that led to this situation?
2. Getting integrated: Review the types of friendships (reciprocal, associative, and receptive). Which of these types of friendships do you have more of in academic contexts and why? Answer the same question for professional contexts and personal contexts.
3. Of the life stages discussed in this chapter, which one are you currently in? How do your friendships match up with the book's description of friendships at this stage? From your experience, do friendships change between stages the way the book says they do? Why or why not?

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## 7.4 Romantic Relationships

### Learning Objectives

- Discuss the influences on attraction and romantic partner selection.
- Discuss the differences between passionate, companionate, and romantic love.
- Explain how social networks affect romantic relationships.
- Explain how sexual orientation and race and ethnicity affect romantic relationships.

Romance has swept humans off their feet for hundreds of years, as is evidenced by countless odes written by love-struck poets, romance novels, and reality television shows like *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*. Whether pining for love in the pages of a diary or trying to find a soul mate from a cast of suitors, love and romance can seem to take us over at times. As we have learned, communication is the primary means by which we communicate emotion, and it is how we form, maintain, and end our relationships. In this section, we will explore the communicative aspects of romantic relationships including love, sex, social networks, and cultural influences.

### Relationship Formation and Maintenance

Much of the research on romantic relationships distinguishes between premarital and marital couples. However, given the changes in marriage and the diversification of recognized ways to couple, I will use the following distinctions: dating, cohabitating, and partnered couples. The category for dating couples encompasses the courtship period, which may range from a first date through several years. Once a couple moves in together, they fit into the category of cohabitating couple. Partnered couples take additional steps to verbally, ceremonially, or legally claim their intentions to be together in a long-term committed relationship. The romantic relationships people have before they become partnered provide important foundations for later relationships. But how do we choose our romantic partners, and what communication patterns affect how these relationships come together and apart?

Family background, values, physical attractiveness, and communication styles are just some of the factors that influence our selection of romantic relationships. Attachment theory, as discussed earlier, relates to the bond that a child feels with their primary caregiver. Research has shown that the attachment style (secure, anxious, or avoidant) formed as a child influences adult romantic relationships. Other research shows that adolescents who feel like they have a reliable relationship with their parents feel more connection and attraction in their adult romantic relationships. Aside from attachment, which stems more from individual experiences as a child, relationship values, which stem more from societal expectations and norms, also affect romantic attraction.

We can see the important influence that communication has on the way we perceive relationships by examining the ways in which relational values have changed over recent decades. Over the course of the twentieth century, for example, the preference for chastity as a valued part of relationship selection decreased significantly. While people used to indicate that it was very important that the person they partner with not have had any previous sexual partners, today people list several characteristics they view as more important in mate selection. In addition, characteristics like income and cooking/housekeeping skills were once more highly rated as qualities in a potential mate. Today, mutual attraction and love are the top mate-selection values.

In terms of mutual attraction, over the past sixty years, men and women have more frequently reported that physical attraction is an important aspect of mate selection. But what characteristics lead to physical attraction? Despite the saying that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” there is much research that indicates body and facial symmetry are the universal basics of judging attractiveness. Further, the matching hypothesis states that people with similar levels of attractiveness will pair together despite the fact that people may idealize fitness models or celebrities who appear very attractive. However, judgments of attractiveness are also communicative and not just physical. Other research has shown that verbal and nonverbal expressiveness are judged as attractive, meaning that a person’s ability to communicate in an engaging and dynamic way may be able to supplement for some lack of physical attractiveness. In order for a relationship to be successful, the people in it must be able to function with each other on a day-to-day basis, once the initial attraction stage is over. Similarity in preferences for fun activities and hobbies like attending sports and cultural events, relaxation, television and movie tastes, and socializing were correlated to more loving and well-maintained relationships. Similarity in role preference means that couples agree whether one or the other or both of them should engage in activities like indoor and outdoor housekeeping, cooking, and handling the finances and shopping. Couples who were not similar in these areas reported more conflict in their relationship.

Examples – “Getting Critical”

### **Arranged Marriages**

Although romantic love is considered a precursor to marriage in Western societies, this is not the case in other cultures. As was noted earlier, mutual attraction and love are the most important factors in mate selection in research conducted in the United States. In some other countries, like China, India, and Iran, mate selection is primarily decided by family members and may be based on the evaluation of a potential partner’s health, financial assets, social status, or family connections. In some cases, families make financial arrangements to ensure the marriage takes place. Research on marital satisfaction of people in autonomous (self-chosen) marriages and arranged marriages has been mixed, but a recent study found that there was no significant difference in marital satisfaction between individuals in marriages of choice in the United States and those in arranged marriages in India. While many people undoubtedly question whether a person can be happy in an arranged marriage, in more collectivistic (group-oriented) societies, accommodating family wishes may be more important than individual preferences. Rather than love leading up to a marriage, love is expected to grow as partners learn more about each other and adjust to their new lives together once married.

1. Do you think arranged marriages are ethical? Why or why not?
2. Try to step back and view both types of marriages from an outsider's perspective. The differences between the two types of marriage are fairly clear, but in what ways are marriages of choice and arranged marriages similar?
3. List potential benefits and drawbacks of marriages of choice and arranged marriages.
4. Love and Sexuality in Romantic Relationships

When most of us think of romantic relationships, we think about love. However, love did not need to be a part of a relationship for it to lead to marriage until recently. In fact, marriages in some cultures are still arranged based on pedigree (family history) or potential gain in money or power for the couple's families. Today, love often doesn't lead directly to a partnership, given that most people don't partner with their first love. Love, like all emotions, varies in intensity and is an important part of our interpersonal communication.

To better understand love, we can make a distinction between passionate love and companionate love. Passionate love entails an emotionally charged engagement between two people that can be both exhilarating and painful. For example, the thrill of falling for someone can be exhilarating, but feelings of vulnerability or anxiety that the love may not be reciprocated can be painful. Companionate love is affection felt between two people whose lives are interdependent. For example, romantic partners may come to find a stable and consistent love in their shared time and activities together. The main idea behind this distinction is that relationships that are based primarily on passionate love will terminate unless the passion cools overtime into a more enduring and stable companionate love. This doesn't mean that passion must completely die out for a relationship to be successful long term. In fact, a lack of passion could lead to boredom or dissatisfaction. Instead, many people enjoy the thrill of occasional passion in their relationship but may take solace in the security of a love that is more stable. While companionate love can also exist in close relationships with friends and family members, passionate love is often tied to sexuality present in romantic relationships.

There are many ways in which sexuality relates to romantic relationships and many opinions about the role that sexuality should play in relationships, but this discussion focuses on the role of sexuality in attraction and relational satisfaction. Compatibility in terms of sexual history and attitudes toward sexuality are more important predictors of relationship formation. For example, if a person finds out that a romantic interest has had a more extensive sexual history than their own, they may not feel compatible, which could lessen attraction. Once together, considerable research suggests that a couple's sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction are linked such that sexually satisfied individuals report a higher quality relationship, including more love for their partner and more security in the future success of their relationship. While sexual activity often strengthens emotional bonds between romantic couples, it is clear that romantic emotional bonds can form in the absence of sexual activity and sexual activity is not the sole predictor of relational satisfaction. In fact, sexual communication may play just as important a role as sexual activity. Sexual communication deals with the initiation or refusal of sexual activity and communication about sexual likes and dislikes. For example, a sexual communication could involve a couple discussing a decision to abstain from sexual activity until a certain level of closeness or relational milestone (like marriage) has been reached. Sexual communication could also involve talking about sexual likes and dislikes. Sexual conflict can result when couples

disagree over frequency or type of sexual activities. Sexual conflict can also result from jealousy if one person believes their partner is focusing sexual thoughts or activities outside of the relationship. While we will discuss jealousy and cheating more in the section on the dark side of relationships, it is clear that love and sexuality play important roles in our romantic relationships.

## Romantic Relationships and Social Networks

Social networks influence all our relationships but have gotten special attention in research on romantic relations. Romantic relationships are not separate from other interpersonal connections to friends and family. Is it better for a couple to share friends, have their own friends, or attempt a balance between the two? Overall, research shows that shared social networks are one of the strongest predictors of whether or not a relationship will continue or terminate.

Network overlap refers to the number of shared associations, including friends and family, that a couple has. For example, if Dan and Shereece are both close with Dan's sister Bernadette, and all three of them are friends with Kory, then those relationships completely overlap (see Figure 7.3 "Social Network Overlap").

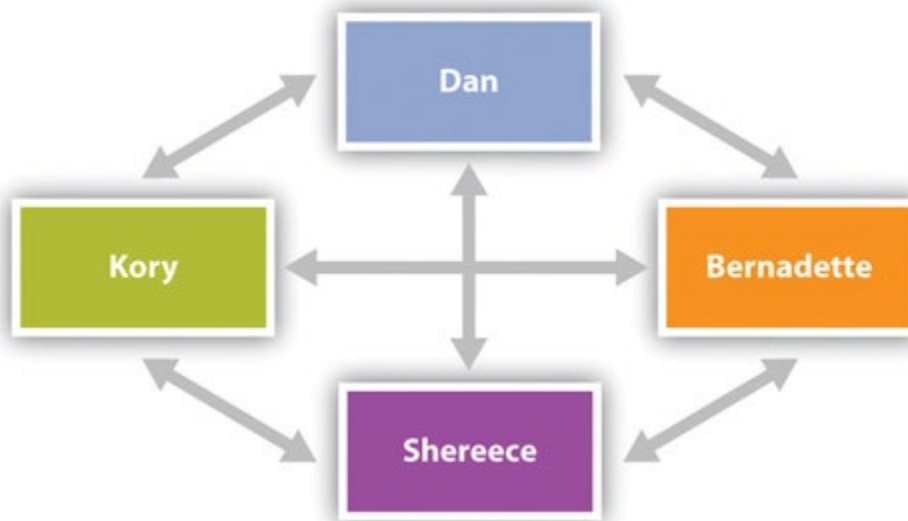


Figure 7.3 Social Network Overlap

Network overlap creates some structural and interpersonal elements that affect relational outcomes. Friends and family who are invested in both relational partners may be more likely to support the couple when one or both parties need it. In general, having more points of connection to provide instrumental support through the granting of favors or emotional support in the form of empathetic listening and validation during times of conflict can help a couple manage common stressors of relationships that may otherwise lead a partnership to deteriorate.

In addition to providing a supporting structure, shared associations can also help create and sustain a positive relational culture. For example, mutual friends of a couple may validate the relationship by discussing the partners as a “couple” or “pair” and communicate their approval of

the relationship to the couple separately or together, which creates and maintains a connection. Being in the company of mutual friends also creates positive feelings between the couple, as their attention is taken away from the mundane tasks of work and family life. Imagine Dan and Shereece host a board-game night with a few mutual friends in which Dan wows the crowd with charades, and Kory says to Shereece, “Wow, he’s really on tonight. It’s so fun to hang out with you two.” That comment may refocus attention onto the mutually attractive qualities of the pair and validate their continued interdependence.

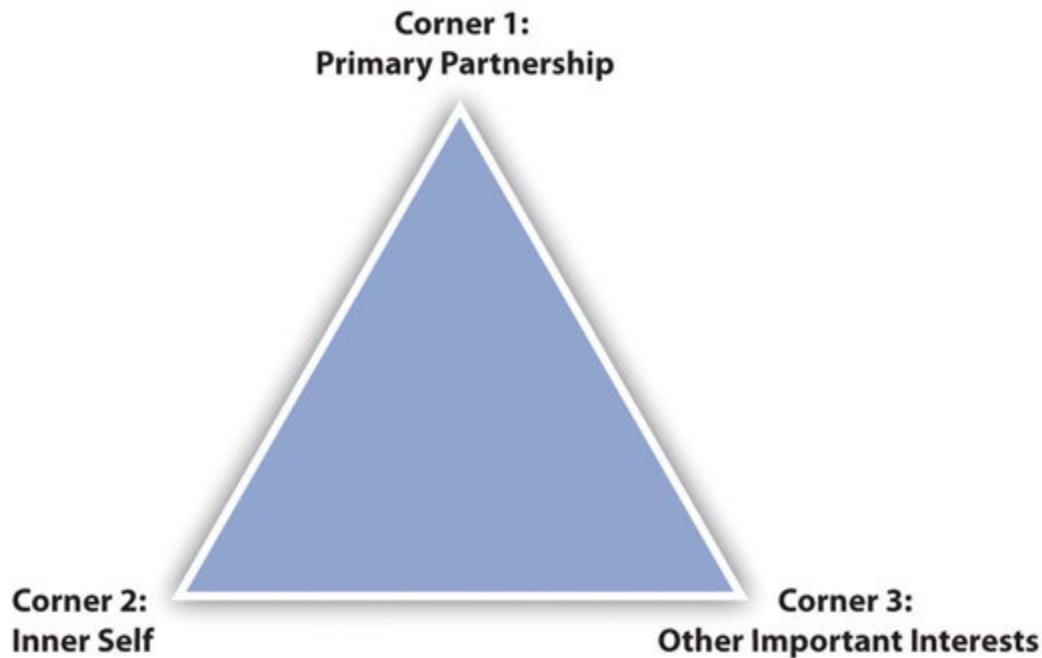
Examples – “Getting Plugged In”

### **Online Dating**

It is becoming more common for people to initiate romantic relationships through the Internet, and online dating sites are big business, bringing in \$470 million a year. Whether it’s through sites like Match.com or OkCupid.com or through chat rooms or social networking, people are taking advantage of some of the conveniences of online dating. But what are the drawbacks?

1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of online dating?
2. What advice would you give a friend who is considering using online dating to help him or her be a more competent communicator?

Interdependence and relationship networks can also be illustrated through the theory of triangles (see Figure 7.4 “Theory of Triangles”), which examines the relationship between three domains of activity: the primary partnership (corner 1), the inner self (corner 2), and important outside interests (corner 3).



**Figure 7.4 Theory of Triangles**

All of the corners interact with each other, but it is the third corner that connects the primary partnership to an extended network. For example, the inner self (corner 2) is enriched by the primary partnership (corner 1) but also gains from associations that provide support or a chance for shared activities or recreation (corner 3) that help affirm a person's self-concept or identity. Additionally, the primary partnership (corner 1) is enriched by the third-corner associations that may fill gaps not met by the partnership. When those gaps are filled, a partner may be less likely to focus on what they're missing in their primary relationship. However, the third corner can also produce tension in a relationship if, for example, the other person in a primary partnership feels like they are competing with their partner's third-corner relationships. During times of conflict, one or both partners may increase their involvement in their third corner, which may have positive or negative effects. A strong romantic relationship is good, but research shows that even when couples are happily married they reported loneliness if they were not connected to friends. While the dynamics among the three corners change throughout a relationship, they are all important.

#### Key Takeaways

- Romantic relationships include dating, cohabitating, and partnered couples.
- Family background, values, physical attractiveness, and communication styles influence our attraction to and selection of romantic partners.
- Passionate, companionate, and romantic love and sexuality influence relationships.
- Network overlap is an important predictor of relational satisfaction and success.

## Exercises

1. In terms of romantic attraction, which adage do you think is more true and why? “Birds of a feather flock together” or “Opposites attract.”
2. List some examples of how you see passionate and companionate love play out in television shows or movies. Do you think this is an accurate portrayal of how love is experienced in romantic relationships? Why or why not?
3. Social network overlap affects a romantic relationship in many ways. What are some positives and negatives of network overlap?

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## 7.5 Relationships at Work

### Learning Objectives

- List the different types of workplace relationships.
- Describe the communication patterns in the supervisor-subordinate relationship.
- Describe the different types of peer coworker relationships.
- Evaluate the positives and negatives of workplace romances.

Although some careers require less interaction than others, all jobs require interpersonal communication skills. Shows like *The Office* and *The Apprentice* offer glimpses into the world of workplace relationships. These humorous examples often highlight the dysfunction that can occur within a workplace. Since many people spend as much time at work as they do with their family and friends, the workplace becomes a key site for relational development. The workplace relationships we’ll discuss in this section include supervisor-subordinate relationships, workplace friendships, and workplace romances.

## Supervisor-Subordinate Relationships

Given that most workplaces are based on hierarchy, it is not surprising that relationships between supervisors and their subordinates develop. The supervisor-subordinate relationship can be primarily based in mentoring, friendship, or romance and includes two people, one of whom has formal authority over the other. In any case, these relationships involve some communication challenges and rewards that are distinct from other workplace relationships.

Information exchange is an important part of any relationship, whether it is self-disclosure about personal issues or disclosing information about a workplace to a new employee. Supervisors are key providers of information, especially for newly hired employees who have to negotiate through much uncertainty as they are getting oriented. The role a supervisor plays in orienting a new employee is important, but it is not based on the same norm of reciprocity that many other relationships experience at their onset. On a first date, for example, people usually take turns communicating as they learn about each other. Supervisors, on the other hand, have information power because they possess information that the employees need to do their jobs. The imbalanced flow of communication in this instance is also evident in the supervisor's role as evaluator. Most supervisors are tasked with giving their employees formal and informal feedback on their job performance. In this role, positive feedback can motivate employees, but what happens when a supervisor has negative feedback? Research shows that supervisors are more likely to avoid giving negative feedback if possible, even though negative feedback has been shown to be more important than positive feedback for employee development. This can lead to strains in a relationship if behavior that is in need of correcting persists, potentially threatening the employer's business and the employee's job.

We're all aware that some supervisors are better than others and may have even experienced working under good and bad bosses. So what do workers want in a supervisor? Research has shown that employees more positively evaluate supervisors when they are of the same gender and race. This isn't surprising, given that we've already learned that attraction is often based on similarity. In terms of age, however, employees prefer their supervisors be older than them, which is likely explained by the notion that knowledge and wisdom come from experience built over time. Additionally, employees are more satisfied with supervisors who exhibit a more controlling personality than their own, likely because of the trust that develops when an employee can trust that their supervisor can handle his or her responsibilities. Obviously, if a supervisor becomes coercive or is an annoying micromanager, the controlling has gone too far. High-quality supervisor-subordinate relationships in a workplace reduce employee turnover and have an overall positive impact on the organizational climate. Another positive effect of high-quality supervisor-subordinate relationships is the possibility of mentoring.

The mentoring relationship can be influential in establishing or advancing a person's career, and supervisors are often in a position to mentor select employees. In a mentoring relationship, one person functions as a guide, helping another navigate toward career goals. Through workplace programs or initiatives sponsored by professional organizations, some mentoring relationships are formalized. Informal mentoring relationships develop as shared interests or goals bring two people together. Unlike regular relationships between a supervisor and subordinate that focus on a specific job or tasks related to a job, the mentoring relationship is more extensive. In fact, if a

mentoring relationship succeeds, it is likely that the two people will be separated as the mentee is promoted within the organization or accepts a more advanced job elsewhere—especially if the mentoring relationship was formalized. Mentoring relationships can continue in spite of geographic distance, as many mentoring tasks can be completed via electronic communication or through planned encounters at conferences or other professional gatherings. Supervisors aren't the only source of mentors, however, as peer coworkers can also serve in this role.

## **Workplace Friendships**

Relationships in a workplace can range from someone you say hello to almost daily without knowing her or his name, to an acquaintance in another department, to your best friend that you go on vacations with. We've already learned that proximity plays an important role in determining our relationships, and most of us will spend much of our time at work in proximity to and sharing tasks with particular people. However, we do not become friends with all our coworkers.

As with other relationships, perceived similarity and self-disclosure play important roles in workplace relationship formation. Most coworkers are already in close proximity, but they may break down into smaller subgroups based on department, age, or even whether or not they are partnered or have children. As individuals form relationships that extend beyond being acquaintances at work, they become peer coworkers. A peer coworker relationship refers to a workplace relationship between two people who have no formal authority over the other and are interdependent in some way. This is the most common type of interpersonal workplace relationship, given that most of us have many people we would consider peer coworkers and only one supervisor.

Peer coworkers can be broken down into three categories: information, collegial, and special peers. Information peers communicate about work-related topics only, and there is a low level of self-disclosure and trust. These are the most superficial of the peer coworker relationships, but that doesn't mean they are worthless. Almost all workplace relationships start as information peer relationships. As noted, information exchange is an important part of workplace relationships, and information peers can be very important in helping us through the day-to-day functioning of our jobs. We often form information peers with people based on a particular role they play within an organization. Communicating with a union representative, for example, would be an important information-based relationship for an employee. Collegial peers engage in more self-disclosure about work and personal topics and communicate emotional support. These peers also provide informal feedback through daily conversations that help the employee develop a professional identity. In an average-sized workplace, an employee would likely have several people they consider collegial peers. Special peers have high levels of self-disclosure with relatively few limitations and are highly interdependent in terms of providing emotional and professional support for one another. Special peer relationships are the rarest and mirror the intimate relationships we might have with a partner, close sibling, or parent. As some relationships with information peers grow toward collegial peers, elements of a friendship develop.

Even though we might not have a choice about whom we work with, we do choose who our friends at work will be. Coworker relationships move from strangers to friends much like other friendships. Perceived similarity may lead to more communication about workplace issues, which may lead to self-disclosure about non-work-related topics, moving a dyad from acquaintances to friends. Coworker friendships may then become closer as a result of personal or professional problems. For example, talking about family or romantic troubles with a coworker may lead to increased closeness as self-disclosure becomes deeper and more personal. Increased time together outside of work may also strengthen a workplace friendship. Interestingly, research has shown that close friendships are more likely to develop among coworkers when they perceive their supervisor to be unfair or unsupportive. In short, a bad boss apparently leads people to establish closer friendships with coworkers, perhaps as a way to get the functional and relational support they are missing from their supervisor.

Friendships between peer coworkers have many benefits, including making a workplace more intrinsically rewarding, helping manage job-related stress, and reducing employee turnover. Peer friendships may also supplement or take the place of more formal mentoring relationships. Coworker friendships also serve communicative functions, creating an information chain, as each person can convey information they know about what's going on in different areas of an organization and let each other know about opportunities for promotion or who to avoid. Friendships across departmental boundaries in particular have been shown to help an organization adapt to changing contexts. Workplace friendships may also have negative effects. Obviously information chains can be used for workplace gossip, which can be unproductive. Additionally, if a close friendship at work leads someone to continue to stay in a job that they don't like for the sake of the friendship, then the friendship is not serving the interests of either person or the organization. Although this section has focused on peer coworker friendships, some friendships have the potential to develop into workplace romances.

## **Romantic Workplace Relationships**

Workplace romances involve two people who are emotionally and physically attracted to one another. Patricia M. Sias, *Organizing Relationships: Traditional and Emerging Perspectives on Workplace Relationships* (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2009), 126. We don't have to look far to find evidence that this relationship type is the most controversial of all the workplace relationships. For example, the president of the American Red Cross was fired in 2007 for having a personal relationship with a subordinate. That same year, the president of the World Bank resigned after controversy over a relationship with an employee. So what makes these relationships so problematic?

Some research supports the claim that workplace romances are bad for business, while other research claims workplace romances enhance employee satisfaction and productivity. Despite this controversy, workplace romances are not rare or isolated, as research shows 75 to 85 percent of people are affected by a romantic relationship at work as a participant or observer. People who are opposed to workplace romances cite several common reasons. More so than friendships, workplace romances bring into the office emotions that have the potential to become intense. This doesn't mesh well with a general belief that the workplace should not be an emotional space. Additionally, romance brings sexuality into workplaces that are supposed to be asexual,

which also creates a gray area in which the line between sexual attraction and sexual harassment is blurred. People who support workplace relationships argue that companies shouldn't have a say in the personal lives of their employees and cite research showing that workplace romances increase productivity. Obviously, this is not a debate that we can settle here. Instead, let's examine some of the communicative elements that affect this relationship type.

Individuals may engage in workplace romances for many reasons, three of which are job motives, ego motives, and love motives. Job motives include gaining rewards such as power, money, or job security. Ego motives include the "thrill of the chase" and the self-esteem boost one may get. Love motives include the desire for genuine affection and companionship. Despite the motives, workplace romances impact coworkers, the individuals in the relationship, and workplace policies. Romances at work may fuel gossip, especially if the couple is trying to conceal their relationship. This could lead to hurt feelings, loss of trust, or even jealousy. If coworkers perceive the relationship is due to job motives, they may resent the appearance of favoritism and feel unfairly treated. The individuals in the relationship may experience positive effects such as increased satisfaction if they get to spend time together at work and may even be more productive. Romances between subordinates and supervisors are more likely to slow productivity. If a relationship begins to deteriorate, the individuals may experience more stress than other couples would, since they may be required to continue to work together daily.

Over the past couple decades, there has been a national discussion about whether or not organizations should have policies related to workplace relationships, and there are many different opinions. Company policies range from complete prohibition of romantic relationships, to policies that only specify supervisor-subordinate relationships as off-limits, to policies that don't prohibit but discourage love affairs in the workplace. One trend that seeks to find middle ground is the "love contract" or "dating waiver." This requires individuals who are romantically involved to disclose their relationship to the company and sign a document saying that it is consensual and they will not engage in favoritism. Some businesses are taking another route and encouraging workplace romances. Southwest Airlines, for example, allows employees of any status to date each other and even allows their employees to ask passengers out on a date. Other companies like AT&T and Ben and Jerry's have similar open policies.

### Key Takeaways

- The supervisor-subordinate relationship includes much information exchange that usually benefits the subordinate. However, these relationships also have the potential to create important mentoring opportunities.
- Peer coworker relationships range from those that are purely information based to those that are collegial and include many or all of the dimensions of a friendship.
- Workplace romances are controversial because they bring the potential for sexuality and intense emotions into the workplace, which many people find uncomfortable.
- However, research has shown that these relationships also increase employee satisfaction and productivity in some cases.

## Exercises

1. Describe a relationship that you have had where you were either the mentor or the mentee. How did the relationship form? What did you and the other person gain from the relationship?
2. Think of a job you have had and try to identify someone you worked with who fit the characteristics of an information and a collegial peer. Why do you think the relationship with the information peer didn't grow to become a collegial peer? What led you to move from information peer to collegial peer with the other person?
3. Remember that special peers are the rarest, so you may not have an experience with one. If you do, what set this person apart from other coworkers that led to such a close relationship?
4. If you were a business owner, what would your policy on workplace romances be and why?

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## 7.6 The Dark Side of Relationships

### Learning Objectives

- Define the dark side of relationships.
- Explain how lying affects relationships.
- Explain how sexual and emotional cheating affects relationships.
- Define the various types of interpersonal violence and explain how they are similar and different.

In the course of a given day, it is likely that we will encounter the light and dark sides of interpersonal relationships. So what constitutes the dark side of relationships? There are two dimensions of the dark side of relationships: one is the degree to which something is deemed acceptable or not by society; the other includes the degree to which something functions productively to improve a relationship or not. These dimensions become more complicated when we realize that there can be overlap between them, meaning that it may not always be easy to identify something as exclusively light or dark.

Some communication patterns may be viewed as appropriate by society but still serve a relationally destructive function. Our society generally presumes that increased understanding of a relationship and relational partner would benefit the relationship. However, numerous research studies have found that increased understanding of a relationship and relational partner may be negative. In fact, by avoiding discussing certain topics that might cause conflict, some couples create and sustain positive illusions about their relationship that may cover up a darker reality. Despite this, the couple may report that they are very satisfied with their relationship. In this case, the old saying “ignorance is bliss” seems appropriate. Likewise, communication that is presumed inappropriate by society may be productive for a given relationship. For example, our society ascribes to an ideology of openness that promotes honesty. However, as we will discuss more next, honesty may not always be the best policy. Lies intended to protect a relational partner (called altruistic lies) may net an overall positive result improving the functioning of a relationship.

## Lying

It’s important to start off this section by noting that lying doesn’t always constitute a “dark side” of relationships. Although many people have a negative connotation of lying, we have all lied or concealed information in order to protect the feelings of someone else. One research study found that only 27 percent of the participants agreed that a successful relationship must include complete honesty, which shows there is an understanding that lying is a communicative reality in all relationships. Given this reality, it is important to understand the types of lies we tell and the motivations for and consequences of lying.

We tend to lie more during the initiating phase of a relationship. At this time, people may lie about their personality, past relationships, income, or skill sets as they engage in impression management and try to project themselves as likable and competent. For example, while on a first date, a person may lie and say they recently won an award at work. People sometimes rationalize these lies by exaggerating something that actually happened. So perhaps this person did get recognized at work, but it wasn’t actually an award. Lying may be more frequent at this stage, too, because the two people don’t know each other, meaning it’s unlikely the other person would have any information that would contradict the statement or discover the lie. Aside from lying to make ourselves look better, we may also lie to make someone else feel better. Although trustworthiness and honesty have been listed by survey respondents as the most desired traits in a dating partner, total honesty in some situations could harm a relationship. Altruistic lies are lies told to build the self-esteem of our relational partner, communicate loyalty, or bend the truth to spare someone from hurtful information. Part of altruistic lying is telling people what they want to hear. For example, you might tell a friend that his painting is really pretty when you don’t

actually see the merit of it, or tell your mom you enjoyed her meatloaf when you really didn't. These other-oriented lies may help maintain a smooth relationship, but they could also become so prevalent that the receiver of the lies develops a skewed self-concept and is later hurt. If your friend goes to art school only to be heavily critiqued, did your altruistic lie contribute to that?

As we grow closer to someone, we lie less frequently, and the way we go about lying also changes. In fact, it becomes more common to conceal information than to verbally deceive someone outright. We could conceal information by avoiding communication about subjects that could lead to exposure of the lie. When we are asked a direct question that could expose a lie, we may respond equivocally, meaning we don't really answer a question. When we do engage in direct lying in our close relationships, there may be the need to tell supplemental lies to maintain the original lie. So what happens when we suspect or find out that someone is lying?

Research has found that we are a little better at detecting lies than random chance, with an average of about 54 percent detection. In addition, couples who had been together for an average of four years were better at detecting lies in their partner than were friends they had recently made. This shows that closeness can make us better lie detectors. But closeness can also lead some people to put the relationship above the need for the truth, meaning that a partner who suspects the other of lying might intentionally avoid a particular topic to avoid discovering a lie. Generally, people in close relationships also have a truth bias, meaning they think they know their relational partners and think positively of them, which predisposes them to believe their partner is telling the truth. Discovering lies can negatively affect both parties and the relationship as emotions are stirred up, feelings are hurt, trust and commitment are lessened, and perhaps revenge is sought.

## **Sexual and Emotional Cheating**

Extradyadic romantic activity (ERA) includes sexual or emotional interaction with someone other than a primary romantic partner. Given that most romantic couples aim to have sexually exclusive relationships, ERA is commonly referred to as cheating or infidelity and viewed as destructive and wrong. Despite this common sentiment, ERA is not a rare occurrence. Comparing data from more than fifty research studies shows that about 30 percent of people report that they have cheated on a romantic partner, and there is good reason to assume that the actual number is higher than that.

Although views of what is considered "cheating" vary among cultures and individual couples, sexual activity outside a primary partnership equates to cheating for most. Emotional infidelity is more of a gray area. While some individuals who are secure in their commitment to their partner may not be bothered by their partner's occasional flirting, others consider a double-glance by a partner at another attractive person a violation of the trust in the relationship. You only have to watch a few episodes of *The Jerry Springer Show* to see how actual or perceived infidelity can lead to jealousy, anger, and potentially violence. While research supports the general belief that infidelity leads to conflict, violence, and relational dissatisfaction, it also shows that there is a small percentage of relationships that are unaffected or improve following the discovery of infidelity. This again shows the complexity of the dark side of relationships.

The increase in technology and personal media has made extradyadic relationships somewhat easier to conceal, since smartphones and laptops can be taken anywhere and people can communicate to fulfill emotional and/or sexual desires. In some cases, this may only be to live out a fantasy and may not extend beyond electronic communication. But is sexual or emotional computer-mediated communication considered cheating? You may recall the case of former Congressman Anthony Weiner, who resigned his position in the US House of Representatives after it was discovered that he was engaging in sexually explicit communication with people using Twitter, Facebook, and e-mail. The view of this type of communication as a dark side of relationships is evidenced by the pressure put on Weiner to resign. So what leads people to engage in ERA? Generally, ERA is triggered by jealousy, sexual desire, or revenge.

Jealousy, as we will explore more later, is a complicated part of the emotional dark side of interpersonal relationships. Jealousy may also motivate or justify ERA. Let's take the following case as an example. Julie and Mohammed have been together for five years. Mohammed's job as a corporate communication consultant involves travel to meet clients and attend conferences. Julie starts to become jealous when she meets some of Mohammed's new young and attractive coworkers. Julie's jealousy builds as she listens to Mohammed talk about the fun he had with them during his last business trip. The next time Mohammed goes out of town, Julie has a one-night-stand and begins to drop hints about it to Mohammed when he returns. In this case, Julie is engaging in counterjealousy induction—meaning she cheated on Mohammed in order to elicit in him the same jealousy she feels. She may also use jealousy as a justification for her ERA, claiming that the jealous state induced by Mohammed's behavior caused her to cheat.

Sexual desire can also motivate or be used to justify ERA. Individuals may seek out sexual activity to boost their self-esteem or prove sexual attractiveness. In some cases, sexual incompatibility with a partner such as different sex drives or sexual interests can motivate or be used to justify ERA. Men and women may seek out sexual ERA for the thrill of sexual variety, and affairs can have short-term positive effects on emotional states as an individual relives the kind of passion that often sparks at the beginning of a relationship. However, the sexual gratification and emotional exhilaration of an affair can give way to a variety of negative consequences for psychological and physical health. In terms of physical health, increased numbers of sexual partners increases one's risk for contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and may increase the chance for unplanned pregnancy. While sexual desire is a strong physiological motive for ERA, revenge is a strong emotional motive.

Engaging in ERA to get revenge may result from a sense of betrayal by a partner and a desire to get back at them. In some cases, an individual may try to make the infidelity and the revenge more personal by engaging in ERA with a relative, friend, or ex of their partner. In general, people who would engage in this type of behavior are predisposed to negative reciprocity as a way to deal with conflict and feel like getting back at someone is the best way to get justice. Whether it is motivated by jealousy, sexual desire, or revenge, ERA has the potential to stir up emotions from the dark side of relationships. Emotionally, anxiety about being "found out" and feelings of guilt and shame by the person who had the affair may be met with feelings of anger, jealousy, or betrayal from the other partner.

## Anger and Aggression

We only have to look at some statistics to get a startling picture of violence and aggression in our society: 25 percent of workers are chronically angry; 60 percent of people experience hurt feelings more than once a month; 61 percent of children have experienced rejection at least once in the past month; 25 percent of women and 16 percent of men have been stalked; 46 percent of children have been hit, shoved, kicked, or tripped in the past month; and nearly two million people report being the victim of workplace violence each year. Violence and abuse definitely constitute a dark side of interpersonal relationships. Even though we often focus on the physical aspects of violence, communication plays an important role in contributing to, preventing, and understanding interpersonal violence. Unlike violence that is purely situational, like a mugging, interpersonal violence is constituted within ongoing relationships, and it is often not an isolated incident. Violence occurs in all types of relationships, but our discussion focuses on intimate partner violence and family violence.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) refers to physical, verbal, and emotional violence that occurs between two people who are in or were recently in a romantic relationship. In order to understand the complexity of IPV, it is important to understand that there are three types: intimate terrorism, violent resistance, and situational couple violence. While control is often the cause of violence, it is usually short-term control (e.g., a threat to get you to turn over your money during a mugging). In intimate terrorism (IT), one partner uses violence to have general control over the other. The quest for control takes the following forms: economic abuse by controlling access to money; using children by getting them on the abuser's side and turning them against the abused partner or threatening to hurt or take children away; keeping the abused partner in isolation from their friends and family; and emotional abuse by degrading self-esteem and intimidating the other partner.

Violent resistance (VR) is another type of violence between intimate partners and is often a reaction or response to intimate terrorism (IT). The key pattern in VR is that the person resisting uses violence as a response to a partner that is violent and controlling; however, the resistor is not attempting to control. In short, VR is most often triggered by living with an intimate terrorist. There are very clear and established gender influences on these two types of violence. The overwhelming majority of IT violence is committed by men and directed toward women, and most VR is committed by women and directed at men who are intimate terrorists. Statistics on violence show that more than one thousand women a year are killed by their male partners, while three hundred men are killed by their female partners, mostly as an act of violent resistance to ongoing intimate terrorism. The influence of gender on the third type of IPV is not as uneven.

Situational couple violence (SCV) is the most common type of IPV and does not involve a quest for control in the relationship. Instead, SCV is provoked by a particular situation that is emotional or difficult that leads someone to respond or react with violence. SCV can play out in many ways, ranging from more to less severe and isolated to frequent. Even if SCV is frequent and severe, the absence of a drive for control distinguishes it from intimate terrorism. This is the type of violence we most often imagine when we hear the term domestic violence. However, domestic violence doesn't capture the various ways that violence plays out between people, especially the way intimate terrorism weaves its way into all aspects of a relationship. Domestic

violence also includes other types of abuse such as child-to-parent abuse, sibling abuse, and elder abuse.

Child abuse is another type of interpersonal violence that presents a serious problem in the United States, with over one million cases confirmed yearly by Child Protective Services. But what are the communicative aspects of child abuse? Research has found that one interaction pattern related to child abuse is evaluation and attribution of behavior. As you'll recall from our earlier discussion, attributions are links we make to identify the cause of a behavior. In the case of abusive parents, they are not as able to distinguish between mistakes and intentional behaviors, often seeing honest mistakes as intended and reacting negatively to the child. Abusive parents also communicate generally negative evaluations to their child by saying, for example, "You can't do anything right!" or "You're a bad girl." When children do exhibit positive behaviors, abusive parents are more likely to use external attributions, which diminish the achievement of the child by saying, for example, "You only won because the other team was off their game." In general, abusive parents have unpredictable reactions to their children's positive and negative behavior, which creates an uncertain and often scary climate for a child. Other negative effects of child abuse include lower self-esteem and erratic or aggressive behavior. Although we most often think of children as the targets of violence, they can also be perpetrators.

Reports of adolescent-to-parent abuse are increasing, although there is no reliable statistic on how prevalent this form of domestic violence is, given that parents may be embarrassed to report it or may hope that they can handle the situation themselves without police intervention. Adolescent-to-parent abuse usually onsets between ages ten and fourteen. Mothers are more likely to be the target of this abuse than fathers, and when the abuse is directed at fathers, it most often comes from sons. Abusive adolescents may also direct their aggression at their siblings. Research shows that abusive adolescents are usually not reacting to abuse directed at them. Parents report that their children engage in verbal, emotional, and physical attacks in order to wear them down to get what they want.

While physical violence has great potential for causing injury or even death, psychological and emotional abuse can also be present in any relationship form. A statistic I found surprising states that almost all people have experienced at least one incident of psychological or verbal aggression from a current or past dating partner. Psychological abuse is most often carried out through communicative aggression, which is recurring verbal or nonverbal communication that significantly and negatively affects a person's sense of self. The following are examples of communicative aggression:

- Degrading (humiliating, blaming, berating, name-calling)
- Physically or emotionally withdrawing (giving someone the cold shoulder, neglecting)
- Restricting another person's actions (overmonitoring/controlling money or access to friends and family)
- Dominating (bossing around, controlling decisions)
- Threatening physical harm (threatening self, relational partner, or friends/family/pets of relational partner)

While incidents of communicative aggression might not reach the level of abuse found in an intimate terrorism situation, it is a pervasive form of abuse. Even though we may view physical or sexual abuse as the most harmful, research indicates that psychological abuse can be more damaging and have more wide-ranging and persistent effects than the other types of abuse. Psychological abuse can lead to higher rates of depression, anxiety, stress, eating disorders, and attempts at suicide. The discussion of the dark side of relationships shows us that communication can be hurtful on a variety of fronts.

Examples – “Getting Competent”

### **Handling Communicative Aggression at Work**

Workplace bullying is a form of communicative aggression that occurs between coworkers as one employee (the bully) attempts to degrade, intimidate, or humiliate another employee (the target), and research shows that one in three adults has experienced workplace bullying. In fact, there is an organization called Civility Partners, LLC devoted to ending workplace bullying—you can visit their website at <http://www.noworkplacebullies.com/home>. This type of behavior has psychological and emotional consequences, but it also has the potential to damage a company’s reputation and finances. While there are often mechanisms in place to help an employee deal with harassment—reporting to Human Resources for example—the situation may be trickier if the bully is your boss. In this case, many employees may be afraid to complain for fear of retaliation like getting fired, and transferring to another part of the company or getting another job altogether is a less viable option in a struggling economy. Apply the communication concepts you’ve learned so far to address the following questions.

1. How can you distinguish between a boss who is demanding or a perfectionist and a boss who is a bully?
2. If you were being bullied by someone at work, what would you do?

### **Key Takeaways**

- The dark side of relationships exists in relation to the light side and includes actions that are deemed unacceptable by society at large and actions that are unproductive for those in the relationship.
- Lying does not always constitute a dark side of relationships, as altruistic lies may do more good than harm. However, the closer a relationship, the more potential there is for lying to have negative effects.
- Extradyadic romantic activity involves sexual or emotional contact with someone other than a primary romantic partner and is most often considered cheating or infidelity and can result in jealousy, anger, or aggression.
- There are three main types of intimate partner violence (IPV).

- Intimate terrorism (IT) involves violence used to have general control over the other person.
  - Violent resistance (VR) is usually a response or reaction to violence from an intimate terrorist.
  - Situational couple violence (SCV) is the most common type of IPV and is a reaction to stressful situations and does not involve a quest for control.
- Communicative aggression is recurring verbal or nonverbal communication that negatively affects another person's sense of self and can take the form of verbal, psychological, or emotional abuse.

## Exercises

1. Describe a situation in which lying affected one of your interpersonal relationships. What was the purpose of the lie and how did the lie affect the relationship?
2. How do you think technology has affected extradyadic romantic activity?
3. Getting integrated: In what ways might the “dark side of relationships” manifest in your personal relationships in academic contexts, professional contexts, and civic contexts?

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# Chapter 8: Culture & Communication

Humans have always been diverse in their cultural beliefs and practices. But as new technologies have led to the perception that our world has shrunk, and demographic and political changes have brought attention to cultural differences, people communicate across cultures more now than ever before. The oceans and continents that separate us can now be traversed instantly with an e-mail, phone call, tweet, or status update. Additionally, our workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods have become more integrated in terms of race and gender, increasing our interaction with domestic diversity. The Disability Rights Movement and Gay Rights Movement have increased the visibility of people with disabilities and sexual minorities. But just because we are exposed to more difference doesn't mean we understand it, can communicate across it, or appreciate it. This chapter will help you do all three.

## 8.1 Culture & Romantic Relationships

Romantic relationships are influenced by society and culture, and still today some people face discrimination based on who they love. Specifically, sexual orientation and race affect societal views of romantic relationships. Although the United States, as a whole, is becoming more accepting of gay and lesbian relationships, there is still a climate of prejudice and discrimination that individuals in same-gender romantic relationships must face. Despite some physical and virtual meeting places for gay and lesbian people, there are challenges for meeting and starting romantic relationships that are not experienced for most heterosexual people.

As we've already discussed, romantic relationships are likely to begin due to merely being exposed to another person at work, through a friend, and so on. But some gay and lesbian people may feel pressured into or just feel more comfortable not disclosing or displaying their sexual orientation at work or perhaps even to some family and friends, which closes off important social networks through which most romantic relationships begin. This pressure to refrain from disclosing one's gay or lesbian sexual orientation in the workplace is not unfounded, as it is still legal in twenty-nine states (as of November 2012) to fire someone for being gay or lesbian. There are also some challenges faced by gay and lesbian partners regarding relationship termination. Gay and lesbian couples do not have the same legal and societal resources to manage their relationships as heterosexual couples; for example, gay and lesbian relationships are not legally recognized in most states, it is more difficult for a gay or lesbian couple to jointly own property or share custody of children than heterosexual couples, and there is little public funding for relationship counseling or couples therapy for gay and lesbian couples.

While this lack of barriers may make it easier for gay and lesbian partners to break out of an unhappy or unhealthy relationship, it could also lead couples to termination who may have been helped by the sociolegal support systems available to heterosexuals.

Despite these challenges, relationships between gay and lesbian people are similar in other ways to those between heterosexuals. Gay, lesbian, and heterosexual people seek similar qualities in a potential mate, and once relationships are established, all these groups experience similar degrees of relational satisfaction. Despite the myth that one person plays the man and one plays the woman in a relationship, gay and lesbian partners do not have set preferences in terms of gender role. In fact, research shows that while women in heterosexual relationships tend to do more of the housework, gay and lesbian couples were more likely to divide tasks so that each person has an equal share of responsibility. A gay or lesbian couple doesn't necessarily constitute an intercultural relationship, but as we have already discussed, sexuality is an important part of an individual's identity and connects to larger social and cultural systems. Keeping in mind that identity and culture are complex, we can see that gay and lesbian relationships can also be intercultural if the partners are of different racial or ethnic backgrounds.

While interracial relationships have occurred throughout history, there have been more historical taboos in the United States regarding relationships between African Americans and white people than other racial groups. Antimiscegenation laws were common in states and made it illegal for people of different racial/ethnic groups to marry. It wasn't until 1967 that the Supreme Court ruled in the case of *Loving versus Virginia*, declaring these laws to be unconstitutional. It wasn't until 1998 and 2000, however, that South Carolina and Alabama removed such language from their state constitutions. The organization and website [lovingday.org](http://lovingday.org) commemorates the landmark case and works to end racial prejudice through education.

Even after these changes, there were more Asian-white and Latino/a-white relationships than there were African American-white relationships. Having already discussed the importance of similarity in attraction to mates, it's important to note that partners in an interracial relationship, although culturally different, tend to be similar in occupation and income. This can likely be explained by the situational influences on our relationship formation we discussed earlier—namely, that work tends to be a starting ground for many of our relationships, and we usually work with people who have similar backgrounds to us.

There has been much research on interracial couples that counters the popular notion that partners may be less satisfied in their relationships due to cultural differences. In fact, relational satisfaction isn't significantly different for interracial partners, although the challenges they may face in finding acceptance from other people could lead to stressors that are not as strong for intracultural partners. Although partners in interracial relationships certainly face challenges, there are positives. For example, some mention that they've experienced personal growth by learning about their partner's cultural background, which helps them gain alternative perspectives. Specifically, white people in interracial relationships have cited an awareness of and empathy for racism that still exists, which they may not have been aware of before.

### Key Takeaways

- Studying intercultural communication, communication between people with differing cultural identities, can help us gain more self-awareness and be better able to communicate in a world with changing demographics and technologies.

- A dialectical approach to studying intercultural communication is useful because it allows us to think about culture and identity in complex ways, avoiding dichotomies and acknowledging the tensions that must be negotiated.
- Intercultural relationships face some challenges in negotiating the dialectic between similarities and differences but can also produce rewards in terms of fostering self- and other awareness.

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# Chapter 9: New Media & Communication

## 9.1 New Media, the Self, and Relationships

### Learning Objectives

- Discuss the relationship between new media and the self.
- Identify positive and negative impacts of new media on our interpersonal relationships.

Think about some ways that new media have changed the way you think about yourself and the way you think about and interact in your relationships. Have you ever given your Facebook page a “once-over” before you send or accept a friend request just to make sure that the content displayed is giving off the desired impression? The technological changes of the past twenty years have affected you and your relationships whether you are a heavy user or not. Even people who don’t engage with technology as much as others are still affected by it, since the people they interact with use and are affected by new media to varying degrees.

### New Media and the Self

The explicit way we become conscious of self-presentation when using new media, social networking sites (SNSs) in particular, may lead to an increase in self-consciousness. You’ll recall that in Chapter 1 “[Introduction to Communication Studies](#)” we talked about the role that communication plays in helping us meet our identity needs and, in Chapter 2 “[Communication and Perception](#)”, the role that self-discrepancy theory plays in self-perception. The things that we “like” on Facebook, the pictures we are tagged in, and the news stories or jokes that we share on our timeline all come together to create a database of information that new and old friends can access to form and reform impressions of us. Because we know that others are making impressions based on this database of information and because we have control over most of what appears in this database, people may become overfocused on crafting their online presence to the point that they neglect their offline relationships. This extra level of self-consciousness has also manifested in an increase in self-image and self-esteem issues for some users. For example, some cosmetic surgeons have noted an uptick in patients coming in to have facial surgeries or procedures specifically because they don’t like the way their chin looks on the webcam while chatting on Skype or because they feel self-conscious about the way they look in the numerous digital pictures that are now passed around and stored on new media. Since new media are being increasingly used in professional capacities, some people are also seeking cosmetic surgery or procedures as a way of investing in their personal brand or as a way of giving them an edge in a tight job market.

The personal and social nature of new media also creates an openness that isn’t necessarily part of our offline social reality. Although some people try to address this problem by creating more than one Facebook account, according to the terms of use we all agreed to, we are not allowed to

create more than one personal profile. People may also have difficulty managing their different commitments, especially if they develop a dependence on or even addiction to new media devices and/or platforms. New media blur the lines between personal and professional in many ways, which can be positive and negative. For example, the constant connection offered by laptops and smartphones increases the expectation that people will continue working from home or while on vacation. At the same time, however, people may use new media for non-work-related purposes while at work, which may help even out the work/life balance. Cyberslacking, which is the non-work-related use of new media while on the job, is seen as a problem in many organizations and workplaces. However, some research shows that occasional use of new media for personal reasons while at work can have positive effects, as it may relieve boredom, help reduce stress, or lead to greater job satisfaction.

Personal media devices bring with them a sense of constant connectivity that makes us “reachable” nearly all the time and can be comforting or anxiety inducing. Devices such as smartphones and computers, and platforms such as e-mail, Facebook, and the web, are within an arm’s reach of many people. While this can be convenient and make things more efficient in some cases, it can also create a dependence that we might not be aware of until those connections are broken or become unreliable. You don’t have to look too far to see people buried in their smartphones, tablets, or laptops all around. While some people have learned to rely on peripheral vision in order to text and walk at the same time, others aren’t so graceful. In fact, London saw the creation of a “text safe” street with padding on street signs and lamp poles to help prevent injuries when people inevitably bump into them while engrossed in their gadgets’ screens. [Follow this link to read a story in Time magazine](#) and see a picture of the street. Additionally, a survey conducted in the United Kingdom found that being away from social networks causes more anxiety than being a user of them. Another study found that 73 percent of people would panic if they lost their smartphone..

Of course, social media can also increase self-esteem or have other social benefits. A recent survey of fifteen thousand women found that 48 percent of the respondents felt that social media helped them stay in touch with others while also adding a little stress in terms of overstimulation. Forty-two percent didn’t mention the stress of overstimulation and focused more on the positive effects of being in touch with others and the world in general. When asked about how social media affects their social lives, 30 percent of the women felt that increased use of social media helped them be more social offline as well. Other research supports this finding for both genders, finding that Facebook can help people with social anxiety feel more confident and socially connected.

## **New Media and Interpersonal Relationships**

How do new media affect our interpersonal relationships, if at all? This is a question that has been addressed by scholars, commentators, and people in general. To provide some perspective, similar questions and concerns have been raised along with each major change in communication technology. New media, however, have been the primary communication change of the past few generations, which likely accounts for the attention they receive. Some scholars in sociology have decried the negative effects of new technology on society and relationships in particular,

saying that the quality of relationships is deteriorating and the strength of connections is weakening.

Facebook greatly influenced our use of the word friend, although people's conceptions of the word may not have changed as much. When someone "friends you" on Facebook, it doesn't automatically mean that you now have the closeness and intimacy that you have with some offline friends. And research shows that people don't regularly accept friend requests from or send them to people they haven't met, preferring instead to have met a person at least once. Some users, though, especially adolescents, engage in what is called "friend-collecting behavior," which entails users friending people they don't know personally or that they wouldn't talk to in person in order to increase the size of their online network. As we will discuss later, this could be an impression management strategy, as the user may assume that a large number of Facebook friends will make him or her appear more popular to others.

Although many have critiqued the watering down of the term friend when applied to SNSs, specifically Facebook, some scholars have explored how the creation of these networks affects our interpersonal relationships and may even restructure how we think about our relationships. Even though a person may have hundreds of Facebook friends that he or she doesn't regularly interact with on- or offline, just knowing that the network exists in a somewhat tangible form (catalogued on Facebook) can be comforting. Even the people who are distant acquaintances but are "friends" on Facebook can serve important functions. Rather than Facebook users seeing these connections as pointless, frivolous, or stressful, they are often comforting background presences. A dormant network is a network of people with whom users may not feel obligated to explicitly interact but may find comfort in knowing the connections exist. Such networks can be beneficial, because when needed, a person may be able to more easily tap into that dormant network than they would an offline extended network. It's almost like being friends on Facebook keeps the communication line open, because both people can view the other's profile and keep up with their lives even without directly communicating. This can help sustain tenuous friendships or past friendships and prevent them from fading away, which as we learned in Chapter 7 "[Communication in Relationships](#)" is a common occurrence as we go through various life changes.

A key part of interpersonal communication is impression management, and some forms of new media allow us more tools for presenting ourselves than others. Social networking sites (SNSs) in many ways are platforms for self-presentation. Even more than blogs, web pages, and smartphones, the environment on an SNS like Facebook or Twitter facilitates self-disclosure in a directed way and allows others who have access to our profile to see our other "friends." This convergence of different groups of people (close friends, family, acquaintances, friends of friends, colleagues, and strangers) can present challenges for self-presentation. Although Facebook is often thought of as a social media outlet for teens and young adults, research shows half of all US adults have a profile on Facebook or another SNS.. The fact that Facebook is expanding to different generations of users has coined a new phrase—"the graying of Facebook." This is due to a large increase in users over the age of fifty-five. In fact, it has been stated the fastest-growing Facebook user group is women fifty-five and older, which is up more than 175 percent since fall 2008. So now we likely have people from personal, professional, and academic contexts in our Facebook network, and those people are now more likely than ever to be from

multiple generations. The growing diversity of our social media networks creates new challenges as we try to engage in impression management.

We should be aware that people form impressions of us based not just on what we post on our profiles but also on our friends and the content that they post on our profiles. In short, as in our offline lives, we are judged online by the company we keep. The difference is, though, that via Facebook a person (unless blocked or limited by privacy settings) can see our entire online social network and friends, which doesn't happen offline. The information on our Facebook profiles is also archived, meaning there is a record the likes of which doesn't exist in offline interactions. Recent research found that a person's perception of a profile owner's attractiveness is influenced by the attractiveness of the friends shown on the profile. In short, a profile owner is judged more physically attractive when his or her friends are judged as physically attractive, and vice versa. The profile owner is also judged as more socially attractive (likable, friendly) when his or her friends are judged as physically attractive. The study also found that complimentary and friendly statements made about profile owners on their wall or on profile comments increased perceptions of the profile owner's social attractiveness and credibility. An interesting, but not surprising, gender double standard also emerged. When statements containing sexual remarks or references to the profile owner's excessive drinking were posted on the profile, perceptions of attractiveness increased if the profile owner was male and decreased if female.

Self-disclosure is a fundamental building block of interpersonal relationships, and new media make self-disclosures easier for many people because of the lack of immediacy, meaning the fact that a message is sent through electronic means arouses less anxiety or inhibition than would a face-to-face exchange. SNSs provide opportunities for social support. Research has found that Facebook communication behaviors such as "friending" someone or responding to a request posted on someone's wall lead people to feel a sense of attachment and perceive that others are reliable and helpful. Much of the research on Facebook, though, has focused on the less intimate alliances that we maintain through social media. Since most people maintain offline contact with their close friends and family, Facebook is more of a supplement to interpersonal communication. Since most people's Facebook "friend" networks are composed primarily of people with whom they have less face-to-face contact in their daily lives, Facebook provides an alternative space for interaction that can more easily fit into a person's busy schedule or interest area. For example, to stay connected, both people don't have to look at each other's profiles simultaneously. I often catch up on a friend by scrolling through a couple weeks of timeline posts rather than checking in daily.

The space provided by SNSs can also help reduce some of the stress we feel in regards to relational maintenance or staying in touch by allowing for more convenient contact. The expectations for regular contact with our Facebook friends who are in our extended network are minimal. An occasional comment on a photo or status update or an even easier click on the "like" button can help maintain those relationships. However, when we post something asking for information, help, social support, or advice, those in the extended network may play a more important role and allow us to access resources and viewpoints beyond those in our closer circles. And research shows that many people ask for informational help through their status updates.

These extended networks serve important purposes, one of which is to provide access to new information and different perspectives than those we may get from close friends and family. For example, since we tend to have significant others that are more similar to than different from us, the people that we are closest to are likely to share many or most of our beliefs, attitudes, and values. Extended contacts, however, may expose us to different political views or new sources of information, which can help broaden our perspectives. The content in this section hopefully captures what I'm sure you have already experienced in your own engagement with new media—that new media have important implications for our interpersonal relationships. Given that, we will end this chapter with a “Getting Competent” feature box that discusses some tips on how to competently use social media.

Examples – “Getting Competent”

### **Using Social Media Competently**

We all have a growing log of personal information stored on the Internet, and some of it is under our control and some of it isn't. We also have increasingly diverse social networks that require us to be cognizant of the information we make available and how we present ourselves. While we can't control all the information about ourselves online or the impressions people form, we can more competently engage with social media so that we are getting the most out of it in both personal and professional contexts.

A quick search on Google for “social media dos and don'ts” will yield around 100,000 results, which shows that there's no shortage of advice about how to competently use social media. I'll offer some of the most important dos and don'ts that I found that relate to communication. Feel free to do your own research on specific areas of concern.

Be consistent. Given that most people have multiple social media accounts, it's important to have some degree of consistency. At least at the top level of your profile (the part that isn't limited by privacy settings), include information that you don't mind anyone seeing.

Know what's out there. Since the top level of many social media sites are visible in Google search results, you should monitor how these appear to others by regularly (about once a month) doing a Google search using various iterations of your name. Putting your name in quotation marks will help target your results. Make sure you're logged out of all your accounts and then click on the various results to see what others can see.

Think before you post. Software that enable people to take “screen shots” or download videos and tools that archive web pages can be used without our knowledge to create records of what you post. While it is still a good idea to go through your online content and “clean up” materials that may form unfavorable impressions, it is even a better idea to not put that information out there in the first place. Posting something about how you hate school or your job or a specific person may be done in the heat of the moment and forgotten, but a potential employer might find that information and form a negative impression even if it's months or years old.

Be familiar with privacy settings. If you are trying to expand your social network, it may be counterproductive to put your Facebook or Twitter account on “lockdown,” but it is beneficial to know what levels of control you have and to take advantage of them. For example, I have a “Limited Profile” list on Facebook to which I assign new contacts or people with whom I am not very close. You can also create groups of contacts on various social media sites so that only certain people see certain information.

Be a gatekeeper for your network. Do not accept friend requests or followers that you do not know. Not only could these requests be sent from “bots” that might skim your personal info or monitor your activity; they could be from people that might make you look bad. Remember, we learned earlier that people form impressions based on those with whom we are connected. You can always send a private message to someone asking how he or she knows you or do some research by Googling his or her name or username.

1. Identify information that you might want to limit for each of the following audiences: friends, family, and employers.
2. Google your name (remember to use multiple forms and to put them in quotation marks). Do the same with any usernames that are associated with your name (e.g., you can Google your Twitter handle or an e-mail address). What information came up? Were you surprised by anything?
3. What strategies can you use to help manage the impressions you form on social media?

## Key Takeaways

1. New media affect the self as we develop a higher degree of self-consciousness due to the increased visibility of our lives (including pictures, life events, and communication). The constant connectivity that comes with new media can also help us feel more connected to others and create anxiety due to overstimulation or a fear of being cut off.
2. New media affect interpersonal relationships, as conceptions of relationships are influenced by new points of connection such as “being Facebook friends.” While some people have critiqued social media for lessening the importance of face-to-face interaction, some communication scholars have found that online networks provide important opportunities to stay connected, receive emotional support, and broaden our perspectives in ways that traditional offline networks do not.
3. Getting integrated: Social networking sites (SNSs) can present interpersonal challenges related to self-disclosure and self-presentation since we use them in academic, professional, personal, and civic contexts. Given that people from all those contexts may have access to our profile, we have to be competent in regards to what we disclose and how we present ourselves to people from different contexts (or be really good at managing privacy settings so that only certain information is available to certain people).

## Exercises

1. Discuss the notion that social media has increased our degree of self-consciousness. Do you agree? Why or why not?
2. Do you find the constant connectivity that comes with personal media overstimulating or comforting?
3. Have you noticed a “graying” of social media like Facebook and Twitter in your own networks? What opportunities and challenges are presented by intergenerational interactions on social media?

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# Glossary

## *accommodating*

Style of conflict management that may indicate a low concern for self and a high concern for other, is often viewed as passive or submissive, and may result in a lose/win situation.

## *Action-oriented listeners*

Listeners who focus on what action needs to take place in regards to a received message and try to formulate an organized way to initiate that action.

## *Active listening*

The process of pairing outwardly visible positive listening behaviors with positive cognitive listening practices.

## *active-empathetic listening*

A type of listening in which a listener becomes actively and emotionally involved in an interaction in such a way that it is conscious on the part of the listener and perceived by the speaker.

## *actual self*

Self that consists of the attributes that you or someone else believes you actually possess.

## *Adaptors*

Touching behaviors and movements that indicate internal states typically related to arousal or anxiety and may be directed at the self, others, or objects.

## *Aggressive listening*

A bad listening practice in which people pay attention in order to attack something a speaker says.

## *altruistic lies*

Lies told to build the self-esteem of another person, communicate loyalty, or bend the truth to spare someone from hurtful information.

## *Annoyance swearing*

Swearing that provides a sense of relief as people use it to manage stress and tension, which can be a preferred alternative to physical aggression.

*Antimiscegenation laws*

Laws that made it illegal for people of different racial/ethnic groups to marry.

*anxious attachment*

Used to describe people with a desire for closeness but anxieties about being abandoned leading to self-doubts and emotional volatility.

*artifacts*

Possessions that communicate our identities.

*Associative friendships*

Solid interpersonal relationships between people who are equals with a shared sense of loyalty and commitment.

*assumed similarity*

Perceptual tendency to perceive others as similar to us.

*avoidant attachment*

Used to describe people who report discomfort with closeness and a reluctance to depend on others resulting in a pessimistic view of love and a fear of intimacy.

*avoiding*

Style of conflict management that may indicate a low concern for self and other, in which there is no direct communication about the conflict, and may result in a lose/lose situation.

*avoiding stage*

Relational interaction stage where people signal that they want to close down the lines of communication.

*Back-channel*

Verbal and nonverbal signals we send while someone is talking, which can consist of verbal cues like “uh-huh,” “oh,” and “right,” and/or nonverbal cues like direct eye contact, head nods, and leaning forward.

*bonding stage*

Relational interaction stage that includes a public ritual that announces formal commitment.

*channel*

The sensory route on which a message travels.

*channels*

The sensory route on which a message travels.

*Chronemics*

The study of how time affects communication.

*circumscribing stage*

Relational interaction stage where communication decreases and certain areas or subjects become restricted as individuals verbally close themselves off from each other.

*collaborating*

Style of conflict management that shows a high degree of concern for self and other, usually indicates investment in the conflict and/or relationship, and results in a win/win situation.

*Collectivistic cultures*

Culture that values in-group identity over individual identity and values conformity to social norms of the in-group.

*Collegial peers*

Peers who engage in self-disclosure about work and personal topics and communicate emotional support.

*communication*

The process of generating meaning by sending and receiving verbal and nonverbal symbols and signs that are influenced by multiple contexts.

*Companionate love*

Overall stable and consistent affection felt between two people whose lives are interdependent.

*competing*

Style of conflict management that indicates a high concern for self and a low concern for other, in which one party attempts to win by gaining concessions or consent from another.

*compromising*

compromising

*consensual family*

A family that is high in both conversation and conformity orientations, encourages open communication, but also maintains a hierarchy that puts parents above children.

*constant connectivity*

A quality of personal media whereby we are “reachable” nearly all the time, which can be both comforting and anxiety inducing.

*Contact cultures*

Cultural groups in which people stand closer together, engage in more eye contact, touch more frequently, and speak more loudly.

*contaminated messages*

Messages that include mixed or misleading expressions.

*Critical listening*

Listening with the goal of analyzing or evaluating a message.

*Cultural context*

Aspects of identities such as race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and ability that influence communication.

*dark side of relationships*

Includes actions that are deemed unacceptable by society at large and actions that are unproductive for those in the relationship.

### *Decoding*

The process of turning communication into thoughts.

### *differentiating stage*

Relational interaction stage where communicating differences becomes a primary focus and people reestablish boundaries between themselves.

### *Discriminative listening*

A focused and usually instrumental type of listening that is primarily physiological and occurs mostly at the receiving stage of the listening process.

### *Display rules*

Sociocultural norms that influence emotional expression.

### *DTR talk*

A form of relationship-maintenance communication that defines the relationship between two people—often occurs in the early stages of a relationship to reduce uncertainty about where one stands with the other person.

### *Eavesdropping*

A bad listening practice that involves a planned attempt to secretly listen to a conversation.

### *Emblems*

Gestures that have specific agreed-on meanings.

### *Emotion sharing*

Communicating the circumstances, thoughts, and feelings surrounding an emotional event.

### *Emotional intelligence*

The ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one's thinking and action.

### *Emotions*

Physiological, behavioral, and/or communicative reactions to stimuli that are cognitively processed and experienced as emotional.

*Encoding*

The process of turning thoughts into communication.

*Environmental noise*

Physical noise present in a communication encounter.

*experimenting stage*

Relational interaction stage where people exchange information and often move from strangers to acquaintances.

*External attributions*

The process of connecting the cause of behaviors to situational factors.

*Extradyadic romantic activity (ERA)*

Sexual or emotional interaction with someone other than a primary romantic partner.

*face*

The projected self we desire to put into the world.

*Face negotiation theory*

Theory that argues people in all cultures negotiate face through communication encounters, and that cultural factors influence how we engage in facework, especially in conflicts.

*facework*

Communicative strategies we employ to project, maintain, or repair our face or maintain, repair, or challenge another's face.

*Facts*

Conclusions based on direct observation or group consensus.

*family celebrations*

Formal family rituals that have more standardization between families, may be culturally specific, help transmit values and memories through generations, and include rites of passage and religious and secular holiday celebrations.

#### *Family traditions*

Formal family rituals that vary widely from family to family and include birthdays, family reunions, and family vacations, among other things.

#### *Feedback*

Messages sent in response to other messages.

#### *Formal time*

Applies to professional situations in which we are expected to be on time or even a few minutes early.

#### *Friends with benefits*

Relationships that have the closeness of a friendship and the sexual activity of a romantic partnership without the expectations of romantic commitment or labels.

#### *Friendships*

Voluntary interpersonal relationships between two people who are usually equals and who mutually influence one another.

#### *fundamental attribution error*

A perceptual error through which we are more likely to explain others' behaviors using internal rather than external attributions.

#### *halo effect*

Perceptual effect that occurs when initial positive perceptions lead us to view later interactions as positive.

#### *haptics*

The study of communication by touch.

#### *high conversation orientation*

People communicate with each other freely and frequently about activities, thoughts, and feelings.

### *high-context communication*

Communication style in which much of the meaning generated within an interaction comes from nonverbal or contextual cues rather than the verbal communication.

### *horn effect*

Perceptual effect that occurs when initial negative perceptions lead us to view later interactions as negative.

### *ideal self*

Self that consists of the attributes that you or someone else would like you to possess.

### *Identity needs*

Needs related to the desire to present ourselves to others and be thought of in particular ways.

### *Illustrators*

The most common type of gesture, used to illustrate the verbal message they accompany.

### *Immediacy behaviors*

Verbal and nonverbal behaviors that lessen real or perceived physical and psychological distance between communicators.

### *implicit personality theories*

An interpretation process that uses previous experience to generalize a person's overall personality from the limited traits we can perceive.

### *Individualistic cultures*

Culture that emphasizes individual identity over group identity and encourages competition and self-reliance.

### *inference-observation confusion*

A frequent source of miscommunication that involves the misperception of an inference (conclusion based on limited information) as an observation (an observed or agreed-on fact).

### *Inferences*

Conclusions based on thoughts or speculation, but not direct observation.

*Informal time*

Applies to casual and interpersonal situations in which there is much more variation in terms of expectations for promptness.

*Information peers*

Peers who communicate only about work-related topics and have a low level of self-disclosure and trust.

*Informational listening*

Listening with the goal of comprehending and retaining information.

*initiating stage*

Relational interaction stage where people size each other up and try to present themselves favorably.

*Instrumental needs*

Needs that help us get things done in our day-to-day lives and achieve short- and long-term goals.

*integrating stage*

Relational interaction stage where two people's identities and personalities merge and a sense of interdependence develops.

*integrative learning*

An approach that encourages students to reflect on how the content they are learning connects to other classes they have taken or are taking, their professional goals, and their civic responsibilities.

*intensifying stage*

Relational interaction stage where people indicate that they would like or are open to more intimacy, closeness, or interdependence.

*interaction model of communication describes communication*

Describes communication as a process in which participants alternate positions as sender and receiver and generate meaning by sending messages and receiving feedback within physical and psychological contexts.

*intergenerational communication*

Communication between people of different age groups.

*Internal attributions*

The process of connecting the cause of behaviors to personal aspects such as personality.

*Interpersonal communication*

Communication between people whose lives mutually influence one another.

*interpersonal communication competence*

Our ability to communicate effectively and appropriately within our personal relationships.

*Interpersonal conflict*

Interactions in which there are real or perceived incompatible goals, scarce resources, or opposing viewpoints.

*Interpretation*

The third part of the perception process, in which we assign meaning to our experiences using mental structures known as schemata.

*Intimate partner violence (IPV)*

Physical, verbal, and emotional violence that occurs between two people who are in or were recently in a romantic relationship.

*intimate terrorism (IT)*

Violence used by one partner to have general control over the other.

*Intrapersonal communication*

Communication with oneself using internal vocalization or reflective thinking.

*Jargon*

Specialized words used by a certain group or profession.

*Johari window*

Concept that can be applied to a variety of interpersonal interactions in order to help us understand what parts of ourselves are open, hidden, blind, and unknown.

*Judgments*

Expressions of approval or disapproval that are subjective and not verifiable.

*kinesics*

Refers to the study of hand, arm, body, and face movements.

*laissez-faire family*

A family that is low in conversation and conformity orientations, has infrequent and/or short interactions, and doesn't discuss many topics.

*Listening*

The learned process of receiving, interpreting, recalling, evaluating, and responding to verbal and nonverbal messages.

*Listening environment*

Characteristics and norms of an organization and its members that contribute to expectations for and perceptions about listening.

*Long-term memory*

A mental storage capability that can retain stimuli for twenty seconds to one minute.

*looking glass self*

A concept that explains that we see ourselves reflected in other people's reactions to us and then form our self-concept based on how we believe other people see us.

*low conversation orientation*

People do not interact with each other as often and the topics of conversation are more restricted.

*low-context communication*

Communication style in which much of the meaning generated within an interaction comes from the verbal communication used rather than nonverbal or contextual cues.

*matching hypothesis*

States that people with similar levels of attractiveness will pair together.

*Mental bracketing*

The process of pairing outwardly visible positive listening behaviors with positive cognitive listening practices.

*mentoring relationship*

Relationship in which one person functions as a guide, helping another navigate toward career goals.

*message*

The verbal or nonverbal content being conveyed in a communication encounter.

*Mindreading*

Communication in which one person attributes something to the other using generalizations, usually leading to a defensive response that escalates conflict.

*mirroring*

The often subconscious practice of using nonverbal cues that match those of others around us.

*mixed messages*

Messages in which verbal and nonverbal signals contradict each other.

*Mnemonic devices*

Techniques that can aid in information recall.

*monochronic*

A fixed and precise orientation toward time in which time is seen as a commodity that can be budgeted, saved, spent, and wasted and events are to be scheduled in advance and have set beginning and ending times.

*Narcissistic listening*

Self-centered and self-absorbed listening in which listeners try to make the interaction about them.

*Noise*

Anything that interferes with a message being sent between participants in a communication encounter.

*noncontact*

Cultural groups in which people stand farther apart while talking, make less eye contact, and touch less during regular interactions.

*Nonverbal communication*

A process of generating meaning using behavior other than words.

*oculesics*

The study of eye behaviors as nonverbal communication.

*One-upping*

Quick reaction to communication from another person that escalates conflict.

*Organizing*

The second part of the perception process, in which we sort and categorize information that we perceive based on innate and learned cognitive patterns.

*ought self*

Self that consists of the attributes you or someone else believes you should possess.

*paralanguage*

The vocalized but not verbal part of a spoken message, such as speaking rate, volume, and pitch.

*paraphrase*

A message that is rephrased in your own words.

*Partial messages*

Messages that are missing a relevant type of expression and can lead to misunderstanding and conflict.

*participants*

The senders and/or receivers of messages in a communication encounter.

*Passionate love*

An emotionally charged engagement between two people that can be both exhilarating and painful.

*Patterned family interactions*

Frequent family rituals that do not have the degree of formality of traditions or celebrations.

*peer coworker relationship*

Relationship between two people who have no formal authority over the other and are interdependent in some way.

*People-oriented listeners*

Listeners who are concerned about the emotional states of others and listen with the purpose of offering support in interpersonal relationships.

*Perception*

The process of selecting, org

*Perception checking*

A strategy to help us monitor our reactions to and perceptions about people and communication.

*personal idioms*

Communicative constructs between relational partners, such as nicknames, that create a sense of belonging and have unique meaning for those in the relationship but may not make sense to outsiders.

*Personality*

A person's general way of thinking, feeling, and behaving based on underlying motivations and impulses.

*Phatic communion*

Scripted and routine verbal interactions that are intended to establish social bonds rather than actually exchange meaning.

*Physical context*

The environmental factors in a communication encounter.

*Physical needs*

Needs that keep our bodies and minds functioning.

*Physiological noise*

Noise stemming from a physical illness, injury, or bodily stress.

*pluralistic family*

A family that is high in conversation orientation and low in conformity, encourages open discussion for all family members, and in which parents do not strive to control their children's or each other's behaviors or decisions.

*polychronic*

A flexible cultural orientation toward time in which relationships are often valued above schedules and scheduling appointments at the same time and being late for or missing appointments may not be a violation of norms.

*Prejudice*

Negative feelings or attitudes toward people based on their identity or identities.

*primacy effect*

Perceptual tendency to place more value on the first information we receive about a person.

*Primary emotions*

Innate emotions that are experienced for short periods of time, appear rapidly, and are expressed similarly across cultures.

*Prosocial self-presentation*

Strategically exhibiting behaviors that present a person as a role model and make a person more likable and attractive.

*protective family*

A family that is low in conversation orientation and high in conformity, expects children to be obedient to parents, and does not value open communication.

*Proxemics*

The study of how space and distance influence communication.

*Psychological context*

The mental and emotional factors in a communication encounter.

*psychological noise*

Noise stemming from our psychological states, including moods and level of arousal, that can impede listening.

*Punctuation*

The structuring of information into a timeline to determine the cause (stimulus) and effect (response) of our communication interactions.

*recency effect*

Perceptual tendency to place more weight on the most recent impression we have of a person's communication over earlier impressions.

*Receptive friendships*

Friendships that include a status differential that makes the relationship asymmetrical.

*Reciprocal friendships*

Solid interpersonal relationships between people who are equals with a shared sense of loyalty and commitment.

*Relational context*

The previous interpersonal history and type of relationship we have with a person.

*Relational needs*

Needs that help us maintain social bonds and interpersonal relationships.

*Relationship cultures*

The unique climate within a relationship that is established through interpersonal communication adapted from established cultural and social norms.

*relationship routines*

Communicative acts that create a sense of predictability in a relationship that is often comforting.

*relationship schemata*

The expectations or blueprints we bring into our interpersonal relationships based on our social and cultural experiences.

*response preparation*

Our tendency to rehearse what we are going to say next while a speaker is still talking.

*Salience*

The degree to which something attracts our attention in a particular context.

*Schemata*

Databases of stored, related information that we use to interpret new experiences.

*Secondary emotions*

Emotions that develop over time, take longer to fade away, and require higher-order thinking to process.

*secure attachment*

Used to describe people who are comfortable with intimacy and dependence and have few self-doubts resulting in generally effective emotion management.

*Selecting*

The first part of the perception process, in which we focus our attention on certain incoming sensory information.

*selective attention*

Our tendency to pay attention to the messages that benefit us in some way and filter others out.

*Self-concept*

The judgments and evaluations we make about our self-concept.

*Self-disclosure*

Purposeful disclosure of personal information to another person.

*Self-discrepancy theory*

Theory that explains that people have beliefs about and expectations for their actual and potential selves that do not always match up with what they actually experience.

*Self-Efficacy*

The judgments people make about their ability to perform a task within a specific context.

*self-enhancement bias*

Self-presentation bias that refers to our tendency to emphasize our desirable qualities.

*Self-esteem*

The judgments and evaluations we make about our self-concept.

*Self-fulfilling prophecies*

Thought and action patterns in which a person's false belief triggers a behavior that makes the initial false belief actually or seemingly come true.

*Self-presentation*

The process of strategically concealing or revealing personal information in order to influence others' perceptions.

*self-serving bias*

A perceptual error through which we overattribute the cause of our successes to internal personal factors while overattributing our failures to external factors beyond our control.

*Self-serving self-presentation*

Strategically exhibiting behaviors that present a person as highly skilled, willing to challenge others, and someone not to be messed with.

*Semantic noise*

Noise that occurs in the encoding and decoding process when the participants do not understand a symbol.

*serial arguing*

A repeated pattern of disagreement over an issue.

*Short-term memory*

A mental storage capability that can retain stimuli for twenty seconds to one minute.

*Situational couple violence (SCV)*

Violence provoked by a particular situation that does not involve a quest for control in the relationship.

*Social comparison*

Theory that states we evaluate ourselves based on how we compare with others.

*Social comparison theory*

Theory that explains how we describe and evaluate ourselves in terms of how we compare to other people.

*Social context*

The stated rules or unstated norms that guide communication.

*Social exchange theory*

Theory that states we weigh the costs and rewards in our relationships.

*Social penetration theory*

Theory that states we engage in a reciprocal process of self-disclosure that changes in breadth and depth and affects how a relationship progresses.

*social swearing*

Swearing used conversationally to create social bonds or for impression management (to seem cool or attractive).

### *Special peers*

Peers who have high levels of self-disclosure with relatively few limitations and are highly interdependent in terms of providing emotional and professional support for one another.

### *stagnating stage*

Relational interaction stage where the relationship may come to a standstill, as individuals wait for the relationship to end.

### *Stereotypes*

Sets of beliefs that we develop about groups, which we then apply to individuals from that group.

### *supervisor-subordinate relationship*

Relationship based in mentoring, friendship, or romance that includes two people, one of whom has formal authority over the other.

### *supportive messages*

Messages communicated in an open, honest, and nonconfrontational way.

### *terminating stage*

Relational interaction stage where a relationship ends.

### *Territoriality*

An innate drive to take up and defend spaces.

### *Tie signs*

Nonverbal cues that communicate intimacy and signal the connection between two people.

### *Time-oriented listeners*

Listeners who are more concerned about time limits and time lines than they are with the content or senders of a message.

### *transaction model of communication*

Describes communication as a process in which communicators generate social realities within social, relational, and cultural contexts.

### *transmission model of communication*

Describes communication as a linear, one-way process in which a sender intentionally transmits a message to a receiver.

### *unsupportive messages*

Messages that can make others respond defensively, which can lead to feelings of separation and actual separation or dissolution of a relationship.

### *Verbal expressions*

Language that helps us communicate our observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs.

### *Violent resistance (VR)*

Violence that is often a reaction or response to intimate terrorism.

### *Vocalics*

The study of paralanguage, which includes the vocal qualities that go along with verbal messages, such as pitch, volume, rate, vocal quality, and verbal fillers.

### *Whole messages*

Messages that include all the relevant types of expressions needed to most effectively communicate in a given situation, including what you see, what you think, what you feel, and what you need.

### *Workplace romances*

Relationships that involve two coworkers who are emotionally and physically attracted to one another.