# Fundamentals of Communication

# FUNDAMENTALS OF COMMUNICATION

LOUIS: THE LOUISIANA LIBRARY NETWORK

CYNTHIA SAMPSON; DOUG MARSHALL; ELIZABETH BATTE;
ELIZABETH HORNSBY; AND ROBIN JOHNSTONE

LOUIS: The Louisiana Library Network

# CONTENTS

## Chapter IX. Chapter 9: Culture and Identity



## Chapter X. Chapter 10: Intercultural Communication



## Chapter XI. Chapter 11: Mass Communication

# INTRODUCTION

## The Creation of This Book

This textbook was created as part of the Interactive OER for Dual Enrollment project, facilitated by LOUIS: The Louisiana Library Network and funded by a $2 million Open Textbooks Pilot Program grant from the Department of Education.

This project supports the extension of access to high-quality post-secondary opportunities to high school students across Louisiana and beyond by creating materials that can be adopted for dual enrollment environments. Dual enrollment is the opportunity for a student to be enrolled in high school and college at the same time.

The cohort-developed OER course materials are released under a license that permits their free use, reuse, modification and sharing with others. This includes a corresponding course available in MoodleNet and Canvas Commons that can be imported to other Learning Management System platforms. For access/questions, contact Affordable Learning Louisiana.

If you are adopting this textbook, we would be glad to know of your use via this brief survey.

## Review Statement

This textbook and its accompanying course materials went through at least two review processes:

- Peer reviewers, coordinated by Jared Eusea, River Parish Community College, used an online course development standard rubric for assessing the quality and content of each course to ensure that the courses developed through Interactive OER for Dual Enrollment support online learners in that environment. The evaluation framework reflects a commitment to accessibility and usability for all learners.
    - Reviewers
        - Lisa Abney
        - Jesse Walczak
        - Missy LaCour
- The Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education (ISKME) collaborated with LOUIS to review course materials and ensure their appropriateness for dual enrollment audiences. Review criteria were drawn from factors that apply across dual enrollment courses and subject areas, such as determining appropriate reading levels, assessing the fit of topics and examples for high school

DE students; applying high-level principles for quality curriculum design, including designing for accessibility, appropriate student knowledge checks, and effective scaffolding of student tasks and prior knowledge requirements, addressing adaptability and open educational practices, and principles related to inclusion and representational social justice.

- Reviewers
  - Melody Boeck
  - Victoria VanNest

## Adaptation Acknowledgements

This book is an updated remix of Process of Communication, an open educational resources publication by the College of the Canyons. Authored and compiled by Tammera Stokes Rice; edited by: Trudi Radtke & Alexa Johnson, Version 1.3, 2020.

This version was remixed by Cynthia Sampson, Doug Marshall, Elizabeth Robertson Hornsby, Robin Johnstone, and Elizabeth Batte. Chapter 2: History of Communication Studies and Chapter 12: Health Communication were removed from this version. Chapter 9: Interpersonal Communication, Chapter 10: Intercultural Communication, and Chapter 11: Gender Communication were replaced by a revised version of Intercultural Communication by Shannon Ahrndt, University of Missouri–St. Louis, 2020.

CHAPTER I

# CHAPTER 1: FOUNDATIONS OF COMMUNICATION

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- Explain communication studies
- Define communication
- Explain the Linear and Transactional Models of Communication
- Discuss the benefits of studying communication

You are probably reading this book because you are taking an introductory communication course at the college level. Many colleges and universities around the country require students to take some type of communication course in order to graduate. Introductory communication classes include courses on public speaking, interpersonal communication, or a class that combines both. While these are some of the most common introductory communication courses, many communication departments are now offering an introductory course that explains what communication is, how it is studied as an academic field, and what areas of specialization make up the field of communication. In other words, these are survey courses similar to courses such as Introduction to Sociology or Introduction to Psychology. Our goal in this text is to introduce you to the field of communication as an academic discipline of study.

# 1.1 DEFINING COMMUNICATION

As professors, we hear a lot of people talk about communication both on and off our campuses. We're often surprised at how few people can actually explain what communication is or what communication departments are about. Even our majors sometimes have a hard time explaining to others what it is they study in college. Throughout this book, we will provide you with the basics for understanding what communication is, what communication scholars and students study, and how you can effectively use the study of communication in your life—whether or not you are a communication major. We accomplish this by taking you on a journey through time. The material in this text is framed chronologically and is largely presented in the context of the events that occurred before the Industrial Revolution (2500 BCE–19$^{th}$ century CE) and after the Industrial Revolution through the present day. In each chapter, we include boxes that provide examples of that chapter's topic in the context of "then," "now," and "you" to help you grasp how the study of communication at colleges and universities impacts life in the real world.

Before we introduce you to verbal and nonverbal communication, history, theories, and research methods and the chronological development of communication specializations, we want to set a foundation in this chapter by explaining communication studies, models of communication, and communication at work.

Image by Jessica Da Rosa on Unsplash.

## What Is Communication Studies?

When we tell others that we teach communication, people often ask questions like, Do you teach radio and television? Do you teach public speaking? Do you do news broadcasts? Do you work with computers? Do you study public relations? Is that journalism or mass communication? But the most common question we get is, What is that? It's interesting that most people will tell us they know what communication is, but they do not have a clear understanding of what it is communication scholars study and teach in our academic discipline. In fact, many professors in other departments on our campus also ask us what it is we study and teach. If you're a communication major, you've probably been asked the same question and, like us, may have had a hard time answering it succinctly. If you memorize the definition below, you will have a quick and simple answer to those who ask you what you study as a communication major.

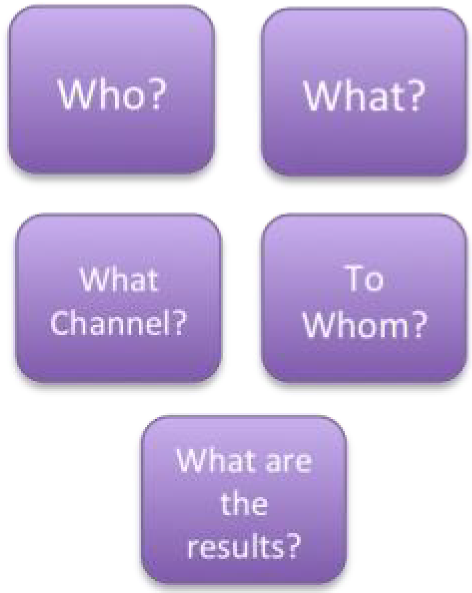



Image by Spaynton is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

Bruce Smith, Harold Lasswell, and Ralph D. Casey provided a good and simple answer to the question, "What is communication studies?" They state that **communication studies** is an academic field whose primary focus is "who says what, through what channels (media) of communication, to whom, [and] what will be the results (121)."

Egyptian antiquities in the Brooklyn Museum Image by Sailko is licensed under CC BY 3.0

Although they gave this explanation almost 70 years ago, to this day it succinctly describes the focus of communication scholars and professionals. As professors and students of communication, we extensively examine the various forms and outcomes of human communication. On its website, the National Communication Association (NCA) states that communication studies "focuses on how people use messages to generate meanings within and across various contexts, cultures, channels, and media. The discipline promotes the effective and ethical practice of human communication...Communication is a diverse discipline which includes inquiry by social scientists, humanists, and critical and cultural studies scholars." Now, if people ask you what you're studying in a communication class, you have an answer!

In this course, we will use the Smith, Lasswell, and Casey definition to guide how we discuss the content in this book. Part I sets the foundation by exploring the what and channels (verbal and nonverbal communication) and presenting the whom and results (theories and research methods). Before we get into those chapters, it is important for you to know how we define the actual term communication to give you context for our discussion of it throughout the book.

## Defining Communication

As we have already discussed, it's more difficult than you think. Don't be discouraged. For decades, communication professionals have had difficulty coming to any consensus about how to define the term communication (Hovland et al.). Even today, there is no single agreed-upon definition of communication. In 1970 and 1984, Frank Dance looked at 126 published definitions of communication within the field and said that the task of trying to develop a single definition of communication that everyone likes is like trying to nail Jell-O to a wall. Thirty years later, defining communication still feels like nailing Jell-O to a wall.

We recognize that there are countless definitions of communication, but we feel it's important to provide you with our definition so that you understand how we approach each chapter in this book. We are not arguing that this definition of communication is the only one you should consider viable, but you will understand the content of this text better if you understand how we have come to define communication. For the purpose of this text, we define **communication** as the process of using symbols to exchange meaning.

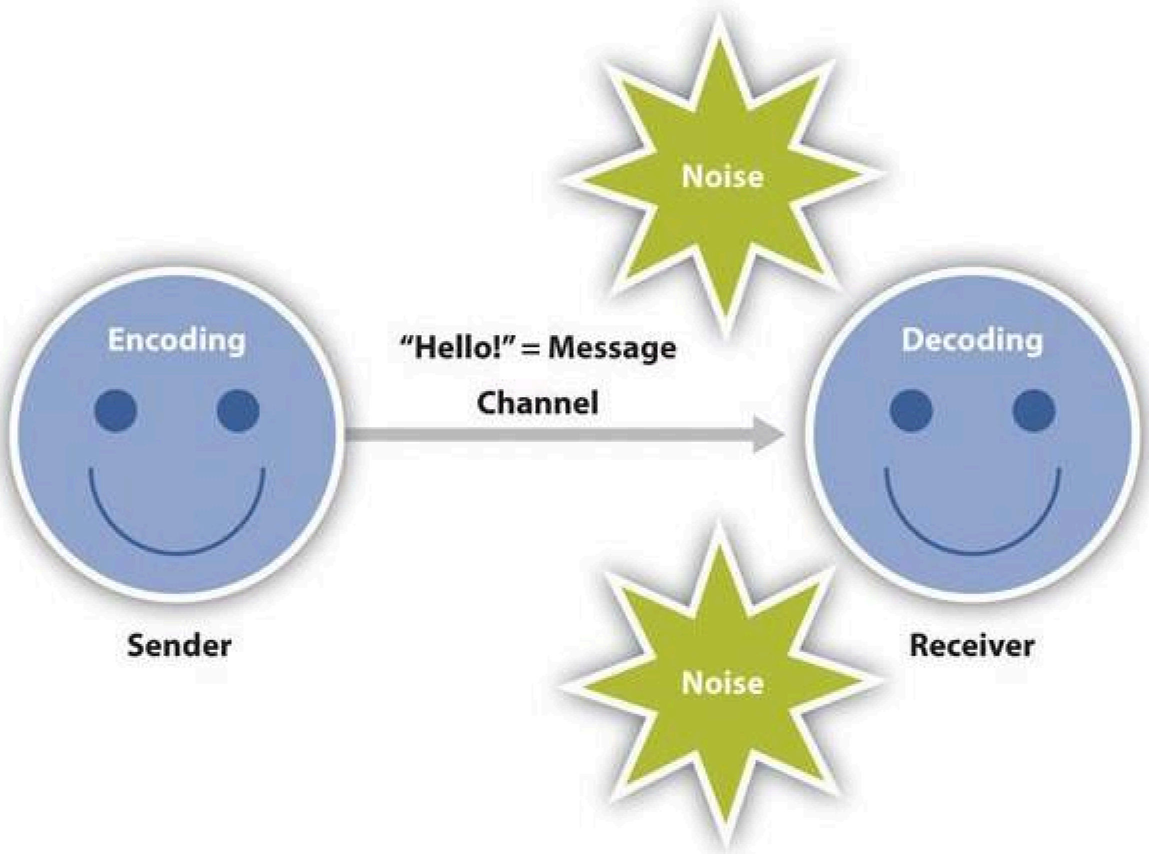
Let's examine two models of communication to help you further grasp this definition. Shannon and Weaver proposed a Mathematical or **Linear Model of Communication** that suggests that communication is simply the transmission of a message from one source to another. Watching YouTube videos serves as an example of this. You act as the receiver when you watch videos, receiving messages from the source (the YouTube video). To better understand this, let's break down each part of this model.

The Linear Model of Communication states that communication moves only in one direction. The sender encodes a message, then uses a certain channel (verbal/nonverbal communication) to send it to a receiver who decodes (interprets) the message. Noise is anything that interferes with or changes the original encoded message.

A **sender** is someone who encodes and sends a message to a receiver through a particular channel. The sender is the initiator of communication. For example, when you text a friend, ask a teacher a question, or wave to someone, you are the sender of a message.

A **receiver** is the recipient of a message. Receivers must decode (interpret) messages in ways that are meaningful to them. For example, if you see your friend make eye contact, smile, wave, and say "hello" as you pass, you are receiving a message intended for you. When this happens, you must decode the verbal and nonverbal communication in ways that are meaningful to you.

A **message** is the particular meaning or content the sender wishes the receiver to understand. The message can be intentional or unintentional, written or spoken, verbal or nonverbal, or any combination of these. For example, as you walk across campus, you may see a friend walking toward you. When you make eye contact, wave, smile, and say "hello," you are offering a message that is intentional, spoken, verbal, and nonverbal.



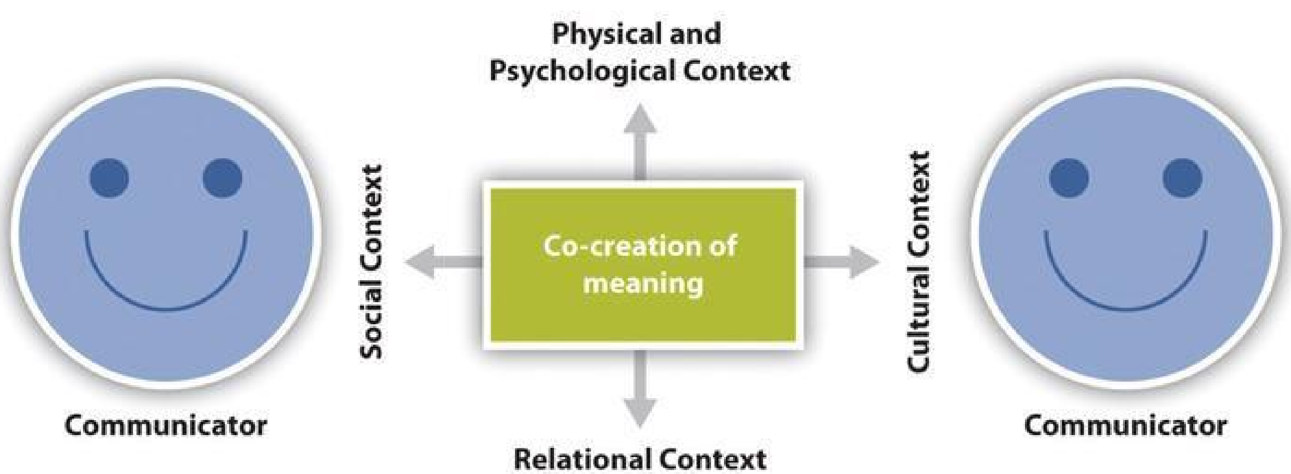

Linear Model of Communication Image by Andy Schmitz is licensed under CC-BY-SA 3.0

A **channel** is the method a sender uses to send a message to a receiver. The most common channels humans use are verbal and nonverbal forms of communication. Verbal communication relies on language and includes speaking, writing, and sign language. Nonverbal communication includes gestures, facial expressions, paralanguage, and touch. We also use communication channels that are mediated (such as television or the computer), which may utilize both verbal and nonverbal communication. Using the greeting example above, the channels of communication include both verbal and nonverbal communication.

**Noise** is anything that interferes with the sending or receiving of a message. Noise is external (a jackhammer outside your apartment window or loud music in a nightclub) and internal (physical pain, psychological stress, or nervousness about an upcoming test). External and internal noise make encoding and decoding messages more difficult. Using our ongoing example, if you are on your way to lunch and listening to music on your phone when your friend greets you, you may not hear your friend say "hello," and you may not wish to chat because you are hungry. In this case, both internal and external noise influenced the communication exchange. Noise is in every communication context, and therefore, no message is received exactly as it is transmitted by a sender because noise distorts it in one way or another.

A major criticism of the **Linear Model of Communication** is that it suggests communication only occurs in one direction. It also does not show how context or our personal experiences impact communication. Television serves as a good example of the linear model. Have you ever talked back to your television while you were watching it? Maybe you were watching a sporting event or a dramatic show and you talked to the people in the television. Did they respond to you? We're sure they did not. Television works in one direction. No matter how much you talk to the television, it will not respond to you. Now apply this idea to the communication in your relationships. It seems ridiculous to think that this is how we would communicate with each other on a regular basis. This example shows the limits of the linear model for understanding communication, particularly human-to-human communication.

Given the limitations of the Linear Model, Barnlund adapted the model to more fully represent what occurs in most human communication exchanges. The **Transactional Model of Communication** demonstrates that communication participants act as senders *and* receivers simultaneously, creating reality through their interactions. Communication is not a simple one-way transmission of a message: the personal filters and experiences of the participants impact each communication exchange. The Transactional Model demonstrates that we are simultaneously senders and receivers and that noise and personal filters always influence the outcomes of every communication exchange.




Transactional Model of Communication Image by Andy Schmitz is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 3.0

The Transactional Model of Communication adds to the Linear Model by suggesting that both parties in a communication exchange act as both sender and receiver simultaneously, encoding and decoding messages to and from each other at the same time.

While these models are overly simplistic representations of communication, they illustrate some of the complexities of defining and studying **communication**. Going back to Smith, Lasswell, and Casey, we may choose to focus on one, all, or a combination of the following: senders of communication, receivers of communication, channels of communication, messages, noise, context, and the outcome of communication. We hope you recognize that studying communication is simultaneously detail-oriented (looking at small parts of human communication) and far-reaching (examining a broad range of communication exchanges).

# 1.2 BENEFITS OF COMMUNICATION STUDIES

If you think about the Smith, Lasswell, and Casey statement that those of us who study communication investigate "who says what, through what channels (media) of communication, to whom, [and] what will be the results," you should realize how truly complex a task we perform (121). While we'll explore many examples later in the book, we want to briefly highlight a few examples of what you might study if you are interested in communication as a field of study.

Studying communication is exciting because there are so many possibilities on which to focus. For example, you might study elements of the history and use of YouTube (Soukup), the use of deception in texting (Wise and Rodriguez), college students' "guilty pleasure" media use (Panek), how sons and daughters communicate disappointment (Miller et al.), an examination of motherhood in lesbian-headed households (Koenig et al.), or daughters' perceptions of communication with their fathers (Dunleavy et al.).

Communication helps with diplomacy Image by Kremlin.ru is licensed under CC BY 4.0

The above examples demonstrate just a small taste of what we can examine through the lens of communication. In reality, studying communication has almost limitless possibilities. That's what makes this field so dynamic and exciting! When you think about the infinite number of variables we can study, as well as the infinite number of communication contexts, the task of studying "who says what, through what channels (media) of communication, to whom, [and] what will be the results" is open to countless possibilities. The study of communication has proven helpful to us as social beings as we work to better understand the complexities of our interactions and relationships.

As a student taking an introductory communication course, you might be thinking, "Why does this matter to me?" One reason it is important for you to study and know communication is that these skills will help you succeed in personal, social, and professional situations. A survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers found that "college students who wish to separate themselves from the competition during their job search would be wise to develop proficiencies most sought by employers, such as communication, interpersonal, and teamwork skills." Whether you major in communication or not, the more you understand communication, the greater potential you have to succeed in all aspects of your life. Another important reason for studying communication is that it can lead to a variety of career opportunities.

## Career-Focused Communication Skills

The kind of skills developed by students who study communication are highly valued by all kinds of employers. Courses and activities in the academic field of communication both teach and make use of the skills ranked consistently high by employers. Students who study communication are ready to excel in a wide variety of careers. Forbes listed "The 10 Skills Employers Want in 20-Something Employees." Look to see how many relate directly to what you would learn from a course such as ours:

- Ability to work in a team
- Ability to make decisions and solve problems
- Ability to plan, organize, and prioritize work
- Ability to communicate verbally with people inside and outside an organization
- Ability to obtain and process information
- Ability to analyze quantitative data
- Technical knowledge related to the job
- Proficiency with computer software programs
- Ability to create and/or edit written reports
- Ability to sell and influence others

CHAPTER II

# CHAPTER 2: PERCEIVING AND UNDERSTANDING

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- Describe communication and perception processes
- Discuss factors that influence the perception of self and others
- Describe strategies for improving 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.

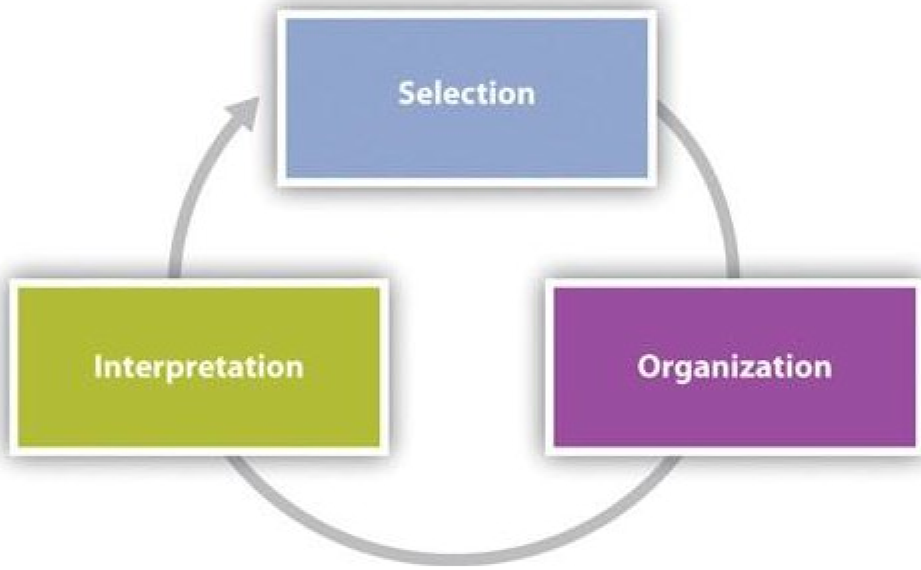
As we go through our daily lives, we perceive all sorts of people and objects, and we often make sense of these perceptions by using previous experiences to help filter and organize the information we take in. Sometimes we encounter new or contradictory information that changes the way we think about 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

**Perception** is the process of selecting, organizing, and interpreting information. This 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 (Fiske and Taylor). **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?




The Perception Process. Image by Lumen Learning is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA

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 (Fiske and Taylor, 186). 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.

## 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 called **schemata**. There are four types of these schemata: prototypes, personal construct, stereotypes, and scripts. One or all of these tools can be used to organize our perceptions in a meaningful way.

The first of the schemata is known as a **prototype**. A prototype defines the clearest or most representative examples of some category. It is an ideal or best example of a particular category. Stating that a particular person would make the ideal friend, or that someone is the perfect worker, are both means of prototyping. We classify people by the category that most represents them. Then we consider how well they measure up. The second schemata, **personal construct**, allows us to measure people and situations. We do so usually after we generalize people into their category or stereotype. Then we make judgments in a limited manner, and our perception may not include nonhighlighted qualities. Thus, we are reminded that the processes of selecting and organizing interact to affect our perception.

The third schemata, known as **stereotyping**, is the process of predicting generalizations of people and situations. It is very widely used and can be negative as well as positive. However, it is rarely a completely accurate form of measure. Finally, the last schemata is known as a script. A **script** is a sequence of activities that spells out how we and others are expected to act in a specific situation. We follow these scripts when someone says hello, when we date, when we are at church, and in many other situations. We have been trained by our environment to follow certain paths that can be constructive, destructive, or both.

The organization of what we select to interpret has a very large influence on our perception. The different environments that we have lived in throughout our lives will always influence our insight. All four cognitive **schemata** are ever-changing based on new environments and how open we are to new ideas. The ability to understand that we cannot possibly have a complete understanding of people in this world is crucial to the interpretation process. Only if we realize that we change with every input of information, with every bite of food, with every breath of air can we understand that cognitive schemata are ever-changing. Therefore, we must revisit regularly how we organize our perceptions constantly and replace what we have thought to be true with what we have learned to be true.

## 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 schemata. Schemata are like databases of stored, related information that we use to interpret new experiences. We all have fairly complicated **schema** 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 schemata adapted to the changing environment. How smooth or troubling schema reevaluation and revision are 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 on to 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 schema can be stressful and that such revision takes effort and usually involves some mistakes, disappointments, and frustrations. But being able to adapt our schema 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 schema 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.

## Summary of Perception Process

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.

# 2.2 PERCEIVING 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 (Ballew and Todorov). 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.

In most interactions, we are constantly making **attributions** through which we invent 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 blowup 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.

Image by MIke Kline is licensed under CC BY 2.0

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 (Sillars, 183). 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 that 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 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 grades to their busy schedules 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're 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.

## 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 a 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, and a hipster. The **schemata** 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 schemata 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 was supposedly being shocked complained of chest pains and became unresponsive (Encina).

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 kinder and more 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).

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 (Hargie, 281).

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.

## Summary of Perceiving Others

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. 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.

# 2.3 PERCEIVING AND PRESENTING SELF

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 ourselves are products of our own making and how much 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 they, she, or he is. If I said, "Tell me who you are," your answers would be clues as to how you see 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 a 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 (Cooley). 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."

Image by Serghei Trofimov on Unsplash

We also develop our self-concept through comparisons. Men are more likely than women to include group memberships in their self-concept descriptions 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 (Hargie, 261). 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 in 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 our 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 highest score on a 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 more specifically an evaluation of the self (Byrne). 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 (Brockner). More specifically, our self-esteem varies across our life span and across contexts.

Image by Fauzan Saari on Unsplash

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 (Brockner). 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

**Self-efficacy** refers to the judgments people make about their ability to perform a task within a specific context (Bandura). Judgments about our self-efficacy influence our self-esteem, which influences our self-concept. The following example also illustrates these interconnections.


Image by Andy Schmitz is licensed under CC-NC-SA 3.0

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 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 (Hargie). 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 (Higgins). 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. 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. 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 ideal 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.

Image by Kyle Glenn on Unsplash

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 and weakness and a feeling that we have fallen short of our moral standard (Higgins, 322–23). 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-Perception

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.

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 (Hargie, 99). 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 for 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 a 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 (Hargie, 105–7).

Image by Benjamin Davies on Unsplash

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 (Wierzbicka). 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 in many verbally and physically abusive relationships. Such patterns have negative effects on a child's self-efficacy and self-esteem (Morgan and Wilson, 341). 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 children 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.

## Summary of Perception and Self

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 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.

# 2.4 IMPROVING PERCEPTION

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 **schemata**, 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 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*

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 a cognitive and emotional investment that goes beyond the learning of a skill set.

### *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. Prejudice is negative feelings or attitudes toward people based on their identity or identities.

### *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.

## Improving Self-Perception

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.

### *Avoid Reliance on Rigid Schemata*

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.

### *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.

### *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 (Guyll et al., 116). 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.

### *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.

# CHAPTER III

# CHAPTER 3: COMMUNICATION THEORY

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- Define theory and explain its functions
- Explain what makes a good theory
- Understand Theoretical Paradigms
- Explain the Empirical Laws Paradigm
- Explain the Human Rules Paradigm
- Explain the Systems Theory Paradigm
- Explain the Rhetorical Theory Paradigm
- Explain the Critical Theory Paradigm

How did the universe begin? Where did it all come from? Scientists, theologians, and educators have been debating this topic for centuries. A commonplace for this debate occurs in school textbooks—should they teach creationism or the big bang theory? How you answer this question depends on the theoretical perspective you hold. In either case, your theoretical perspective includes some common features—reasons to justify your theory and evidence you use to prove that it is correct. Creationists cite the Bible or other religious texts as proof of their theoretical perspective. Advocates of the big bang theory argue that the earth emerged 13.7 billion years ago and cite the continued expansion of space (Hubble's law) as verifiable proof that this theory is correct. But how do we know which theory is right? Let's apply this same reasoning to communication. Think about the many ways you develop and try to answer questions about the "right" ways to communicate.

We want to leave the intricacies of the theoretical debate between creationism and the big bang theory to our colleagues in the physical sciences, religious studies, and philosophies. However, we'll use this chapter to explore theoretical issues relevant to the study of communication. By the end of this chapter, you should understand what communication theories are, their functions, how we evaluate them, and the five major theoretical paradigms shaping communication study today. You'll also discover just how important communication theory is to your everyday life.

# 3.2 EMPIRICAL LAWS PARADIGM

Theories in the **empirical laws paradigm** approach communication from the perspective that there are universal laws that govern how we communicate. Other names for empirical laws include hard science, the positivist approach, the covering-laws approach, and the classical approach. Natural scientists look for universal laws to understand and explain our world.

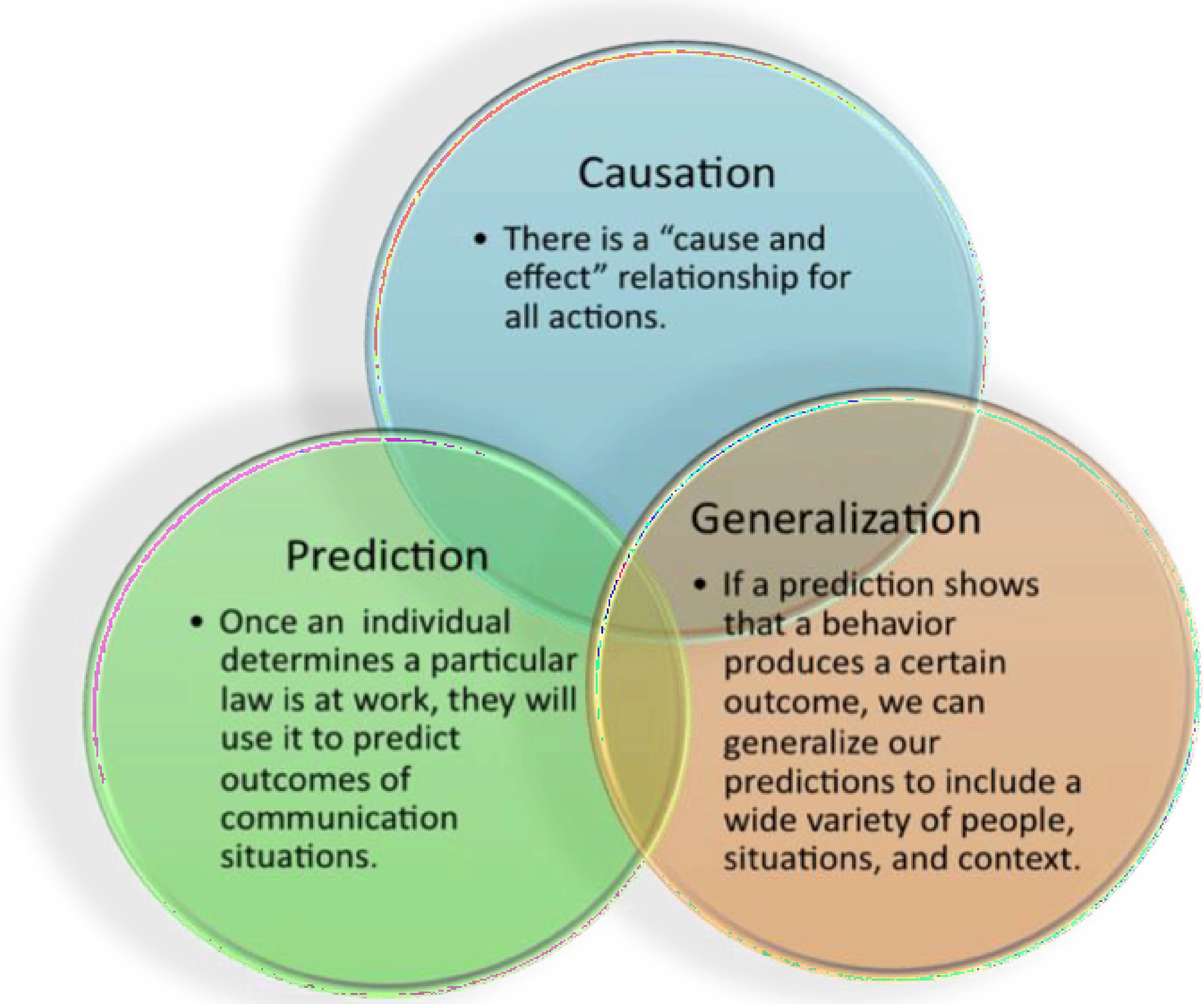
Using our example of gravity, we know that objects fall to the earth 100% of the time when we drop them. This is a universal law. In the late 1950s, scholars began studying human communication using approaches developed in the natural sciences (a.k.a. the scientific method). Thus, early proponents of empirical laws theories studied communication to see if there were universal communication laws similar to those in the natural world.

Natural laws at work in our world influence every moment of our lives. Every time you fly in an airplane or cross a bridge, you trust that the people who designed and built the plane and bridge followed the physical laws that allow a plane to fly and a bridge to span a distance without collapsing. Every time you press the brakes on a car, you trust them to slow you down based on the laws explaining how long a mass, traveling at a certain speed, takes to stop. Even if you do not understand all of these laws, you live by them and believe the laws themselves hold true 100% of the time.

Are there laws you follow about communication with this kind of regularity? Are they applicable 100% of the time, in all situations, and with all people? What happens if someone breaks one of these laws? Are the consequences similar to when you break physical laws? For example, is the consequence of calling someone by the wrong name comparable to that of hitting your brakes and them not working? Those who approach communication from an empirical laws perspective believe there are laws that govern human communication. The premise of this approach can be stated as a simple equation of causation: If X, then Y. For example, if I greet a person with "Hi, how are you?" then I anticipate a response, "Fine, how are you?" It's likely that you conduct much of your communication using this equation. However, does that mean that it works all of the time?

There are three characteristics that help us understand **empirical laws theories**: causation, prediction, and generalization (Infante, Rancer & Womack). **Causation** states that there is a "cause and effect" relationship for all actions. In the physical world, if someone drops a pen, it will fall. In human communication, if someone says "hello" to someone, that person responds. **Prediction** suggests that once someone determines a particular law is at work, they can use it to predict outcomes of future similar communication situations. Have you ever rehearsed how you will ask someone out on a date and tried to predict the outcome? What evidence did you use to make your prediction? In this example, you are using the "If X, then Y" equation to predict the outcome of the interaction.

**Generalization** suggests that if a prediction shows that behavior produces a certain outcome, we can generalize our predictions to include a wide variety of people, situations, and contexts. We make generalizations such as "If I'm friendly to others, they will be friendly to me" based on our past experiences with this type of behavior. However, this does not account for scenarios in which the person might not hear you, might be having a bad day, does not wish to respond, or assumes you are talking to another person, so they choose not to acknowledge you.




Causation, Generalization, Prediction Image by Wikibooks is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0

In the physical sciences, laws are absolute. This is comforting because it allows us to make informed decisions based on what we know about the laws that govern the world around us. In our example of gravity, we know that dropping an object will produce the same result every time. We could spend the rest of our lives testing this theory, but we don't have to. We know what the result will be without having to continuously drop an object.

Now imagine what it would be like to always know what the outcome would be of every communication situation! Would that be comforting to you or make your life boring?

Unlike the physical world, laws that govern human communication are not absolute and are most often bound by culture and context. Empirical laws theories are generally approached from the perspective of probability rather than absoluteness (Miller & Berger). Probability states that under certain conditions, it is highly likely that we can predict communication outcomes. For example, when you greet someone with "hello," it is probable, not absolute, they will respond back with a greeting of their own. If they do not, you might run through a variety of reasons why the other person did not respond in accordance with the "laws" that govern greetings in our culture. Even though empirical laws theories do not produce absolutes about communication, we still use them in our everyday interactions with one another. Businesses, advertisers, schools, and other organizations use this approach to predict consumer, educational, and behavioral habits of particular demographic groups. While their approaches never produce a 100% cause-effect relationship, the information they gather helps them determine what actions to take to be successful in their communicative behaviors.

Empirical laws theories are a relatively new approach for understanding communication. We have only been developing empirical laws theories of communication for the past 100 or so years. To date, none of this research has concluded that given a certain circumstance, a particular communicative behavior will always produce a particular outcome. However, working under an empirical laws approach that accepts probability, we have many research examples that demonstrate probable laws that govern human communication.

## Strengths

A particular strength of empirical laws theories is that they help us determine cause-and-effect relationships in our communication with others. Understanding communication using these theories helps us predict the outcomes of our interactions with others. While we know that not all outcomes can be determined with 100% reliability, prediction and control allow us to navigate our encounters more easily. Think about the number of encounters you have each day in which you quickly predict and control your interaction with others. While not 100% conclusive, it's comforting that a great number of our interactions have a certain level of probable outcomes.

## Weaknesses

A criticism of empirical laws theory is that while it is useful for understanding relatively simple interactions, it can oversimplify or fail to explain situations where a number of variables exist. Your classroom environment serves as a good example. While there are certain predictions you can make about how communication will occur in your classes, why is it that each classroom experience is unique? In your classrooms, it is impossible to predict, control, and generalize how a class will go with 100% accuracy because it is impossible to replicate classes in exactly the same ways. This approach does not account for the variety of human choices and behaviors that are brought into every communication context. It operates under the assumption that given the same context, people bring the same things to the context each time. Obviously, this is not the case. Human behaviors are complex and cannot be predicted at a 100% accuracy rate. However, empirical laws theories work well for showing us patterns of behavior that guide our communication.

# 3.1 DEFINING THEORY

When we mention the word theory to our students, we often watch their eyes glaze over as if it is the most boring thing we could talk about. Students sometimes have the misperception that theory has absolutely no relevance in their lives. But did you know that you use and test theories of communication on a daily basis? Whether you know it or not, your theories guide how you communicate. For example, you may have a theory that attractive people are harder to talk to than less attractive people. If you believe this is true, you are probably missing opportunities to get to know entire groups of people.

Our personal theories guide our communication, but there are often problems with them. They generally are not complete or sophisticated enough to help us fully understand the complexities of the communication in which we engage. Therefore, it is essential that we go beyond personal theories to develop and understand ones that guide both our study and performance of communication.

Before we get into the functions that theory performs for us, let's define what we mean by theory. Kenneth Hoover defined theory as "a set of interrelated propositions that suggest why events occur in the manner that they do." Foss, Foss, and Griffin defined theory as, "a way of framing an experience or event—an effort to understand and account for something and the way it functions in the world."

**Theories** are a way of looking at events, organizing them, and representing them. Take a moment to reflect on the elegant simplicity of these two definitions by Hoover and Foss, Foss and Griffin. Any thoughts or ideas you have about how things work in the world or your life are your personal theories. These theories are essentially your framework for how the world works and guide how you function in the world. You can begin to see how important it is that your theories are solid. As you'll see, well-developed communication theories help us better understand and explain the communicative behaviors of ourselves and others.

## Functions of Communication Theory

While theories in many disciplines can be hard for some to understand, in a field like communication, our theories are important to understand because they directly impact our daily lives. In this respect, they serve several functions in guiding our communication.

In elementary school, you might have believed in cooties. Or you might have believed that if a boy was mean to a girl, he must have liked her, and vice versa. In middle school and high school, finding a date for the homecoming or prom could be one of the most intimidating things to do. Now, in college, the dating world has once again evolved. The ambiguity between what defines a date and a friendly night out can be frustrating for some and exciting for others. Regardless, when situations like these appear, it is easy to seek advice from friends about the situation, ask a parent, or search the web for answers. Each of these resources will likely provide theories about functioning in relationships that you can choose to use or dismiss when clarifying the relationship's dynamic situation.

The first function theories serve is that they help us organize and understand our communication experiences. We use theories to organize a broad range of experiences into smaller categories by paying attention to "common features" of communication situations (Infante, Rancer & Womack). How many times have you surfed the internet and found articles or quizzes on relationships and what they mean for different genders? Deborah Tannen, author of *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversations*, argues that men and women talk in significantly different ways and for significantly different reasons. Of course, these differences cannot be applied to all men and women. But theories on gender communication help us organize and understand the talk of the different genders in a more simplified context so we can understand general patterns of communication behavior. This helps us make appropriate decisions in gendered communication situations.

A second function of theories is that they help us choose what communicative behaviors to study. Theories guide where we choose to look, what we look at, and how we look at communicative phenomena. Remember back to chapter 1 where we defined communication studies. Theories focus our attention on certain aspects of that definition. If you find that Tannen's theories regarding how men and women talk differ from your own perceptions, or that they're outdated, you might choose to more closely study the talk or nonverbals of men and women to see if you can rectify the difference in theoretical perspectives. You likely already do this on a personal level. Googling something as simple as "how to act in a relationship" will lead you to hundreds of websites and articles breaking down the dynamics of relationships depending on one's gender. Likewise, if you want to persuade someone to do something for you, you probably have a theory about what strategies you can use to get them to do what you want. Your theory guides how you approach your persuasive attempts and what you look for to see if you were successful or not.

A third function of theories is that they help us broaden our understanding of human communication. Scholars who study communication share theories with one another online, through books and journal articles, and at conferences. The sharing of theories generates dialogue, which allows us to further refine the theories developed in this field. Tannen's book allowed the public to rethink the personal theories they had about the communication of men and women. With the opportunity to find countless theories through new books, magazines, the internet, and TV shows, the general public has the opportunity to find theories that will influence how they understand and communicate in the world. But are these theories valid and useful? It's likely that you discuss your personal theories of communication with others on a regular basis to get their feedback.

A fourth function of theories is that they help us predict and control our communication. When we communicate, we try to predict how our interactions will develop so we can maintain a certain level of control. Imagine being at a party and you want to talk to someone that you find attractive. You will use some sort of theory about how to talk to others to approach this situation in order to make it more successful. As in all situations, the better your theoretical perspectives, the better your chances for success when communicating.

While theories do not allow us to predict and control communication with 100% certainty, they do help us function in daily interactions at a more predictable and controlled level. Notice that when you are successful or unsuccessful in your interactions, you use this information to assess and refine your own theoretical perspectives.

A fifth function of theories is that they help us challenge current social and cultural realities by providing new ways of thinking and living. People sometimes make the mistake of assuming that the ways we communicate are innate rather than learned. This is not true. In order to challenge the communicative norms we learn, people use critical theories to ask questions about the status quo of human communication, particularly focusing on how humans use communication to bring advantage and privilege to particular people or groups. For example, Tannen argues that when men listen to women express their troubles, they listen with the purpose of wanting to provide a fix or give advice. Tannen argues that many times, women are looking for not advice or a solution but rather empathy or sympathy from their male conversational partners. With this understanding, it's possible to begin teaching men new strategies for listening in cross-gendered conversations that serve to build stronger communication ties.

Critical theories challenge our traditional theoretical understandings, providing alternative communicative behaviors for social change.

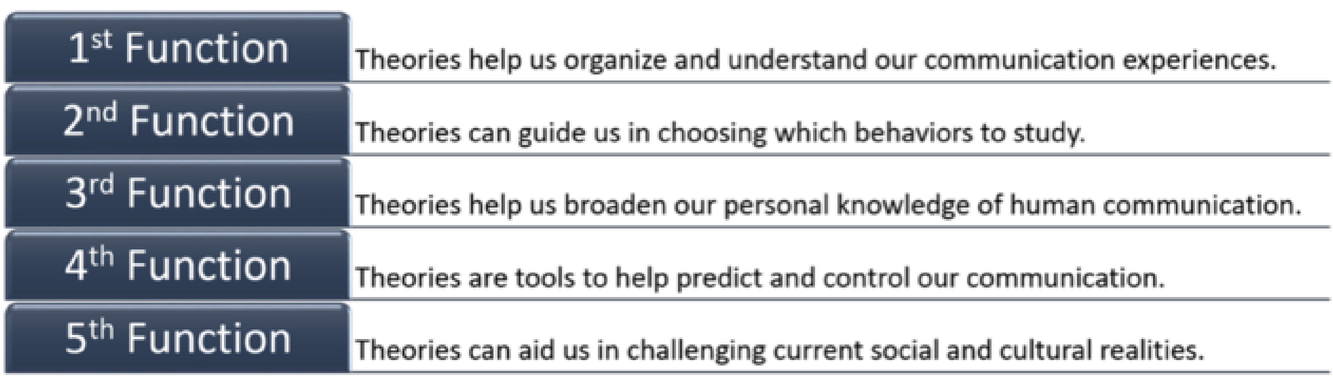



Image by Wikibooks is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0

While theories serve many useful functions, these functions don't really matter if we do not have well-developed theories that provide a good representation of how our world works. While we all form our personal theories through examining our experiences, how are communication theories developed?

## Development of Communication Theories

At this point, you may be wondering where communication theories come from. Because we cannot completely rely on our personal theories for our communication, people like your professors develop communication theories by starting with their own personal interests, observations, and questions about communication (Miller & Nicholson). Those of us who study communication are in a continual process of forming, testing, and reforming theories of communication (Littlejohn & Foss) so that we have a better understanding of our communicative practices. There are three essential steps involved in developing communication theories: (1) ask important questions, (2) look for answers by observing communicative behavior, and (3) form answers and theories as a result of your observations (Littlejohn & Foss).

Asking important questions is the first step in the process of discovering how communication functions in our world. Tannen's work grew out of her desire to find out answers to questions about why men and women "can't seem to communicate," a commonly held theory by many. As a result of her line of questioning, she has spent a career asking questions and finding answers. Likewise, John Gottman has spent his career researching how married couples can be relationally successful. Both their findings and the theories they have developed often contradict common beliefs about how men and women communicate, as well as long-term romantic relationships.

However, simply asking questions is not enough. It is important that we find meaningful answers to our questions in order to continue to improve our communication. In the field of communication, answers to our questions have the potential to help us communicate better with one another as well as provide positive social change. If you've ever questioned why something is the way it is, perhaps you're on your way to discovering the next big theory by finding meaningful answers to your questions.

When we find answers to our questions, we are able to form theories about our communication. Answering our questions helps us develop more sophisticated ways of understanding the communication around us—theories! You may have a theory about how to make friends. You use this theory to guide your behavior, then ask questions to find out if your theory works. The more times you prove that it works, the stronger your theory becomes about making friends. But how do we know if a theory is good or not?

## Developing Good Theories

Take a moment to compare Newton's theory of gravity to communication theories. Simply put, Newton theorized that there is a force that draws objects to the earth. We base our physical behaviors on this theory, regardless of how well we understand its complexities. For example, if you hold a pen above a desk and let go, you know that it will fall and hit the desk every time you drop it. In contrast, communication theories change and develop over time (Infante, Rancer & Womack; Kaplan; Kuhn). For example, you might theorize that smiling at someone should produce a smile back. You speculate that this should happen most of the time, but it probably would not surprise you if it does not happen every time. Contrast this to gravity. If you dropped a pen and it floated, you would likely be very surprised, if not a little bit worried about the state of the world.

If communication theories are not 100% consistent like theories in the physical sciences, why are they useful? This question has initiated a great deal of debate among those who study communication. While there is no definitive answer to this question, there are a number of criteria we use to evaluate the value of communication theories. According to Littlejohn and Foss, scope, parsimony, heuristic value, openness, appropriateness, and validity are starting places for evaluating whether or not a theory is good.

Scope refers to how broad or narrow a theory is (Infante, Rancer & Womack; Shaw & Costanzo). Theories that cover various domains are considered good theories, but if a theory is too broad, it may not account for specific instances that are important for understanding how we communicate. If it is too narrow, we may not be able to understand communication in general terms. Narrow theories work well if the range of events they cover can be applied to a large number of situations. It is easier to understand some theories when we are given examples or can see them being played out.

Parsimony refers to the idea that, all things being equal, the simplest solution takes precedence over a more complicated one. Thus, a theory is valuable when it is able to explain, in basic terms, complex communicative situations. If the theory cannot be explained in simple terms, it is not demonstrating parsimony.

Heuristic value means that a theory prompts other theorists to engage in further study and theorizing about a given problem. The Greeks used the term *heurisko*, meaning "I find," to refer to an idea, which stimulates additional thinking and discovery. This is an important criterion that facilitates intellectual growth, development, and problem-solving. For most communication theories, it would be quite easy to track their development as more people weighed in on the discussion.

Openness is the quality that a theory allows for, and recognizes, multiple options and perspectives. In essence, a good theory acknowledges that it is "tentative, contextual, and qualified" (Littlejohn & Foss, 30) and is open to refinement. The openness of a theory should allow a person to examine its multiple options and perspectives in order to personally determine if the theory holds up or not.

Appropriateness refers to the fit between the underlying theoretical assumptions and the research question. Theories must be consistent with the assumptions, goals, and data of the research in question. Let's say you want to understand the relationship between playing violent video games and actual violence. One of your assumptions about human nature might be that people are active rather than passive agents, meaning we don't just copy what we see in the media. Given this, examining this issue from a theoretical perspective that suggests people emulate whatever they see in the media would not be appropriate for explaining a phenomenon.

Validity refers to the worth and practical nature of a theory. The question should be asked, "Is a theory representative of reality?" There are three qualities of validity — value, fit, and generalizability. Is a theory valuable for the culture at large? Does it fit with the relationship between the explanations offered by the theory and the actual data? Finally, is it generalizable to a population beyond the sample size? In our example of the relationship between violent video games and actual violence, let's say we studied 100 boys and 100 girls, ages 12–15, from a small rural area in California. Could we then generalize or apply our theories to everyone who plays video games?

The above criteria serve as a starting point for generating and evaluating theories. As we move into the next section on specific theoretical paradigms, you will see how some of these criteria work. Let's now turn to look at ways to more easily conceptualize the broad range of communication theories that exist.

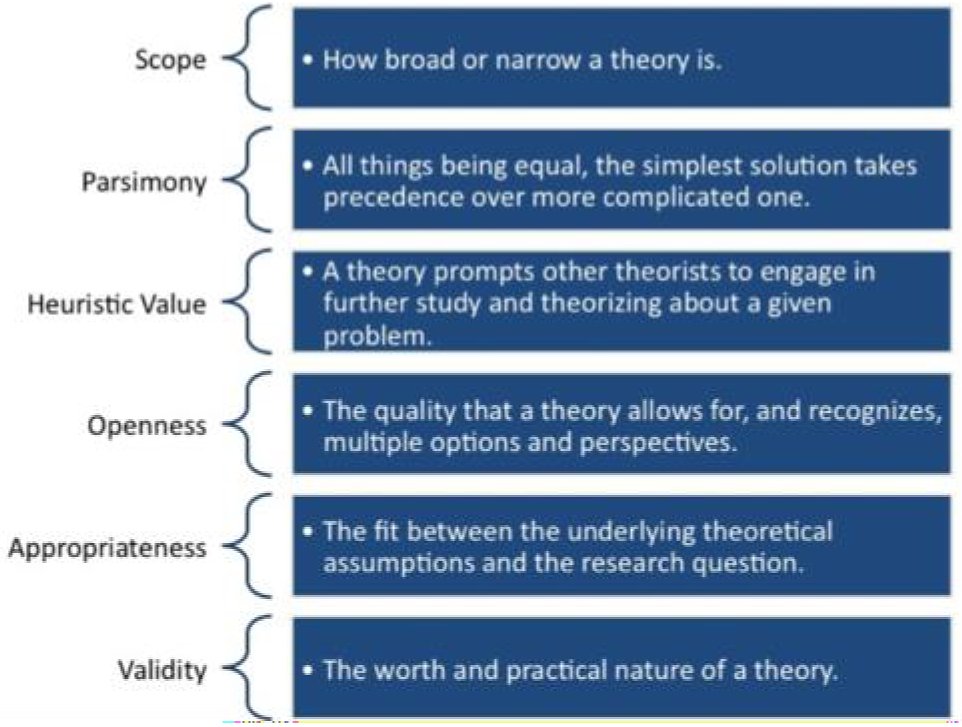



Figure 3: Elements of a good theory. Image by Wikibooks is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.

## Theoretical Paradigms

One way to simplify the understanding of complex theories is to categorize multiple theories into broader categories, or paradigms. A paradigm is a collection of concepts, values, assumptions, and practices that constitute a way of viewing reality for a community that shares them, especially an intellectual community. According to Thomas Kuhn, intellectual revolutions occur when people abandon previously held paradigms for new ones. For example, when Pythagoras in the 6th century BC argued the earth was a sphere rather than flat, he presented a paradigm shift.

In the field of communication, there are numerous ways to categorize and understand theoretical paradigms. No single way is more valuable than another, nor is any paradigm complete or better in its coverage of communication. Instead, **paradigms** are a way for us to organize a great number of ideas into categories. For our purposes, we've divided communication theories into five paradigms that we call empirical laws, human rules, rhetorical theory, systems theory, and critical paradigms.

# 3.3 HUMAN RULES PARADIGM

Some communication scholars believe that we cannot, and should not, try to study communication with an approach that does not work as accurately as it does in the physical sciences (Winch). These scholars believed empirical laws theories could not explain communication effectively, so they began developing theories around the idea of rules rather than laws. By now you are aware that we all follow rules that guide our communication. If we didn't, human communication would be total chaos and confusion. The human rules paradigm approaches communication from the perspective that we follow shared rules of communication, not strict laws (Shimanoff). While human rules theories share similar assumptions with empirical laws, they promote a more flexible approach to communication by suggesting that we follow general rules of communication rather than absolute laws that apply 100% of the time to our interactions.

There is an old saying, "Rules are meant to be broken." This simple statement highlights the fundamental difference between empirical laws and human rules approaches to communication. If you break a law in the physical world, there is always a consequence. For example, no two objects can occupy the same space at the same time. A car accident is often a disastrous example of an attempt to break this law. However, if you break a rule, it may not have the same consequences as breaking a law. For example, your parents may have set a curfew for you when you were younger. Imagine you were on your way home at night but stopped to help a friend change a flat tire. Your parents may choose to not punish you after you explain to them the reason you violated the rule.

Those who approach communication using human rules theories believe that communication rules are created by people and are therefore always open to change. Put another way, empirical laws theories seek absolute "Truth" that we can discover through careful observation and testing. Human rules theories see "truth" as subjective and created by humans, not set by the universe in which we live.

Rules are dynamic, whereas laws are not. Rules are contextually and culturally dependent and change as we change. Take, for example, social exchange theory, which theorizes that people participate in relationships when there is a fair exchange of costs and rewards (Roloff; Walster, Walster & Berscheid). When the rules of exchange are violated, participants may choose to terminate the relationship. For example, you've likely had a friend who began dating a new boyfriend or girlfriend. You probably realized quite quickly that your friend suddenly "did not have time for you anymore." If you were upset over this, you were most likely upset that your friend violated the rules of social exchange; in this case, the exchange was time spent together. In this example, you may feel like the change in relationship means you not having your needs met by your friend, while they are likely getting their needs met by the new relationship. Thus, a violation of social exchange has occurred.

Using human rules theories, we are still able to predict how people might communicate, much like empirical laws theories. However, unlike empirical laws theories, rules are bound by context and not universal to all situations. For example, we predict that most people abide by posted speed limits on roadways. While we know that there are always exceptions to this (sometimes we are the exception!), we can predict a certain type of driving experience based on rules. Not all places approach speed limits from this perspective.

One of our exchange students came to class one day extremely upset. When asked what was wrong, the student stated he had received a speeding ticket. To this student, the speeding ticket made no sense at all. Why? In the US, we approach speed limits as a maximum speed and risk a ticket when we exceed it. It's a law. However, this student stated that in his country, speed limits are considered guidelines for how fast to drive. The student went on to explain that police officers in his country are not interested in determining if people accidentally or purposefully drive above the posted speed limit. Instead, they let people make their own decisions regarding the guidelines of the posted speed limits. In this example, the US approach to speed limits is one of law; break the law and there are consequences. The student's country approached speed limits from a rules perspective; there is flexibility to interpret and act according to the interpretation of the rules based on the current driving conditions, or context.

Think of rules you choose to follow or break every day. Sitting in a classroom, taking notes, listening to your instructor, and doing homework are all "rules" of how to communicate being a student. However, no one is forcing you to follow these rules. You can choose to follow them or not. If you choose to follow them, you probably do so for a variety of reasons. Each rule we choose to follow is a choice. As with all things, there are outcomes as a result of our choices, but unlike empirical laws theories, human rules theories suggest that our experiences are socially constructed in ways that make it easier to organize experience into collectives of general rules that we follow. That way, we are not overly surprised when our interactions do not produce predicted outcomes 100% of the time.

## Strengths

One of the primary strengths of human rules theories is that they account for choice in communication behaviors. They suggest that we are not controlled by external laws when it comes to our communication. Instead, we develop rules to help facilitate and understand our interactions while at the same time not being bound to abide by these rules at all times (remember, rules are sometimes meant to be broken). Thus, we can take comfort in following rules of communication to guide our interactions but also know that we have flexibility to "play" with the rules because they are dynamic and contextual.

## Weaknesses

The primary criticism with human rules theories is that they cannot fully predict behavior or outcomes. However, as of now all theories fail to do this when applied to human communication. Another criticism of human rules theories is that they are culturally and contextually bound. So when we develop theories about something like communication anxiety as it relates to public speaking, we do so under the framework of our cultural perspective. These same theories often do not apply to other cultures.

# 3.4 SYSTEMS THEORY PARADIGM

The systems theory paradigm represents a dramatic theoretical shift from empirical laws and human rules approaches for understanding communication. Systems thinking began in the social and physical sciences in the 19th century with George Hegel (Kaufmann) and was more fully developed by biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy in the 20th century. Von Bertalanffy argued that everything is interconnected, and therefore, we should study interconnectedness as a means of understanding the world. This departs from empirical approaches that traditionally study phenomena by looking at individual components. Conversations surrounding global warming are among the most recognizable ideas of systems theory. In effect, those that warn us of global warming tell us that all of our actions have an impact on one another and our environment, and thus, we must be mindful of what we do, or we will continue to cause harm to everything on earth.

Systems theory is easily summed up with a simple definition: "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts." Put another way, anything we do as individuals impacts others around us as well as the environment in which we exist. Discussions about global warming are, in reality, debates about a global version of systems theory. We are becoming increasingly aware that none of us truly exist as individuals without impacting others. Many cultures have long recognized the importance of thinking from a collectivist perspective, looking out for the good of the whole rather than pursuing the good of the individual. For those of us born and raised in cultures that value the experience of the individual, we are beginning to learn the larger consequences of trying to exist outside the scope of systems theory. We can never fully realize the full scope of our actions. We can only hope that our actions do more positive than negative.

When applied to communication, the systems theory paradigm seeks to understand the interconnectedness of human communication rather than looking at just one part. An easy example of this is baking a cake. If you were to lay out all of the ingredients of a cake, you would not have a cake. Instead, you would have the ingredients of cake. Combine those ingredients in a particular way, you produce a cake. Not only that, but you also produce an experience surrounding the cake (think birthday, anniversary, wedding, etc.). What is produced by making a cake equals so much more than the simple combination of ingredients.

Another example is an automobile engine. If you have all the pieces of an automobile engine on a garage floor, you do not have an engine. You have parts of an engine. But if you put the engine parts together in the right way, you get something much greater than the parts; you get transportation. These examples demonstrate the idea that what makes a cake or automobile engine is the actual interaction or combination of their parts, not the simple sum of the parts themselves.

One characteristic of the systems theory paradigm is that systems are teleological (Infante, Rancer & Womack), meaning that they seek to achieve a particular goal or outcome. The goal of combining the ingredients of a cake is to produce a cake and facilitate an occasion. The goal of a working automobile engine is transportation. The goal of having a family is love and support. The goal of a business is to produce products and profit. Communication researchers examine the interactions of those that make up systems to understand the systems' goals as well as how they attempt to achieve goals.

Another characteristic of systems is they are always trying to achieve homeostasis—the state of equilibrium or balance. Using the idea of a family, most families attempt to fit in with their neighbors, coworkers, friends, city, country, culture, etc. Systems are always in a process of trying to achieve a level of homeostasis with their environment. When changes occur in either the environment or a system, system participants will adapt in order to maintain balance. For example, if you moved away from your immediate family to attend college, your move had an impact on the homeostasis of your family. As a result, everyone in your family had to adjust in some way to the change brought about by your move in order to create a new sense of homeostasis. Even though you are still part of the family system, the system changed as a result of your move and must respond in order to adapt to the change.

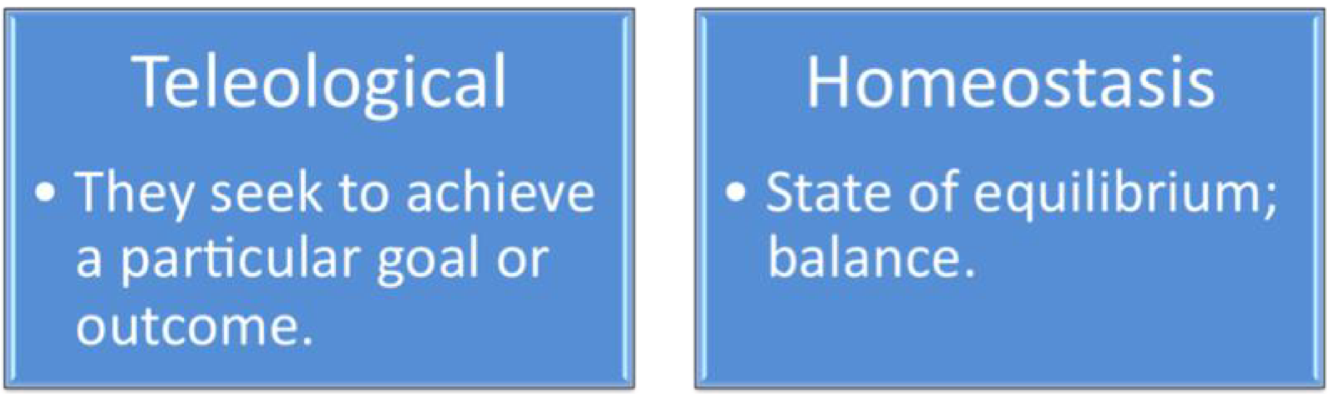



Image by Wikibooks is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0

The power of looking at communication from a systems perspective is that every communicative act impacts the system as a whole. When there is a change in one part of a system, it changes the entire system to some degree. Let's revisit our example of an automobile engine. Let's say a truck engine started making a terrible noise. The sound was so bad that one would think it might cost hundreds of dollars to fix the problem. However, a mechanic quickly finds that a small bolt had fallen out. Fifty-three cents later (tax included), and five minutes of time, the engine no longer made the terrible noise. Homeostasis was reached once again through the change of one very small part of the engine.

Like a car engine, we form systems with whom we interact. One of the reasons each of your college classes is unique is that each person (component) is unique, and thus, the interaction among the components is unique and cannot be duplicated. When we apply this approach to our communication exchanges, we can learn many things about the impacts that our interactions have in the systems in which we interact. Think about systems you belong to like family, work, church, friends, etc. How do your communicative acts, whether big or small, impact the dynamics of these systems? What ways do you communicate in these systems? Do you use things like Zoom, FaceTime, text messaging, or the traditional phone call to communicate with the members in your systems? Technology continues to open new doors of communication that allow us to participate in a system without having to be physically a part of it.

## Strengths

Systems theory paradigm seeks to understand a more complete picture by examining multiple layers of communication as interconnected rather than looking at isolated people or communication acts. This key strength of the paradigm does not try to predict human behavior but rather explain it in ways that highlight the interconnectedness of people and their communicative acts. Much of the way we communicate is culturally and contextually specific. This approach does not seek to make universal generalizations about human communication but rather explain the totality of our interactions.

## Weaknesses

One of the primary criticisms of the systems theory paradigm is that it can be too broad in its focus. If everything is interconnected, how do we know what to study? What do we focus on when trying to understand communication interactions? This can prove challenging considering the dynamic and changing nature of systems, particularly human systems built on changing relationships. It can be difficult to answer why things happen when we use this approach, making it problematic for generating further theories of human communication. Finally, because it is a relatively new approach for understanding communication, this paradigm has yet to produce a definitive body of research. Studies from this perspective tend to take significant time and money to accomplish.

# 3.5 RHETORICAL THEORIES PARADIGM

Rhetoric is the oldest tradition of the communication field. A good definition of rhetoric is "any kind of human symbol use that functions in any realm—public, private, and anything in between" (Foss, Foss & Trapp, 7). Remember that one of our definitions for theory is "a way of framing an experience or event—an effort to understand and account for something and the way it functions in the world" (Foss, Foss, & Griffin, 8). Combining these definitions allows us to understand the rhetorical theories paradigm as "a way to understand and account for the way any kind of human symbol use functions in any realm." Scholars have historically used rhetorical theories as a way to produce and evaluate messages.

## Theories of Message Production

If you have taken a public speaking course, you were likely exposed to rhetorical theories of message production. In public speaking classes, students are taught methods for organizing presentations, building credibility with the audience, and making messages more entertaining, informative, and/or persuasive. You probably intuitively understand that there are effective ways for putting together messages. But how do you know what is truly effective or ineffective? Whether you are preparing a public presentation, an advertising campaign, or trying to persuade a friend, rhetorical theories guide the ways you produce messages. Companies devote millions of dollars to produce the advertisements we see. You can bet that significant research has gone into what messages will work the best, so they do not waste their money on ineffective advertising. Audience analysis, context, goals, etc. are all considered before producing and delivering these messages.

Over the centuries, communication scholars have devoted entire careers to studying what it takes to produce effective messages. Aristotle gave us his ideas of ethos (credibility), logos (logic), and pathos (emotions) as fundamental components for constructing persuasive messages. Cicero gave us the five canons of rhetoric, or the five necessary steps for putting together an effective message. In the modern era, Stephen Toulmin developed the Toulmin model as a means for constructing persuasive arguments, which includes a claim, grounds, warrant, backing, modal qualifier, and rebuttal. For Toulmin, effectiveness was based on issues of practicality—to find a claim that is of interest to people and the ability to justify it. The greater understanding you have of rhetorical theories of message production, the greater potential you have for producing effective messages in a variety of contexts.

## Theories of Message Evaluation

Super Bowl Sunday is a day that many people gather together to watch a big football game on television. It is also a day that many people give special attention to watching commercials. It has become a popular pastime for people to evaluate the quality of commercials shown during the Super Bowl. In fact, all of the commercials from the Super Bowl are put on the internet for people to watch and evaluate. Many people spend a considerable amount of time discussing the effectiveness of commercials. Those who engage in these conversations are, at a basic level, engaging in message evaluation. If you make a comment about these commercials such as "that was funny" or "that was stupid," you are using some kind of criteria to come to those conclusions. A person approaching these messages using rhetorical theories would ask "why was that funny or stupid?" In other words, what works, or doesn't work, about certain messages?

There are many ways we can use rhetorical theories to evaluate messages including feminist, ideological, narrative, or other approaches. For example, Kenneth Burke argues that we can evaluate messages by understanding them as a dramatic play. He contends that all messages contain acts, scenes, agents, purposes, and agencies. If you were to evaluate your relationships with your friends from this perspective, who are the agents, what is the scene, and what act of the play are you in? Jean Baudrillard states that we can evaluate messages from the perspective that messages are commodities that we exchange. Whereas Michel Foucault asserts that we can evaluate messages by looking at how power is enacted in them. Rhetorical theories give us different lenses for us to understand messages. No interpretation is right or wrong. Instead, each interpretation allows us to have a more comprehensive understanding of communication.

As with message production, we are constantly in the process of evaluating messages that are sent and received by us. The greater understanding you have of rhetorical theories for both putting together and evaluating messages, the greater potential you have to be an effective communicator in a variety of contexts. For rhetorical theorists, the message is the primary focus of inquiry when approaching the study of communication.

## Strengths

The primary strength of the rhetorical theories paradigm is its ability to help us produce and evaluate effective messages. Rhetorical theories provide a way for us to take context into consideration when we examine messages. Unlike empirical laws theories, rhetorical theories highlight the importance of considering context as essential for understanding messages. Finally, rhetorical theories provide a way for us to foster multiple perspectives in the evaluation and construction of messages.

## Weaknesses

A primary weakness of rhetorical theories comes from one of its strengths. With such an intense focus on messages, it is possible to overlook alternative interpretations of messages. Also, some theories of message evaluation are not critical enough to reveal power dynamics at work in message exchanges. Finally, rhetorical theories are often not generalizable across a variety of communication contexts. While some rhetorical theories can be generalized, rhetorical theories are most often highly contextualized.

# 3.6 CRITICAL THEORIES PARADIGM

At this point, you have learned about four different theoretical paradigms we use to understand communication. One problem with these approaches is they often lack an explicit critique of the status quo of communication. Put another way, they serve as a general approach to understand communication norms rather than challenge them. We all realize that there are communication realities in the world that are hurtful and oppressive to particular people and that there are people in the world that use communication to serve their own needs and interests. How do we bring these communicative practices to light and work to change communication practices that are hurtful?

The critical theories paradigm helps us understand how communication is used to oppress and provides ways to foster positive social change (Foss & Foss; Fay). Critical theories challenge the status quo of communication contexts, looking for alternatives to those forms of oppressive communication. These theories differ from other theoretical approaches because they seek praxis as the overarching goal. Praxis is the combination of theory and action. Rather than simply seeking to understand power structures, critical theories actively seek to change them in positive ways. Easily identifiable examples of critical approaches are Marxism, postmodernism, and feminism. These critical theories expose and challenge the communication of dominant social, economic, and political structures. Areas of inquiry include language, social relationships, organizational structures, politics, economics, media, cultural ideologies, interpersonal relationships, labor, and other social movements.

## Origins of Critical Theories in Communication

Marxism is one of the earliest origins of critical theory. In addition, postmodernism, feminism, and postcolonialism have greatly influenced how critical theories have grown and expanded to challenge a greater number of social power structures. While each of these approaches examines a different area of oppression, all are critical approaches to enact great social changes, not only in Western societies, but in cultures worldwide.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Karl Marx's ideas challenged the status quo of newly emerging industrial societies. As societies moved from agrarian-based economies to ones based in industrial manufacturing, there became an increasing division between the rich and the poor—much like the income inequality talked about so much today. Marx, in two of his most well-known works, *The Communist Manifesto* and *Capital*, argued that working-class laborers were being oppressed by those in power, specifically the owners of manufacturing plants.

In any discussion of postmodernism, another critical theoretical perspective, the difficulty of defining the term is invariably part of the discussion. *Modern* refers to just now (from *modo* in Latin) and *post* means after. Thus, this term translates into "after just now"—an idea that can be difficult to wrap our heads around. How do you, for example, point to or mark the period after just now (Covino & Jolliffe, 76)? In discussing the postmodern condition, Lyotard explained the relationship between those who have and don't have social power: "The [decision-makers] allocate our lives for the growth of power. In matters of social justice and scientific truth alike, the legitimation of that power is based on optimizing the system's performance—efficiency" (27).

A third major influence on the development of the critical theories paradigm comes from feminist theories. Feminist theories explore power structures that create and recreate gendered differentiations in societies (Foss & Foss; Dervin; MacKinnon). Critical feminist theories contend that gender relations are often oppressive to both men and women and that they support an institution based on patriarchal values. Thus, critical feminist theories challenge dominant assumptions and practices of gender in ways that foster more equal and egalitarian forms of communication and social structures in society.

When discussing feminism and feminist theories, we refer to a set of multiple and diverse theories. Feminist theories include a wide range of philosophical arguments, economic structures, and political viewpoints. Some of these include Marxist feminism, which focuses on the division of labor as a source of gender inequality, and liberal feminism, which asserts that men and women should have equal status in the culture—such as voting rights, educational and professional opportunities, and equal pay. Ecofeminism recognizes that all parts of the universe are interconnected and that the oppression of women and other minorities is analogous to the oppression of the natural environment, such as in the cutting down of natural forests to meet consumer demands for paper goods or the killing of animals for the eating of meat.

## Critical Theories in Action

Whether we listen to music on our phones, watch TV, go to the movies, or read a magazine, most of us consume media. Have you ever stopped to think about who puts together those messages? Have you wondered what their goals might be and why they want to send the messages they do? One way we can use critical theories is to examine who owns what media to determine what they are trying to accomplish (Croteau & Hoynes). For example, why does General Electric want to own companies like RCA and NBC? Why does a company like Seagram's want to buy MCA (Universal Studios) and PolyGram Records? What worldviews are these companies creating in the media they produce? These are all questions for which we might consider using theories from the critical theories paradigm. Did you know that in 1983, 50 corporations controlled most of the US media (papers, television, movies, magazines, etc.) and that by 2004, that number has dropped down to 5 corporations (Bagdikian)? Using critical theories paradigm, we can begin to examine the messages that so few companies are constructing and their impacts on how we understand the world around us as shaped through these messages.

We use critical theories to reveal a vast range of possible ideological structures that create and foster dominant worldviews and to challenge and change those ideologies that oppress others.

## Strengths

A significant strength of the critical theories paradigm is that it combines theory and practice, seeking to create actual change from theoretical development. Rather than seeking prediction and control or explanation and understanding, critical theories seek social change. The intent behind these theoretical perspectives is to help empower those whose worldviews and ideological perspectives have not found equality in social contexts. At their best, critical theories have the potential to enact large-scale social change for both large and small groups of people.

## Weaknesses

A potential weakness of critical theories is their dependence on social values. While empirical laws theories seek an objective reality, critical theories highlight subjective values that guide communication behaviors. When values conflict, the question of "Whose values are better?" emerges. Because values are subjective, answering this question is often filled with much conflict and debate. The example of gay marriage highlights a current debate taking place over ideological values. How do we define marriage? And whose definition is best?

# 3.7 EVALUATING THEORIES

Theories are lenses for understanding the world around us. We don't have to use one theory to understand communication phenomena, but instead, it is possible to use multiple theories to examine our communication. Theories allow us to organize and understand communication experiences, select communication behavior to study, broaden our understanding of human communication, predict and control communication situations, challenge current social and cultural relationships, and offer new ways of thinking and living. Forming theories is a three-step process of (1) asking important questions, (2) looking for answers through observation, and (3) forming answers or theories as a result of observation.

Are all theories alike in their usefulness? Of course not. Evaluating the usefulness or value of a theory is important. Six qualities are crucial for evaluating theories—scope, parsimony, heuristic value, openness, appropriateness, and validity. As you recall, scope refers to the breadth of the theory, parsimony to its level of simplicity, and heuristic value is the theory's ability to generate other theories. When a theory is open, this means that it recognizes other perspectives and options. Appropriateness refers to the fit between the research question and the theory used to answer it. Finally, validity is the overall worth or practicality of a theory which includes value, fit, and generalizability. When these characteristics are present, we can be confident of our choice of theory.

You have also learned five major paradigms for understanding, explaining, and changing the communication around you. It is important to recognize that no theoretical perspective is the right perspective, although most communication scholars do favor particular theoretical approaches over others and conduct communication research from their preferred perspectives. Those who believe there are universal laws that govern human communication conduct research from the empirical laws perspective. Those who think communication is a result of shared, adaptable rules utilize the human rules paradigm. The systems perspective recognizes the interconnectedness of people, relationships, and communication. If the use of symbols for message creation and evaluation is the focus, then rhetorical theory is the corresponding paradigm. For scholars who are action oriented and desire social change as an outcome of their research, the critical perspective is the one of choice.

## Discussion Questions

- How does understanding communication theory help you in your daily life?
- Pick a theoretical paradigm. Now pick a communication phenomenon. How does that paradigm help explain that phenomenon to you?
- What would you focus on using critical theories? What questions would you try to answer?
- Think of a system in which you are a member. What communicative action could you change that

would change the system? What do you think the effect would be?

- What criteria do you use for constructing or evaluating a good persuasive message? How did you establish these criteria?

## Key Terms

- Theory
- Scope
- Parsimony
- Heuristic value
- Openness
- Appropriateness
- Validity
- Paradigm
- Empirical laws paradigm
- Causation
- Prediction
- Generalization
- Probability
- Human rules paradigm
- Social exchange theory
- Teleological
- Homeostasis
- Rhetoric
- Rhetorical theory paradigm
- Critical theory paradigm
- Praxis

## References

Bagdikian, Ben H. The New Media Monopoly: A Completely Revised and Updated Edition With Seven New Chapters. 20th edition. Boston: Beacon Press, 2004. Print.

Baudrillard, Jean. The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures. London: Sage, 1998. Print.

Bertalanffy, Ludwig Von. General System Theory: A Critical Review. General Systems 7, 1–20. 1962. Print.

Bertalanffy, Ludwig Von. General System Theory; Foundations, Development, Applications. New York: G. Braziller, 1969. Print.

Burke, Kenneth. A Rhetoric of Motives. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969.

Covino, William A., and David A. Jolliffe. Rhetoric: Concepts, definitions, boundaries. Longman Publishing Group, 1995.

Croteau, David, and William Hoynes. “The New Media Giants: Changing Industry Structure.” The Business of Media: Corporate Media and the Public Interest. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge, 2001. 71–107. Print.

Dervin, Brenda. “The Potential Contribution of Feminist Scholarship to the Field of Communication.” Journal of Communication 37.4 (1987): 107–20. Print.

Dines, Gail, and Jean M. Humez. Gender, race, and class in media: A text-reader. Sage, 2003. Planet Ice. Digital image. MourgeFile. N.p., Apr. 2014. Web. 15 Dec. 2014. <http://mrg.bz/LazHgk>.

Fay, Brian. Social Theory and Political Practice. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1975. Print.

Foss, Kathryn A., and Sonja K. Foss. Incorporating the Feminist Perspective in Communication Scholarship: A Research Commentary. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Pub., 1989. 64–94. Print.

Foss, Karen A., Sonja K. Foss, and Cindy L. Griffin. Feminist Rhetorical Theories. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Pub., 1999. Print.

Foss, Karen A., Sonja K. Foss, and Robert Trapp. Readings in Contemporary Rhetoric. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 2002. Print.

Foss, Sonja K. Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration & Practice. Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland, 1989. Print.

Foucault, Michel. The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception. London: Routledge, 2003. Print.

Hegel, George Wilhelm Friedrich, and Walter Arnold Kaufmann. Hegel: Texts and Commentary; Hegel’s Preface to His System in a New Translation. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1966. Print.

Hoover, Kenneth. The Elements of Social Scientific Thinking. 3rd ed. New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1984. Print.

Hovland, Carl Iver, and Irving L. Janis. Communication and Persuasion; Psychological Studies of Opinion Change. New Haven: Yale UP, 1953. Print.

Infante, Dominic A., Andrew S. Rancer, and Deanna F. Womack. Building Communication Theory. 4th ed. Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland, 2003. Print.

Kaplan, Abraham. The Conduct of Inquiry: Methodology for Behavioral Science. San Francisco: Chandler Pub., 1964. Print.

Kellner, Douglas. “Multiple Literacies and Critical Pedagogy in a Multicultural Society.” Educational Theory. Vol. 48. Illinois: U of Illinois, 1998. 103–22. Print. Ser. 1.

Kuhn, Thomas S. The structure of scientific revolutions. University of Chicago Press, 2012.

Littlejohn, Stephen W., and Karen A. Foss. Theories of Human Communication. Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2011. Print.

Lyotard, Jean-François, Geoffrey Bennington, and Brian Massumi. The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1984. Print.

MacKinnon, Catharine A. “Desire and Power: A Feminist Perspective.” Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture. By Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana: U of Illinois, 1988. 105–22. Print.

Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. Communist Manifesto. United Kingdom: Pathfinder, 2009. Print.

Miller, Gerald R, and Charles R Berger. “On Keeping the Faith in Matters Scientific.” Western Journal of Speech Communication, 42.1 (1978): 44–57.

Miller, Gerald R., and Henry E Nicholson. Communication Inquiry: A Perspective On a Process. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1976. Print.

Northouse, Peter. Leadership: Theory and Practice. Sage Publications: n.p., 2012. Print.

Roloff, Michael E. Interpersonal Communication: The Social Exchange Approach. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1981. Print.

SandJLinkens. Bridge. Digital image. MourgeFile. N.p., 2 Dec. 2014. Web. 15 Dec. 2014.<http://mrg.bz/uOv0wF>.

Shaw, Marvin E., and Philip R. Costanzo. Theories of Social Psychology. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982. Print.

Shimanoff, Susan B. Communication Rules: Theory and Research. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1980. Print.

Shimanoff, Susan. “Group interaction via communication rules.” In R. S. Cathcart & L. A. Samovar (Eds.), Small group communication: A reader (6th ed.). W.C. Brown, Dubuque, IA, 1992. Print.

Tannen, Deborah. You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation. New York, NY: Morrow, 1990. Print.

Toulmin, Stephen. The Uses of Argument. Cambridge: U, 2003. Print.

Wilson II, Clint C., and Felix Gutierrez. “Advertising and People of Color.” Race, Multiculturalism, and the Media: From Mass to Class Community (1995): 283–92. Print.

Winch, Peter. The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958. Print.

CHAPTER IV

# CHAPTER 4: VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- Define verbal communication and explain its main characteristics
- Understand the three qualities of symbols
- Describe the rules governing verbal communication
- Explain the differences between written and spoken communication
- Describe the functions of verbal communication

Imagine for a moment that you have no language with which to communicate. It's hard to imagine, isn't it? It's probably even harder to imagine that with all of the advancements we have at our disposal today, there are people in our world who actually do not have, or cannot use, language to communicate.

Almost 35 years ago, the Nicaraguan government started bringing deaf children together from all over the country in an attempt to educate them. These children had spent their lives in remote places and had no contact with other deaf people. They had never learned a language and could not understand their teachers or each other. Likewise, their teachers could not understand them. Shortly after bringing these students together, the teachers noticed that the students communicated with each other in what appeared to be an organized fashion: they brought together the individual gestures they used at home and composed them into a new language. Although the teachers still did not understand what the kids were saying, the adults were astonished at what they were witnessing—the birth of a new language in the late 20th century! This was an unprecedented discovery.

In 1986, American linguist Judy Shepard-Kegl went to Nicaragua to find out what she could learn from these children without language. Over the course of her career, she has contended that our brains are open to language until the age of twelve or thirteen, and then language becomes difficult to learn. Once invited to visit the deaf youngsters, she quickly discovered approximately 300 people in Nicaragua who did not have language, explaining in a segment aired on the CBS news program *60 Minutes*, “They are invaluable to research—among the only people on earth who can provide clues to the beginnings of human communication.”

Adrien Perez, one of the early deaf students who formed this new language (referred to as Nicaraguan Sign Language), also spoke during the same segment, titled “Birth of a Language,” saying that without verbal communication, “you can’t express your feelings. Your thoughts may be there but you can’t get them out. And you can’t get new thoughts in.” As one of the few people on earth who has experienced life with and without verbal communication, his comments speak to the heart of communication: it is the essence of who we are and how we understand our world. We use it to form our identities; initiate and maintain relationships; express our needs and wants; construct and shape worldviews; and achieve personal goals.

In this chapter, we want to provide and explain our definition of verbal communication, highlight the differences between written and spoken verbal communication, and demonstrate how verbal communication functions in our lives.

# 4.1 DEFINING VERBAL COMMUNICATION

When people ponder the word communication, they often think about the act of talking. We rely on verbal communication to exchange messages with one another and develop as individuals. The term verbal communication often evokes the idea of spoken communication, but written communication is also part of verbal communication. Reading this book, you are decoding the authors' written verbal communication in order to learn more about communication. Let's explore the various components of our definition of verbal communication and examine how it functions in our lives.

Verbal communication is about language, both written and spoken. In general, verbal communication refers to our use of words, while nonverbal communication refers to communication that occurs through means other than words, such as body language, gestures, and silence. Both verbal and nonverbal communication can be spoken and written. Many people mistakenly assume that verbal communication refers only to spoken communication.

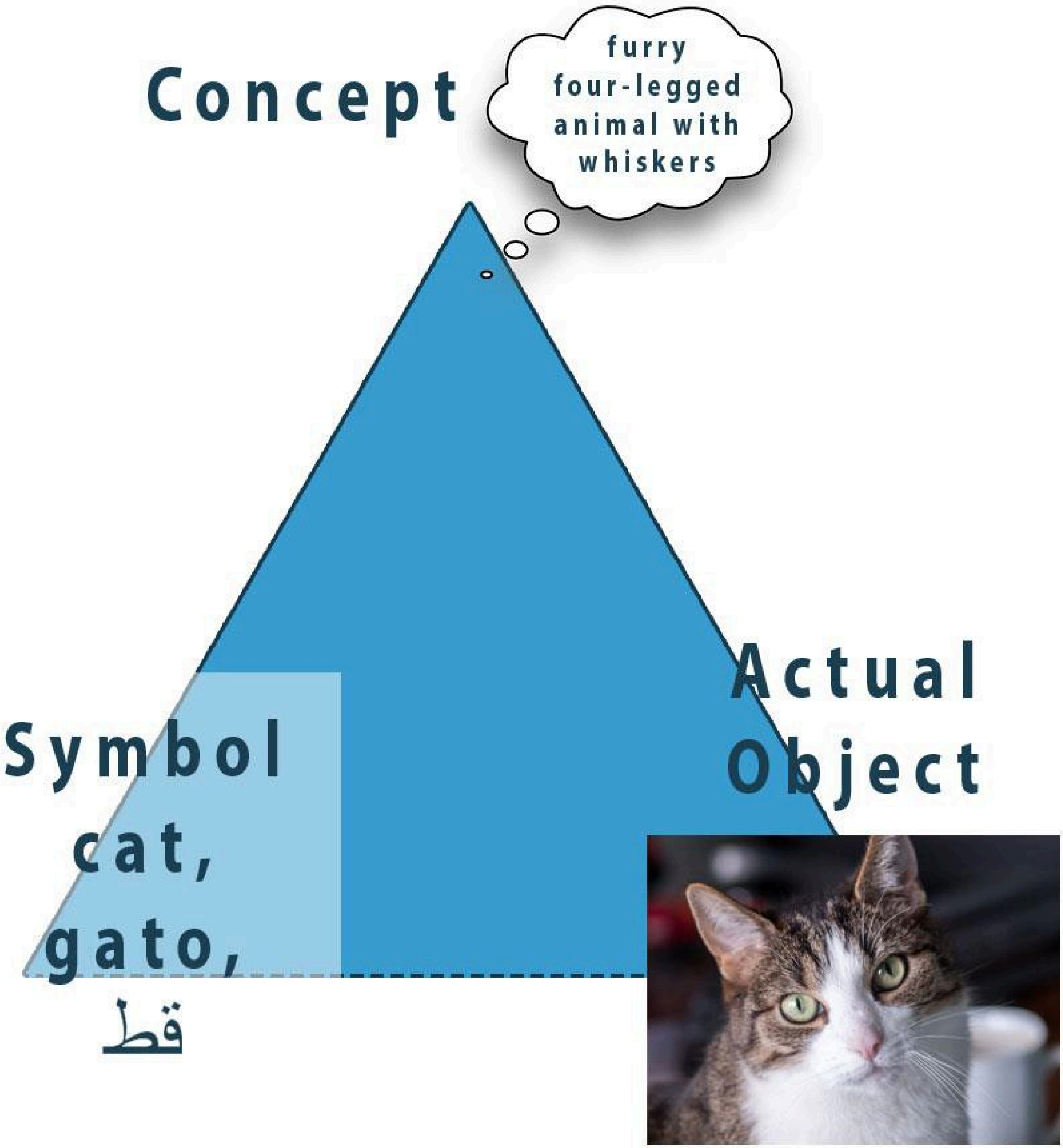
However, you will learn that this is not the case. Let's say you tell a friend a joke, and he or she laughs in response. Is the laughter verbal or nonverbal communication? Why? Because the sound of laughter would not be considered words, we would consider this vocal act as a form of nonverbal communication. For simplification, the box below highlights the kinds of communication that fall into the various categories. You can find many definitions of verbal communication in other literature, but for this text, we define verbal communication as an agreed-upon and rule-governed system of symbols used to share meaning. Let's examine each component of this definition in detail.

| | Verbal Communication | Nonverbal Communication |
|---|---|---|
| **Oral** | Spoken Language | Laughing, Crying, Coughing, etc. |
| **Non Oral** | Written Language/Sign Language | Gestures, Body Language, etc. |

Types of Verbal and Non-Verbal Communications Image by COC OER is licensed under CC BY 4.0

## A System of Symbols

Symbols are arbitrary representations of thoughts, ideas, emotions, objects, or actions used to encode and decode meaning (Nelson et al.). Symbols stand for or represent something else. For example, there is nothing intrinsic about calling a cat a *cat*. Rather, English speakers have agreed that these symbols (words), whose components (letters) are used in a particular order each time, stand for both the actual object as well as our interpretation of that object. This idea is illustrated by C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richard's triangle of meaning. The word *cat* is not the actual cat. Nor does it have any direct connection to an actual cat. Instead, it is a symbolic representation of our idea of a cat, as indicated by the line going from the word *cat* to the speaker's idea of cat to the actual object.




Ogden and Richard's Triangle of Meaning Image by Lumen Learning is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

Symbols have three distinct qualities: they are arbitrary, ambiguous, and abstract. Notice that the picture of the cat on the right side of the triangle more closely represents a real cat than the word *cat*. However, we do not use pictures as language or verbal communication. Instead, we use words to represent our ideas. This example demonstrates our agreement that the word *cat* represents or stands for a real cat and our idea of a cat. The symbols we use are arbitrary and have no direct relationship to the objects or ideas they represent. We generally consider communication successful when we reach agreement on the meanings of the symbols we use (Duck).

Not only are symbols arbitrary, but they are also ambiguous—that is, they have several possible meanings. Imagine your friend tells you she has an apple on her desk. Is she referring to a piece of fruit or her computer? If a friend says that a person he met is sick, does he mean that person is physically ill or awesome? The meanings of symbols change over time due to changes in social norms, values, and advances in technology. You might be asking, "If symbols can have multiple meanings, then how do we communicate and understand one another?" We are able to communicate because there are a finite number of possible meanings for our symbols, a range of meanings that the members of a given language system agree upon. Without an agreed-upon system of symbols, we could share relatively little meaning with one another.

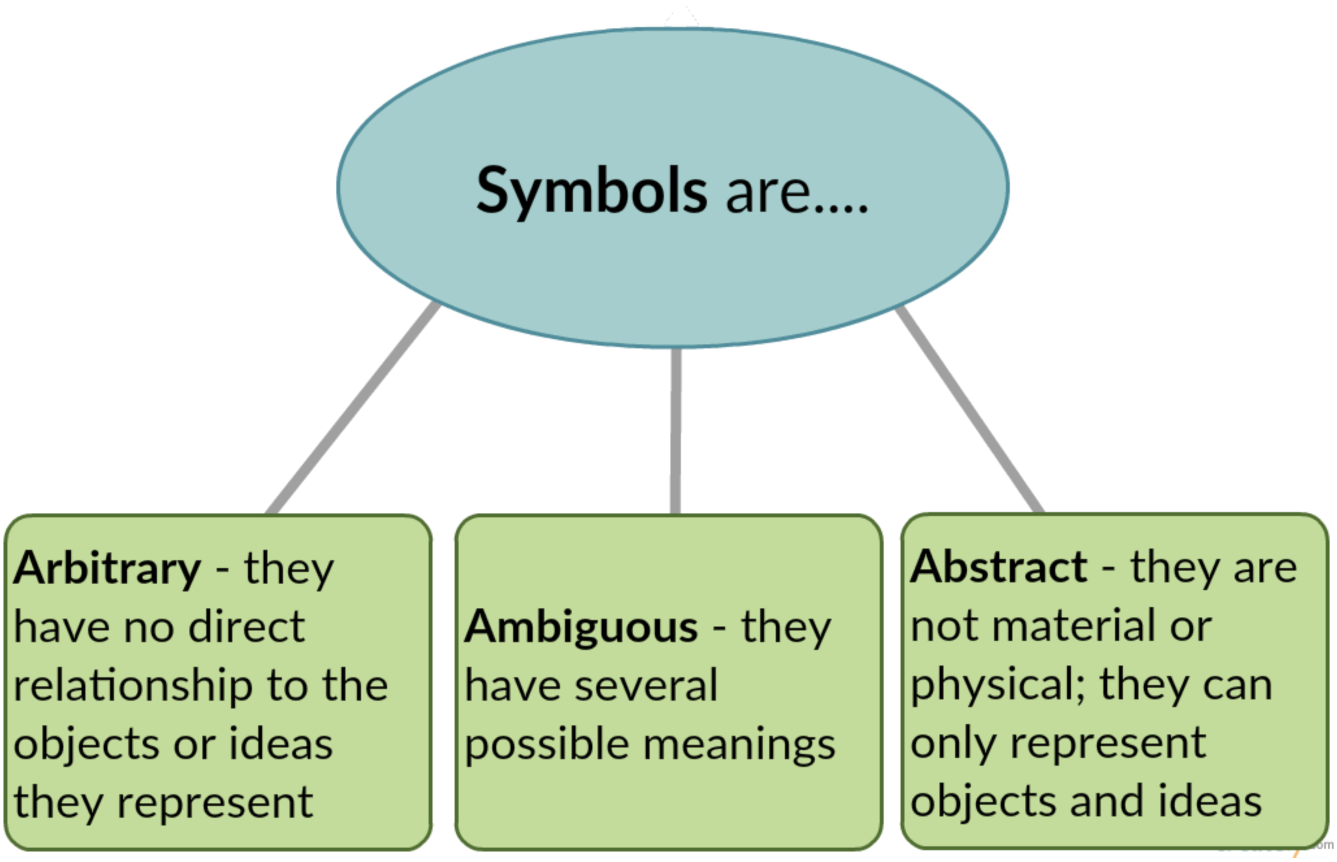



Image by H. Rayl is licensed under CC BY 4.0

A simple example of ambiguity can be represented by one of your classmates making a simple question of the teacher during a lecture including PowerPoint slides: "Could you go to the last slide, please?" The teacher is halfway through the presentation. Is the student asking if the teacher can go back to the previous slide? Or does the student really want the lecture to be over with and is insisting that the teacher jump to the final slide of the presentation? Chances are the student missed a point on the previous slide and would like to see it again to quickly take notes. However, suspense may have overtaken the student, and they may have a desire to see the final slide. Even a simple word like *last* can be ambiguous and open to more than one interpretation.

The verbal symbols we use are also abstract, meaning that words are not material or physical. A certain level of abstraction is inherent in the fact that symbols can only represent objects and ideas. This abstraction allows us to use a phrase like *the public* in a broad way to mean all the people in the United States rather than having to distinguish among all the diverse groups that make up the US population. Similarly, in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* book series, wizards and witches call the nonmagical population on earth "muggles" rather than having to define all the separate cultures of muggles. Abstraction is helpful when you want to communicate complex concepts in a simple way. However, the more abstract the language, the greater potential there is for confusion.

## Rule Governed

Verbal communication is rule governed. We must follow agreed-upon rules to make sense of the symbols we share. Let's take another look at our example of the word *cat*. What would happen if there were no rules for using the symbols (letters) that make up this word? If placing these symbols in the proper order was not important, then cta, tac, tca, act, or atc could all mean cat. Even worse, what if you could use any three letters to refer to cat? Or still worse, what if there were no rules and anything could represent cat? Clearly, it's important that we have rules to govern our verbal communication. There are four general rules for verbal communication, involving the sounds, meaning, arrangement, and use of symbols.

Phonology is the study of speech sounds. The pronunciation of the word *cat* comes from the rules governing how letters sound, especially in relation to one another. The context in which words are spoken may provide answers for how they should be pronounced. When we don't follow phonological rules, confusion results. One way to understand and apply phonological rules is to use syntactic and pragmatic rules to clarify phonological rules. Semantic rules help us understand the difference in meaning between the word *cat* and the word *dog*. Instead of each of these words meaning any four-legged domestic pet, we use each word to specify which four-legged domestic pet we are talking about. You've probably used these words to say things like *I'm a cat person* or *I'm a dog person*. Each of these statements provides insight into what the sender is trying to communicate.

We attach meanings to words; meanings are not inherent in words themselves. As you've been reading, words (symbols) are arbitrary and attain meaning only when people give them meaning. We can always look to a dictionary to find a standardized definition of a word, its denotative meaning, but words do not always follow standard, agreed-upon definitions when used in various contexts. For example, think of the word *sick*. The denotative definition of the word is ill or unwell. However, connotative meanings, the meanings we assign based on our experiences and beliefs, are quite varied. *Sick* can have a connotative meaning that describes something as good or awesome as opposed to its literal meaning of illness, which usually has a negative association. The denotative and connotative definitions of *sick* are in total contrast to one another, which can cause confusion. Think about an instance when a student is asked by their parent about a friend at school. The student replies that the friend is *sick*. The parent then asks about the new teacher at school and the student describes the teacher as *sick* as well. The parent must now ask for clarification, as they do not know if the teacher is in bad health or is an excellent teacher and if the friend of their child is ill or awesome.

Syntactics is the study of language structure and symbolic arrangement. Syntactics focuses on the rules we use to combine words into meaningful sentences and statements. We speak and write according to agreed-upon syntactic rules to keep meaning coherent and understandable. Think about this sentence: "The pink and purple elephant flapped its wings and flew out the window." While the content of this sentence is fictitious and unreal, you can understand and visualize it because it follows syntactic rules for language structure.

Pragmatics is the study of how people actually use verbal communication. For example, as a student, you probably speak more formally to your professors than to your peers. It's likely that you make different word choices when you speak to your parents than you do when you speak to your friends. Think of the words *bowel movements*, *poop*, *crap*, and *shit*. While all of these words have essentially the same denotative meaning, people make choices based on context and audience to choose the most appropriate word for the situation. These differences illustrate the pragmatics of our verbal communication. Even though you use agreed-upon symbolic systems and follow phonological, syntactic, and semantic rules, you apply these rules differently in different contexts. Each communication context has different rules for appropriate communication. We are trained from a young age to communicate appropriately in different social contexts.

It is only through an agreed-upon and rule-governed system of symbols that we can exchange verbal communication in an effective manner. Without agreement, rules, and symbols, verbal communication would not work. The reality is that after we learn language in school, we don't spend much time consciously thinking about all of these rules; we simply use them. However, rules keep our verbal communication structured in ways that make it useful for us to communicate more effectively.

# 4.2 SPOKEN AND WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

While both spoken and written communication function as agreed-upon, rule-governed systems of symbols used to convey meaning, there are enough differences in pragmatic rules between writing and speaking to justify discussing some of their differences. Imagine for a moment that you're a college student who desperately needs money. Rather than looking for a job, you decide that you're going to ask your parents for the money you need to make it through the end of the semester. Now, you have a few choices for using verbal communication to do this. You might choose to call your parents or talk to them in person. You may take a different approach and write them a letter or send them an email. You can probably identify your own list of pros and cons for each of these approaches. But really, what's the difference between writing and talking in these situations? Let's look at four of the major differences between the two: (1) formal versus informal, (2) synchronous versus asynchronous, (3) recorded versus unrecorded, and (4) private versus open.

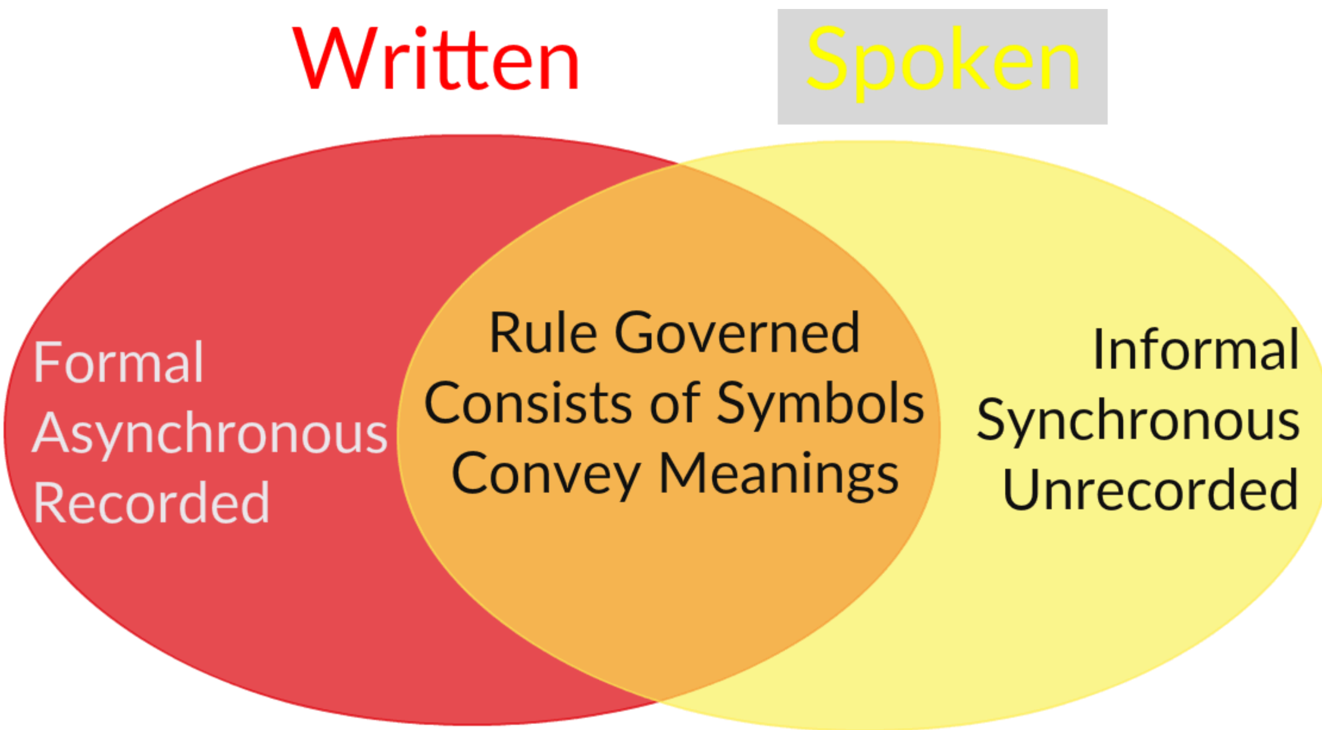



Image by H. Rayl is licensed under CC BY 4.0

The first difference between spoken and written communication is that we generally use spoken communication informally, while we use written communication formally. Consider how you have been trained to talk versus how you have been trained to write. Have you ever turned in a paper to a professor that sounds like how you talk? How was that paper graded compared to one that follows the more formal structures and rules of the English language? In Western societies like the US, we follow more formal standards for our written communication than we do for our spoken communication. With a few exceptions, we generally tolerate verbal mistakes (e.g., *should of* rather than *should have*) and qualifiers (e.g., *uh*, *um*, *you know*, etc.) in our speech, but not our writing.

Consider a written statement such as “I should of, um, gone and done somethin’ ‘bout it, but, um, I I didn’t do nothin’.” In most written contexts, this is considered unacceptable written verbal communication. However, most of us would not give much thought to hearing this statement spoken aloud by someone. While we may certainly notice mistakes in another’s speech, we are generally not inclined to correct those mistakes as we would in written contexts. Even though many of us try to speak without qualifiers and verbal mistakes, there is some value added by those utterances in our speech while engaging in an interpersonal conversation. According to John Du Bois, the way two people use utterances and structure their sentences during conversation creates an opportunity to find new meaning within the language and develop parallelism, which can lead to a natural feeling of liking or sympathy in the conversation partner. So even though it may seem like formal language is valued over informal, this informal language that most of us use when we speak inadvertently contributes to bringing people closer together.

While writing is generally more formal and speech more informal, there are some exceptions to the rule, especially with the growing popularity of new technologies. For the first time in history, we are now seeing exceptions in our uses of speech and writing. Using text messaging and email, people are engaging in forms of writing using more informal rule structures, making their writing sound more like conversation. Likewise, this style of writing often attempts to incorporate the use of nonverbal communication (such as emojis) to accent the writing.

The second difference between spoken and written forms of verbal communication is that spoken communication or speech is almost entirely synchronous, while written communication is almost entirely asynchronous. Synchronous communication is communication that takes place in real time, such as a conversation with a friend. When we are in conversation, and even in public speaking situations, immediate feedback and response from the receiver is the rule. For instance, when you say hello to someone, you expect that the person will respond immediately. You do not expect that the person will get back to you sometime later in response to your greeting.

In contrast, asynchronous communication is communication that is not immediate and occurs over longer periods of time, such as letters, email, or even text messages at times. When someone writes a book, letter, email, or text, there is no expectation from the sender that the receiver will provide an immediate response. Instead, the expectation is that the receiver will receive the message and respond to it when they have time. This is one of the reasons people sometimes choose to send an email instead of calling another person because it allows the receiver to respond when they have time rather than putting them on the spot to respond right away.

Just as new technologies are changing the rules of formality and informality, they are also creating new situations that break the norms of written communication as asynchronous and spoken communication as synchronous. Voicemail has turned the telephone into an asynchronous form of communication. We understand that if we leave a message on voicemail, we will not get an immediate reply. Instead, we understand that the receiver will call us back at their convenience. In this example, even though the channel of communication is speaking, there is no expectation for an immediate response to the sent message. Similarly, texting is a form of written communication that follows the rules of spoken conversation in that it functions as synchronous communication. When you type a text to someone you know, the expectation is that they will respond almost immediately. The lines continued to blur when video chats were introduced as communication technologies.

FaceTime, Skype, Zoom, and others are forms of synchronous communication that mimic face-to-face interaction and, in some cases, even include an option to simultaneously send written messages to others. The possible back-and-forth between written and spoken communication has allowed many questions to arise about the rules and meaning behind interactions. Maria Sindoni explains in her article "Through the Looking Glass" that even though people are having a synchronous conversation and are sharing meaning through their words, they are ultimately in different rooms and communicating through a machine that makes the meaning of their exchanges more ambiguous.

The third difference between spoken and written communication is that written communication is generally archived and recorded for later retrieval, while spoken communication is generally not recorded. When we talk with friends, we do not tend to take notes or tape-record our conversations. Instead, conversations tend to be ongoing and cataloged into our personal memories rather than recorded in an easily retrievable written format. On the other hand, it is quite easy to reference written works such as books, journals, magazines, newspapers, and electronic sources such as web pages and emails for long periods after the sender has written them. Platforms like TikTok add to the confusion. This app allows users to record themselves and post to their profiles. This would be considered a form of spoken communication, yet it is archived and asynchronous so others can look at the videos years after the original posting. To make the matter more complicated, Snapchat's many functions come into play. On Snapchat, you have the option of sending videos or photos that are traditionally not archived, since the sender decides how long the receiver has to view them, and then they will theoretically disappear forever. With the addition of the Story feature on several social media platforms, users of these apps can post a picture for 24 hours and have their friends view it multiple times before it disappears. The feeling of technological communication not being archived can lead to a false sense of privacy, which can lead to some negative consequences.

As with the previous rules we've discussed, new technologies are changing many of the dynamics of speech and writing. For example, many people use email and texting informally like spoken conversation, as an informal form of verbal communication. Because of this, they often expect that these operate and function like spoken conversation with the belief that it is a private conversation between the sender and receiver. However, some people have gotten into trouble because of what they have communicated about others through email and text. The corporation Epson (a large computer electronics manufacturer) was at the center of one of the first lawsuits regarding the recording and archiving of employees' use of email correspondence.

Employees at Epson assumed their email was private and therefore used it to say negative things about their bosses. What they didn't know was their bosses were saving and printing these email messages and using the content of these messages to make personnel decisions. When employees sued Epson, the courts ruled in favor of the corporation, stating that they had every right to retain employee email for their records.

While most of us have become accustomed to using technologies such as texting and instant messaging in ways that are similar to our spoken conversations, we must also consider the repercussions of using communication technologies in this fashion because they are often archived and not private. We can see examples of negative outcomes from archived messages in recent years through many highly publicized sexting scandals. One pertinent incident involved former congressman and former candidate for mayor of New York Anthony Weiner, who made a series of inappropriate exchanges with women using communication technologies. Because of his position in power and high media coverage, and given that he had these conversations in a setting that is recorded, Weiner was not able to keep his anonymity or confidentiality in the matter. These acts were seen as inappropriate by the public, so there were both professional and personal repercussions for the involved parties. Both the Epson and Anthony Weiner incidents, even though happening in different decades, show the consequences when assumed private information becomes public.

As you can see, there are a number of differences between spoken and written forms of verbal communication. Both forms are rule governed, as our definition points out, but the rules are often different for the use of these two types of verbal communication. However, it's apparent that as new technologies provide more ways for us to communicate, many of our traditional rules for using both speech and writing will continue to blur as we try to determine the most appropriate uses of these new communication technologies. Practical problems of the day will continue to guide the directions our field takes as we continue to study the ways technology changes our communication. As more changes continue to occur in the ways we communicate with one another, more avenues of study will continue to open for those interested in being part of the development of how communication is conducted. Now that we have looked in detail at our definition of verbal communication and the differences between spoken and written forms of verbal communication, let's explore what our use of verbal communication accomplishes for us as humans.

# 4.3 FUNCTIONS OF VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Our existence is intimately tied to the communication we use, and verbal communication serves many functions in our daily lives. We use verbal communication to define reality, organize, think, and shape attitudes.

Verbal communication helps us define reality. We use verbal communication to define everything from ideas, emotions, experiences, thoughts, objects, and people (Blumer). Think about how you define yourself. You may define yourself as a student, employee, son/daughter, parent, advocate, etc. You might also define yourself as moral, ethical, a night owl, or a procrastinator. Verbal communication is how we label and define what we experience in our lives. These definitions are not only descriptive but also evaluative. Imagine you are at the beach with a few of your friends. The day starts out sunny and beautiful, but the tides quickly turn when rain clouds appear overhead. Because of the unexpected rain, you define the day as disappointing and ugly. Suddenly, your friend comments, "What are you talking about, man? Today is beautiful!" Instead of focusing on the weather, he might be referring to the fact that he was having a good day by spending quality time with his buddies on the beach, rain or shine. This statement reflects that we have choices for how we use verbal communication to define our realities. We make choices about what to focus on and how to define what we experience and its impact on how we understand and live in our world.

Verbal communication helps us organize complex ideas and experiences into meaningful categories. Consider the number of things you experience with your five primary senses every day. It is impossible to comprehend everything we encounter. We use verbal communication to organize seemingly random events into understandable categories to make sense of our experiences. For example, we all organize the people in our lives into categories. We label these people with terms like friends, acquaintances, romantic partners, family, peers, colleagues, and strangers. We highlight certain qualities, traits, or scripts to organize outwardly haphazard events into meaningful categories to establish meaning for our world.

Verbal communication helps us think. Without verbal communication, we would not function as thinking beings. The ability most often used to distinguish humans from other animals is our ability to reason and communicate. With language, we are able to reflect on the past, consider the present, and ponder the future. We develop our memories using language. Try recalling your first conscious memories. Chances are your first conscious memories formed around the time you started using verbal communication. The example we used at the beginning of the chapter highlights what a world would be like for humans without language. In the 2011 *Scientific American* article "How Language Shapes Thought," the author, Lera Boroditsky, claims that people "rely on language even when doing simple things like distinguishing patches of color, counting dots on a screen or orienting in a small room: my colleagues and I have found that limiting people's ability to access their language faculties fluently—by giving them a competing demanding verbal task such as repeating a news report, for instance—impairs their ability to perform these tasks." This may be why it is difficult for some people to multitask—especially when one task involves speaking and the other involves thinking.

Verbal communication helps us shape our attitudes about our world. The way you use language shapes your attitude about the world around you. Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf developed the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis to explain that language determines thought. People who speak different languages, or use language differently, think differently (Whorf et al.). The argument suggests that if a native English speaker had the exact same experiences in their life but grew up speaking Chinese instead of English, their worldview would be different because of the different symbols used to make sense of the world. When you label, describe, or evaluate events in your life, you use the symbols of the language you speak. Your use of these symbols to represent your reality influences your perspective and attitude about the world. So it makes sense, then, that the more sophisticated your repertoire of symbols is, the more sophisticated your worldview can be for you.

While the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is highly respected, there have been many scholarly and philosophical challenges to the viewpoint that language is what shapes our worldview. For example, Agustin Vicente and Fernando Martinez-Manrique did a study regarding the argument of explicitness, which has two premises. The first premise is that "the instrument of thought must be explicit" in order for thought and language to be connected; the second is that natural languages—languages that humans can learn cognitively as they develop—are not explicit (Vicente and Martinez-Manrique, 384). The authors conclude that thoughts "demand a kind of completeness and stability of meaning that natural language sentences, being remarkably underdetermined, cannot provide" (Vicente and Martinez-Manrique, 397). It makes sense that something as arbitrary and complicated as the connection between thought and language is still being debated today.

While we have overly simplified the complexities of verbal communication for you in this chapter, when it comes to its actual use—accounting for the infinite possibilities of symbols, rules, contexts, and meanings—studying how humans use verbal communication is daunting. When you consider the complexities of verbal communication, it is a wonder we can communicate effectively at all. But verbal communication is not the only channel humans use to communicate. In the next chapter, we will examine the other most common channel of communication we use: nonverbal communication.

## Verbal Communication Summary

In this chapter, we defined verbal communication as an agreed-upon and rule-governed system of symbols used to share meaning. These symbols are arbitrary, ambiguous, and abstract. The rules that dictate our use and understanding of symbols include phonology, semantics, syntactics, and pragmatics. As you recall, there are distinct differences between written and spoken forms of verbal communication in terms of levels of formality, synchronicity, recording, and privacy. Yet new technologies are beginning to blur some of these differences. Finally, verbal communication is central to our identity as humans, and it allows us to define reality, organize ideas and experiences into categories, help us think, and shape our attitudes about the world.

CHAPTER V

# CHAPTER 5: NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- Define nonverbal communication and explain its main characteristics
- Understand the three qualities of symbols
- Describe the rules governing nonverbal communication
- Explain the differences between written and spoken communication
- Describe the functions of nonverbal communication

Your brother comes home from school and walks through the door. Without saying a word, he walks to the fridge, gets a drink, and turns to head for the couch in the family room. Once there, he plops down, stares straight ahead, and sighs. You notice that he sits there in silence for the next few minutes. During this time, he never speaks a word. Is he communicating? If your answer is yes, how would you interpret his actions? How do you think he is feeling? What types of nonverbal communication was your brother using? Like verbal communication, nonverbal communication is essential in our everyday interactions. Remember that verbal and nonverbal communication are the two primary channels we study in the field of communication. While nonverbal and verbal communications have many similar functions, nonverbal communication has its own set of functions for helping us communicate with each other. Before we get into the types and functions of nonverbal communication, let's define nonverbal communication to better understand how it is used in this text.

# 5.1 DEFINING NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Like verbal communication, we use nonverbal communication to share meaning with others. Just as there are many definitions for verbal communication, there are also many ways to define nonverbal communication. Let's look at a few.

Verbal communication researchers Burgoon, Buller, and Woodall define nonverbal behaviors as "typically sent with intent, are used with regularity among members of a social community, are typically interpreted as intentional, and have consensually recognized interpretations." In our opinion, this sounds too much like verbal communication and might best be described as symbolic and systematic nonverbal communication. Mead differentiated between what he termed as "gesture" versus "significant symbol," while Buck and VanLear took Mead's idea and argued that "gestures are not symbolic in that their relationship to their referents is not arbitrary," a fundamental distinction between verbal and nonverbal communication (524).

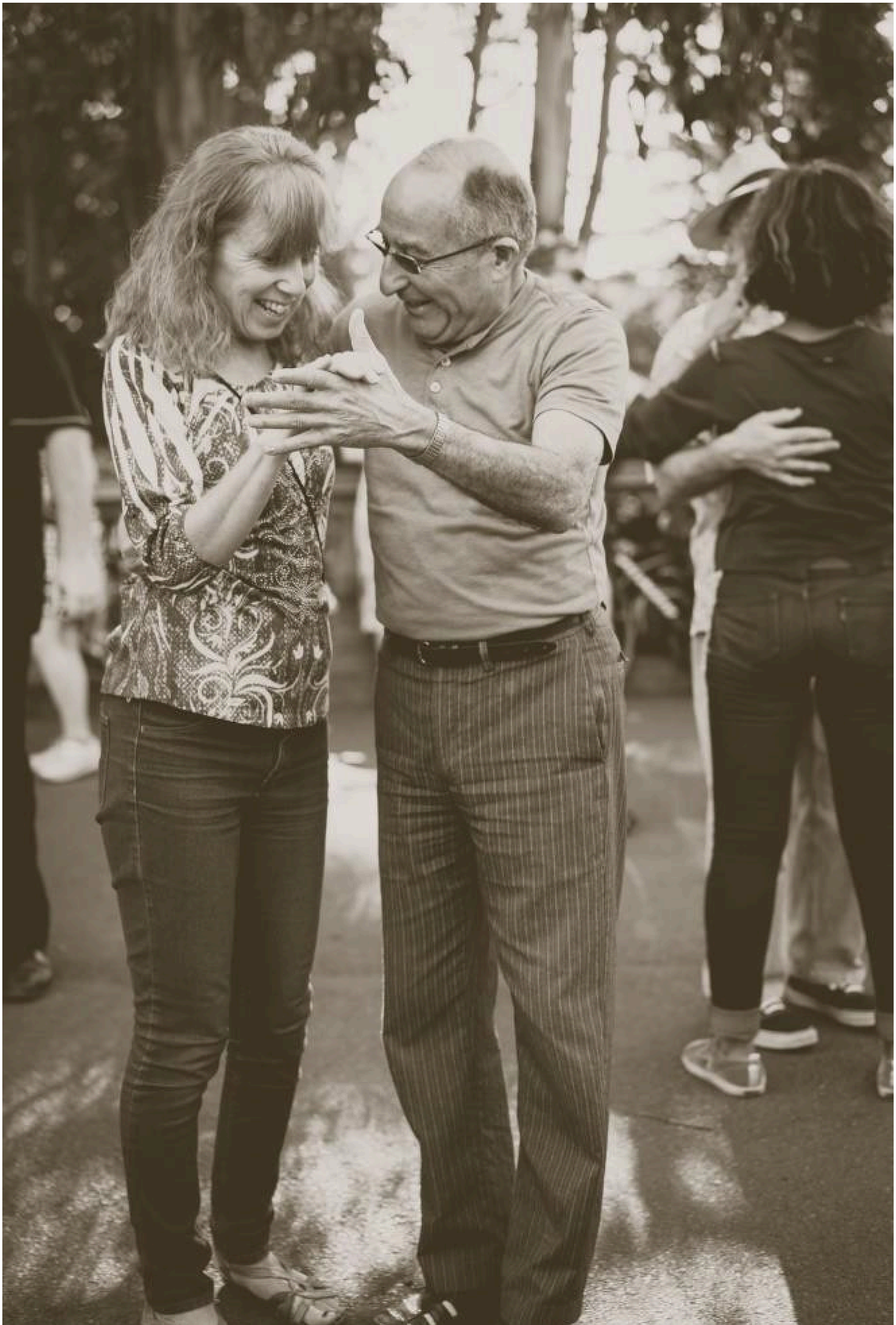


Image by John Moeses Bauan on Unsplash

Think of all the ways you unconsciously move your body throughout the day. For example, you probably do not sit in your classes and think constantly about your nonverbal behaviors. Instead, much of the way you present yourself nonverbally in your classes is done unconsciously. Even so, others can derive meaning from your nonverbal behaviors, whether they are intentional or not. For example, professors watch their students' nonverbal communication in class (such as slouching, leaning back in the chair, or looking at their watch) and make assumptions about them (they are bored, tired, or worrying about a test in another class). These assumptions are often based on acts that are typically done unintentionally.

While we certainly use nonverbal communication consciously at times to generate and share particular meanings, when examined closely, it should be apparent that this channel of communication is not the same as verbal communication, which is "an agreed-upon, rule-governed system of symbols." Rather, nonverbal communication is most often spontaneous and unintentional and may not follow formalized symbolic rule systems.

## Differences between Verbal and Nonverbal Communication

There are four fundamental differences between verbal and nonverbal communication. The first difference between verbal and nonverbal communication is that we use a single channel when we communicate verbally versus multiple channels when we communicate nonverbally. Channels are *how we send messages*, and Figure 2 illustrates the breakdown of the two primary channels. There is one verbal channel: language. There are eight nonverbal channels: kinesics, haptics, appearance, proxemics, environment, chronemics, paralanguage, and silence.

Try this exercise! Say your first and last name at the same time. You quickly find that this is an impossible task. Now pat the top of your head with your right hand, wave with your left hand, smile, shrug your shoulders, and chew gum at the same time. While goofy and awkward, our ability to do this demonstrates how we use multiple nonverbal channels simultaneously to communicate.

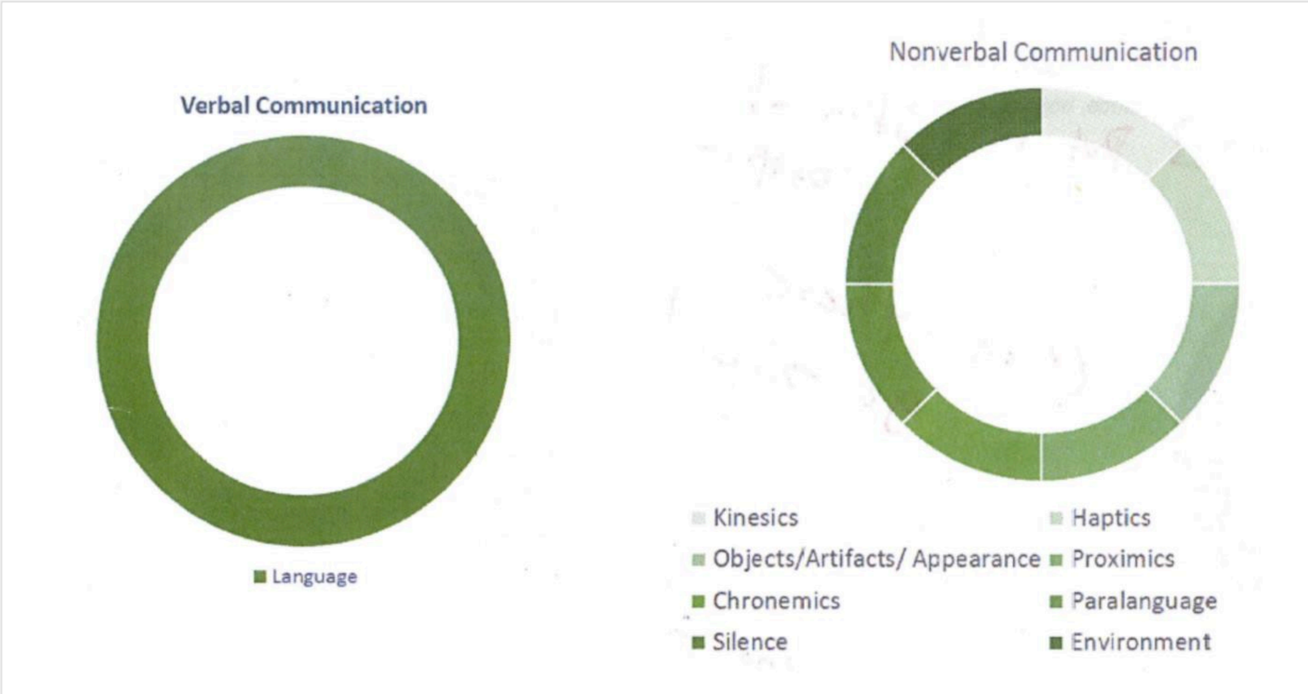



Image is under a CC BY-SA 4.0 license

It can be difficult to decode a sender's single verbal message due to the arbitrary, abstract, and ambiguous nature of language. But think how much more difficult it is to decode the even more ambiguous and multiple nonverbal signals we take in like eye contact, facial expressions, body movements, clothing, personal artifacts, and tone of voice all at the same time. Despite this difficulty, Motley found that we learn to decode nonverbal communication as babies. Hall found that women are much better than men at accurately interpreting the many nonverbal cues we send and receive (Gore). How we interpret these nonverbal signals can also be influenced by our gender as the viewer.

A second difference between verbal and nonverbal communication is that verbal communication is distinct, while nonverbal communication is continuous. Distinct means that messages have a clear beginning and end and are expressed in a linear fashion. We begin and end words and sentences in a linear way to make it easier for others to follow and understand. If you pronounce the word cat, you begin with the letter "C" and proceed to finish with "T." Continuous means that messages are ongoing and work in relation to other nonverbal and verbal cues. Think about the difference between analog and digital clocks. The analog clock represents nonverbal communication in that we generate meaning by considering the relationship of the different arms to each other (context). Also, the clock's arms are in continuous motion. We notice the speed of their movement, their position in the circle and to each other, and their relationship with the environment (is it day or night?).

Nonverbal communication is similar in that we evaluate nonverbal cues in relation to one another and consider the context of the situation. Suppose you see your friend in the distance. She approaches, waves, smiles, and says hello. To interpret the meaning of this, you focus on the wave, smile, tone of voice, her approaching movement, and the verbal message. You might also consider the time of day, if there is a pressing need to get to class, etc.

Image by Spaynton is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

Now contrast this to a digital clock, which functions like verbal communication. Unlike an analog clock, a digital clock is not in constant motion. Instead, it replaces one number with another to display time (its message). A digital clock uses one distinct channel (numbers) in a linear fashion. When we use verbal communication, we do so like the digital clock. We say one word at a time, in a linear fashion, to express meaning.

A third difference between verbal and nonverbal communication is that we use verbal communication consciously, while we generally use nonverbal communication unconsciously. Conscious communication means that we think about our verbal communication before we communicate. Unconscious communication means that we do not think about every nonverbal message we communicate. If you ever heard the statement as a child "Think before you speak," you were being told a fundamental principle of verbal communication. Realistically, it's nearly impossible not to think before we speak. When we speak, we do so consciously and intentionally. In contrast, when something funny happens, you probably do not think, *Okay, I'm going to smile and laugh right now*. Instead, you react unconsciously, displaying your emotions through these nonverbal behaviors. Nonverbal communication can occur as unconscious reactions to situations. We are not claiming that all nonverbal communication is unconscious. At times, we certainly make conscious choices to use or withhold nonverbal communication to share meaning. Angry drivers use many conscious nonverbal expressions to communicate to other drivers! In a job interview, you are making conscious decisions about your wardrobe, posture, and eye contact.

A fourth difference between verbal and nonverbal communication is that some nonverbal communication is universal (Hall et al.). Verbal communication is exclusive to the users of a particular language dialect, whereas some nonverbal communication is recognized across cultures. Although cultures most certainly have particular meanings and uses for nonverbal communication, there are universal nonverbal behaviors that almost everyone recognizes. For instance, people around the world recognize and use expressions such as smiles, frowns, and the pointing of a finger at an object.

Let us sum up the ways in which nonverbal communication is unique:

- Nonverbal communication uses multiple channels simultaneously.
- Nonverbal communication is continuous.
- Nonverbal communication can be both conscious and unconscious.
- Certain nonverbal communication is universally understood.

Now that you have a definition of nonverbal communication and can identify the primary differences between verbal and nonverbal communication, let's examine what counts as nonverbal communication. In this next section, we show you eight types of nonverbal communication we use regularly: kinesics, haptics, appearance, proxemics, environment, chronemics, paralanguage, and silence.

# 5.2 TYPES OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Kinesics is the study of how we use body movement and facial expressions. We interpret a great deal of meaning through body movement, facial expressions, and eye contact. Many people believe they can easily interpret the meanings of body movements and facial expressions in others. The reality is that it is almost impossible to determine an exact meaning for gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact. Even so, we rely a great deal on kinesics to interpret and express meaning. We know that kinesics can communicate liking, social status, and even relational responsiveness (Mehrabian). Facial expressions are a primary method of sharing emotions and feelings (Ekman et al.). For example, imagine yourself at a party and you see someone across the room you are attracted to. What sort of nonverbal behaviors do you engage in to let that person know? Likewise, what nonverbal behaviors are you looking for from them to indicate that it's safe to come over and introduce yourself? We are able to go through exchanges like this using only our nonverbal communication.

Haptics is the study of touch. Touch is the first type of nonverbal communication we experience as humans and is vital to our development and health (Dolin et al.). Those who don't have positive touch in their lives are less healthy both mentally and physically than those who experience positive touch. We use touch to share feelings and relational meanings. Hugs, kisses, handshakes, or even playful roughhousing demonstrate relational meanings and indicate relational closeness. In Western society, touch is largely reserved for family and romantic relationships. Generally, girls and women in same-sex friendships have more liberty to express touch as part of the relationship than men in same-sex friendships.

However, despite these unfortunate social taboos, the need for touch is so strong that men are quite sophisticated at finding ways to incorporate this into their friendships in socially acceptable ways. One such example is wrestling among adolescent and young-adult males. Do you ever wonder why you don't see as many women doing this? Perhaps it's because wrestling is socially acceptable for men, whereas women are more likely to hug, hold hands, and sit touching one another. In contrast, an exchange student from Brazil recognized the differences in touch between cultures when arriving in the United States. She was surprised when someone hesitated to remove an eyelash from her face and apologized for touching her. In her country, no one would hesitate to do this act. She realized how much more physical touch is accepted and even expected in her culture.

Objects/artifacts/personal appearance are types of nonverbal communication we use on our bodies and surroundings to communicate meaning to others. Consider your preferences for hairstyle, clothing, jewelry, and automobiles as well as the way you maintain your body. Your choices express meanings to those around you about what you value and the image you wish to put forth. As with most communication, our choices for personal appearance, objects, and artifacts occur within cultural contexts and are interpreted in light of these contexts. Consider the recent trendiness and popularity of tattoos. While once associated primarily with prison and armed services, tattoos have become mainstream and are used to articulate a variety of personal, political, and cultural messages.

Proxemics is the study of our use of space to influence the ways we relate to others. It also demonstrates our relational standing with those around us (May). Edward Hall developed four categories of space we use in the US to form and maintain relationships. Intimate space consists of space that ranges from touch to eighteen inches. We use intimate space with those whom we are close (family members, close friends, and intimate partners). Intimate space is also the context for physical fighting and violence. Personal space ranges from eighteen inches to four feet and is reserved for most conversations with nonintimate others (friends and acquaintances). Social space extends from four to twelve feet and is used for small group interactions such as sitting around a dinner table with others or a group meeting. Public space extends beyond twelve feet and is most often used in public speaking situations. We use space to regulate our verbal communication and communicate relational and social meanings. A fun exercise to do is to go to a public space and observe people. Based on their use of the above categories of space, try to determine what type of relationship the people are in: romantic, family, or friends.

Our environments offer nonverbal communication through our use of spaces we occupy, like our homes, rooms, cars, or offices. Think of your home, room, automobile, or office space. What meanings can others perceive about you from these spaces? What meanings are you trying to send by how you keep them? Think about spaces you use frequently and the nonverbal meanings they have for you. Most educational institutions intentionally paint classrooms in dull colors. Why? Dull colors on walls have a calming effect, theoretically keeping students from being distracted by bright colors and excessive stimuli. Contrast the environment of a classroom to that of a fast-food restaurant. These establishments have bright colors and hard plastic seats and tables. The bright colors generate an upbeat environment, while the hard plastic seats are just uncomfortable enough to keep patrons from staying too long—remember, it's fast food. People and cultures place different emphases on the use of space as a way to communicate nonverbally.

Chronemics is the study of how people use time. Are you someone who is always early or on time? Or are you someone who arrives late to most events? Levine believes our use of time communicates a variety of meanings to those around us. Think about the person you know who is most frequently late. How do you describe that person based on their use of time? Now think about someone else who is always on time. How do you describe that person? Is there a difference? If so, these differences are probably based on their use of time. In the US, we place high value on being on time and respond more positively to people who are punctual. But in many Arab and Latin American countries, time is used more loosely, and punctuality is not necessarily a goal to achieve. You may have heard the expression "Indian time" to refer to "the perception of time [that] is circular and flexible" (Harris and Shutiva). This is the belief that activities will commence when everyone is present and ready, not according to an arbitrary schedule based on a clock or calendar. Neither approach is better than the other, but the dissimilar uses of time can create misunderstandings among those from different cultural groups.

Paralanguage is the term we use to describe vocal qualities such as pitch, volume, inflection, rate of speech, and rhythm. While the types of nonverbal communication we've discussed so far are nonvocal, some nonverbal communication is actually vocal (noise is produced). How we say words often expresses greater meaning than the actual words themselves. Sarcasm and incongruence are two examples of this. The comedian Stephen Wright bases much of his comedy on his use of paralanguage. He frequently makes statements such as "I'm getting really excited" while using a monotone voice accompanied by a blank facial expression. The humor lies in the incongruency—his paralanguage and facial expression contradict his verbal message. Whenever you use sarcasm, your paralanguage is intended to contradict the verbal message you say. As professors, we have found that using sarcasm in the classroom can backfire when students do not pick up on our paralinguistic cues and focus primarily on the verbal message. We have learned to use sarcasm sparingly so as not to hurt anyone's feelings.

You should now recognize the infinite combination of verbal and nonverbal messages we can share. When you think about it, it really is astonishing that we can communicate effectively at all. We engage in a continuous dance of communication where we try to stay in step with one another. With an understanding of the definition of nonverbal communication and the types of nonverbal communication, let's consider the various functions nonverbal communication serves in helping us communicate.

# 5.3 FUNCTIONS OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

You learned that we use different types of nonverbal communication to express ideas, emotions, experiences, and thoughts. But what function does nonverbal communication serve as we communicate? Even though it's not through words, nonverbal communication serves many purposes to help us communicate meanings with one another more effectively.

We use nonverbal communication to duplicate verbal communication, often in a way that is recognizable to most people within a particular cultural group. Obvious examples include a head-nod or a headshake to duplicate the verbal messages of yes or no. If someone asks if you want to go to a movie, you might verbally answer "yes" and at the same time nod your head. This accomplishes the goal of duplicating the verbal message with a nonverbal message. Interestingly, the head-nod is considered a "nearly universal indication of accord, agreement, and understanding" because the same muscle in the head-nod is the same one a baby uses to lower its head to accept milk from its mother's breast (Givens). Researchers witnessed a two-year-old girl who was learning the duplication function of nonverbal communication and didn't always get it right. When asked if she wanted something, her *yes* was shaking her head from side to side as if she was communicating *no*. However, her *no* was the same headshake, but it was accompanied by the verbal response "no." So when she was two, she thought that the duplication was what made her answer *no*.

We use nonverbal communication to replace verbal communication. If someone asks you a question, instead of a verbal reply *yes* and a head-nod, you may choose to simply nod your head without the accompanying verbal message. When we replace verbal communication with nonverbal communication, we use nonverbal behaviors that are easily recognized by others such as a wave, head-nod, or headshake. This is why it was so confusing for others to understand the young girl in the example above when she simply shook her head in response to a question. This was cleared up when someone asked her if she wanted something to eat, and she shook her head. When she didn't get food, she began to cry. This was the first clue that the replacing function of communication still needed to be learned. Consider how universal shaking the head from side to side is as an indicator of disbelief, disapproval, and negation. This nonverbal act is used by human babies to refuse food or drink; rhesus monkeys, baboons, bonnet macaques, and gorillas turn their faces sideways in aversion; and children born deaf/blind head shake to refuse objects or disapprove of touch (Givens).

We use nonverbal cues to complement verbal communication. If a friend tells you that she recently received a promotion and a pay raise, you can show your enthusiasm in a number of verbal and nonverbal ways. If you exclaim, "Wow, that's great! I'm so happy for you!" while at the same time smiling and hugging your friend, you are using nonverbal communication to complement what you are saying. Unlike duplicating or replacing, nonverbal communication that complements cannot be used alone without the verbal message. If you simply smiled and hugged your friend without saying anything, the interpretation of that nonverbal communication would be more ambiguous than using it to complement your verbal message.

We use nonverbal communication to accent verbal communication. While nonverbal communication complements verbal communication, we also use it to accent verbal communication by emphasizing certain parts of the verbal message. For instance, you may be upset with a family member and state, "I'm very angry with you." To accent this statement nonverbally, you might say, "I'm *very* angry with you," placing your emphasis on the word *very* to demonstrate the magnitude of your anger. In this example, it is your tone of voice (paralanguage) that serves as the nonverbal communication that accents the message. Parents might tell their children to "come here." If they point to the spot in front of them dramatically, they are accenting the *here* part of the verbal message.

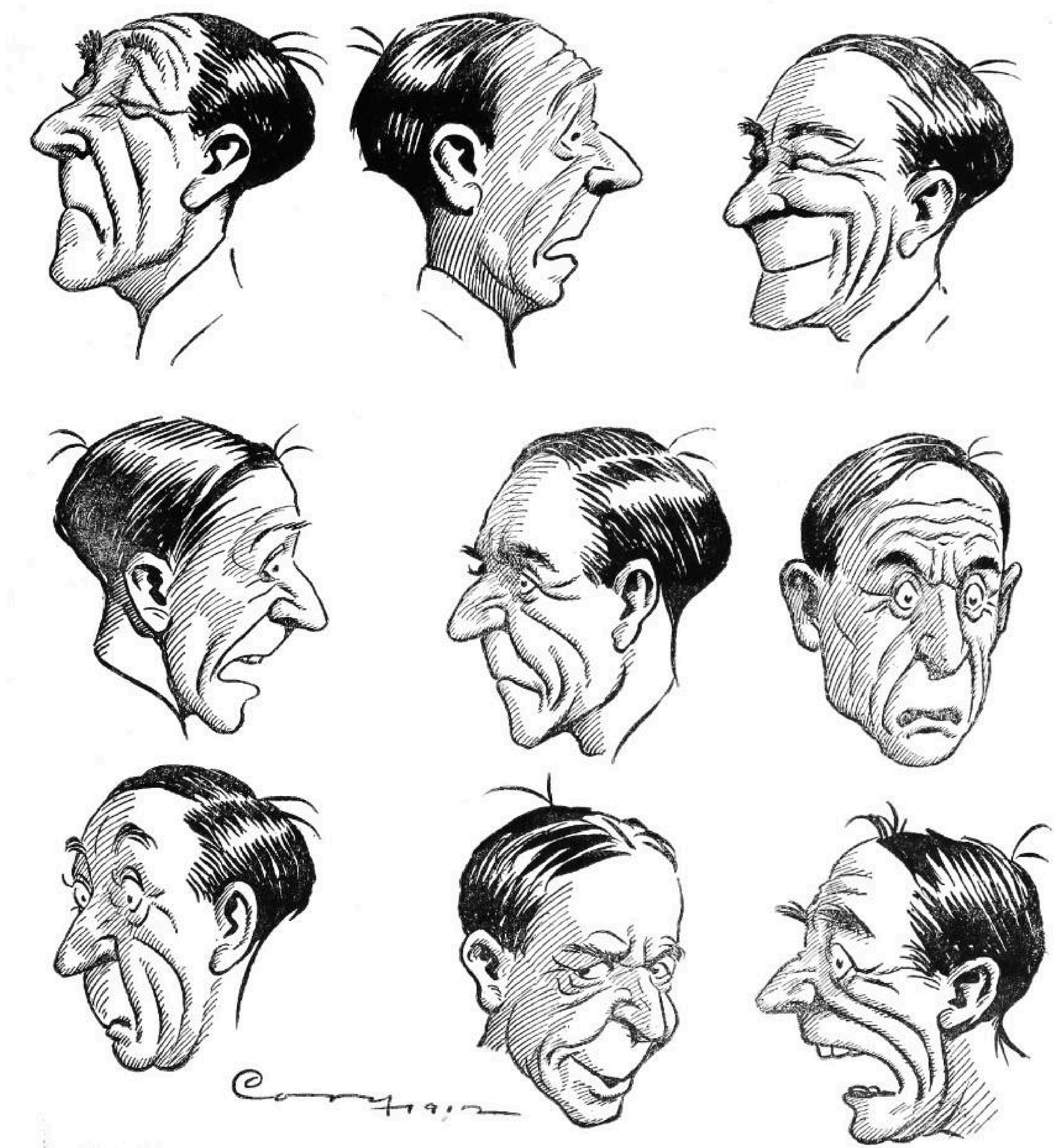
We use nonverbal communication to regulate verbal communication. Generally, it is pretty easy for us to enter, maintain, and exit our interactions with others nonverbally. Rarely, if ever, would we approach a person and say, "I'm going to start a conversation with you now. Okay, let's begin." Instead, we might make eye contact, move closer to the person, or face the person directly—all nonverbal behaviors that indicate our desire to interact. Likewise, we do not generally end conversations by stating "I'm done talking to you now" unless there is a breakdown in the communication process. We are generally proficient in enacting nonverbal communication such as looking at our watch, looking in the direction we wish to go, or being silent to indicate an impending end in the conversation. When there is a breakdown in the nonverbal regulation of conversation, we may say something to the effect of "I really need to get going now." In fact, we've seen one example where someone does not seem to pick up on the nonverbal cues about ending a phone conversation. Because of this inability to pick up on the nonverbal regulation cues, others have literally had to resort to saying, "Okay, I'm hanging up the phone right now" followed by actually hanging up the phone. In these instances, there was a breakdown in the use of nonverbal communication to regulate conversation.

We use nonverbal communication to contradict verbal communication. Imagine that you visit your boss's office and she asks you how you're enjoying a new work assignment. You may feel obligated to respond positively because it is your boss asking the question, even though you may not truly feel this way. However, your nonverbal communication may contradict your verbal message, indicating to your boss that you really do not enjoy the new work assignment. In this example, your nonverbal communication contradicts your verbal message and sends a mixed message to your boss. Research suggests that when verbal and nonverbal messages contradict one another, receivers often place greater value on the nonverbal communication as the more accurate message (Argyle et al.). One place this occurs frequently is in greeting sequences. You might say to your friend in passing, "How are you?" She might say "Fine" but have a sad tone to her voice. In this case, her nonverbal behaviors go against her verbal response. We are more likely to interpret the nonverbal communication in this situation than the verbal response.

We use nonverbal communication to mislead others. We can also use nonverbal communication to deceive, and often, we focus on a person's nonverbal communication when trying to detect deception. Recall a time when someone asked your opinion of a new haircut. If you did not like it, you may have stated verbally that you liked the haircut and provided nonverbal communication to further mislead the person about how you really felt. Conversely, when we try to determine if someone is misleading us, we generally focus on the nonverbal communication of the other person. One study suggests that when we only use nonverbal communication to detect deception in others, 78% of lies and truths can be detected (Vrij et al.). However, other studies indicate that we are really not very effective at determining deceit in other people (Levine et al.) and that we are only accurate 45–70% of the time when trying to determine if someone is misleading us (Kalbfleisch et al.; Horchak et al.). When trying to detect deception, it is more effective to examine both verbal and nonverbal communication to see if they are consistent (Vrij et al.). Even further than this, Park et al. argue that people usually go beyond verbal and nonverbal communication and consider outsiders' words, physical evidence, and the relationship over a longer period of time.

We use nonverbal communication to indicate relational standing (Mehrabian; Burgoon et al.; Le Poire et al.; Sallinen-Kuparinen et al.). Take a few moments today to observe the nonverbal communication of people you see in public areas. What can you determine about their relational standing from their nonverbal communication? For example, romantic partners tend to stand close to one another and touch one another frequently. On the other hand, acquaintances generally maintain greater distances and touch less than romantic partners. Those who hold higher social status often use more space when they interact with others. In the United States, it is generally acceptable for women in platonic relationships to embrace and be physically close, while males are often discouraged from doing so. Contrast this to many other nations where it is customary for males to greet each other with a kiss or a hug and hold hands as a symbol of friendship. We make many inferences about relational standing based on the nonverbal communication of those with whom we interact and observe. Imagine seeing a couple talking to each other across a small table. They both have faces that look upset, red eyes from crying, closed body positions, are leaning into each other, and are whispering emphatically. Upon seeing this, would you think they were having a breakup conversation?

We use nonverbal communication to demonstrate and maintain cultural norms. We've already shown that some nonverbal communication is universal, but the majority of nonverbal communication is culturally specific. For example, in US culture, people typically place high value on their personal space. In the US, people maintain far greater personal space than those in many other cultures. If you go to New York City, you might observe that any time someone accidentally touches you on the subway, he/she might apologize profusely for the violation of personal space. Cultural norms of anxiety and fear surrounding issues of crime and terrorism appear to cause people to be more sensitive to others in public spaces, highlighting the importance of culture and context.



This 1920s comic artist was practicing facial expressions; what do you think each one means? Image is in the public domain

If you go grocery shopping in China as a Westerner, you might be shocked that shoppers would ram their shopping carts into others' carts when they wanted to move around them in the aisle. This is not an indication of rudeness but a cultural difference in the negotiation of space. You would need to adapt to using this new approach to personal space even though it carries a much different meaning in the US. Nonverbal cues such as touch, eye contact, facial expressions, and gestures are culturally specific and reflect and maintain the values and norms of the cultures in which they are used.

We use nonverbal communication to communicate emotions. While we can certainly tell people how we feel, we more frequently use nonverbal communication to express our emotions. Conversely, we tend to interpret emotions by examining nonverbal communication. For example, a friend may be feeling sad one day, and it is probably easy to tell this by her nonverbal communication. Not only may she be less talkative, but her shoulders may be slumped, and she may not smile. One study suggests that it is important to use and interpret nonverbal communication for emotional expression and, ultimately, relational attachment and satisfaction (Schachner et al.). Research also underscores the fact that people in close relationships have an easier time reading the nonverbal communication of emotion of their relational partners than those who aren't as intimate. Likewise, those in close relationships can more often detect concealed emotions (Sternglanz and Depaulo).

## Nonverbal Communication Summary

In this chapter, you have learned that we define nonverbal communication as any meaning shared through sounds, behaviors, and artifacts other than words. Some of the differences between verbal and nonverbal communication include the fact that verbal communication uses one channel, while nonverbal communication occurs through multiple channels simultaneously. As a result, verbal communication is distinct, while nonverbal communication is continuous. For the most part, nonverbal communication is enacted at an unconscious level, while we are almost always conscious of our verbal communication. Finally, some nonverbal communication is considered universal and recognizable by people all over the world, while verbal communication is exclusive to particular languages.

There are many types of nonverbal communication including kinesics, haptics, appearance-based, objects, artifacts, proxemics, environmental, chronemics, paralanguage, and silence. These types of nonverbal communication help us share meanings in our interactions.

# CHAPTER VI

# CHAPTER 6: LISTENING

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

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

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% 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% of their workday listening, and managers spend about 63% of their day listening, according to Owen Hargie in his book *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice*.

Listening is a primary means through which we learn new information, which can help us meet instrumental needs as we learn things that help 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. Stronger listening skills can make a person wiser about the world that surrounds them.

# 6.1 LISTENING PROCESS

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.

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 email, text, and phone interactions presents some difficulties for reading contextual clues into meaning received through only auditory channels.


Image by Mohammad Metri on Unsplash

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 things salient when those things are visually or audibly stimulating and when they 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 noise 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% after eight hours, and recall 20% after a day (Hargie, 189–99). Our memory consists of multiple "storage units," including sensory storage, short-term memory, working memory, and long-term memory (Hargie, 184).

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. Information here can be stored indefinitely (Hargie, 184). 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 as well as 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, 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 comprehend 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% 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 accurate and 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?" Listeners respond to speakers nonverbally during a message using back-channel cues and verbally after message using.

# 6.2 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 communication goals: physical, instrumental, relational, and identity. 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 (Zabaya and Wolvin, 215–17). 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, according to the 2011 "Job Outlook" published by the National Association of Colleges and Employers.

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 (DiSalvo, 283–90). 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 (Milardo and Helms-Erikson, 37).

The following list reviews some of the main functions of listening that are relevant in multiple contexts:

- 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 (Bodie and Villaume, 48). The main types of listening we will discuss are discriminative, informational, critical, and empathetic (Watson et al., 1–13).

### 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 to a sound coming from 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 (Hargie, 185). 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 re-create nuanced behavior (Wolvin and Coakley, 18–19).

### 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, voicemail, 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 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. 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 are expected to be subjective and critical, critical listening is also important when listening to speakers who 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 (Bruneau, 188). 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 (for more information, visit http://www.justice.gov.za/trc). 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 (for more information, visit http://www.greensborotrc.org/truth_reconciliation.php).

The truth and reconciliation process seeks to heal relations between opposing sides by uncovering all pertinent facts, distinguishing truth from lies, and allowing for acknowledgment, 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% of people have more than one preferred listening style and that they choose a style based on the listening situation (Bodie and Villaume, 50). 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 (Worthington, 82). 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 when 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 shortcuts or cutting corners) when they think they have enough information.

## Summary on Listening

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.

# 6.3 BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE LISTENING

Barriers to effective listening are present at every stage of the listening process (Hargie, 200). 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. 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 (Anderson, 57–58). 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, such as a whirring air conditioner, barking dogs, or nearby construction that 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, or *noise stemming from our psychological states including moods and level of arousal*, can impede listening or facilitate it by bridging physical and cognitive barriers to effective 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 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 manifest 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 (Hargie, 195). 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 (Brownwell, 245). 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, which 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.

### 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, sexual orientation, gender, 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. In a classroom public speaking setting, it is generally considered unacceptable to interrupt another student while they are presenting.

### Distorted Listening

Distorted listening is *a bad listening practice that 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 before right or right then left?) 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 (Hargie, 191). 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 idiom 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.

## 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 (McCornack, 208). 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 more prone they may be to engage in aggressive listening (McCornack). 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* (McCornack, 212). 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:

**Bob**: 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.

**Todd**: 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…" (Perri, 68–72). 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* (McCornack, 208). 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 to 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.

## Listening Summary

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.

# 6.4 IMPROVING LISTENING COMPETENCE

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 lists indicate (Ridge, 5–6).

To improve listening at the receiving stage,

- prepare yourself to listen,
- discern between intentional messages and noise,
- concentrate on stimuli most relevant to your listening purpose(s) or goal(s),
- be mindful of the selection and attention process as much as possible,
- pay attention to turn-taking signals so you can follow the conversational flow, and
- 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,

- identify main points and supporting points;
- use contextual clues from the person or environment to discern additional meaning;
- be aware of how a relational, cultural, or situational context can influence meaning;
- be aware of the different meanings of silence; and
- note differences in tone of voice and other paralinguistic cues that influence meaning.

To improve listening at the recalling stage,

- use multiple sensory channels to decode messages and make more complete memories;
- repeat, rephrase, and reorganize information to fit your cognitive preferences; and
- use mnemonic devices as a gimmick to help with recall.

To improve listening at the evaluating stage,

- separate facts, inferences, and judgments;
- be familiar with and able to identify persuasive strategies and fallacies of reasoning;
- assess the credibility of the speaker and the message; and
- be aware of your own biases and how your perceptual filters can create barriers to effective listening.

To improve listening at the responding stage:

- ask appropriate clarifying and follow-up questions and paraphrase information to check understanding,
- give feedback that is relevant to the speaker's purpose or motivation for speaking,
- adapt your response to the speaker and the context, and
- do not let the preparation and rehearsal of your response diminish earlier stages of listening.

Active listening refers to 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.

## Listenable Messages and Effective Feedback

We should not forget that sending messages is an important part of the listening process. Although we often think of listening as the act of receiving messages, that passive view of listening overlooks the importance of message construction and feedback. In the following section, we will learn how speakers can facilitate listening by creating listenable messages and how listeners help continue the listening process through feedback for others and themselves.

### Creating Listenable Messages

Some of the listening challenges we all face would be diminished if speakers created listenable messages. Listenable messages are *orally delivered messages that are tailored to be comprehended by a listener* (Rubin, 269). While most of our communication is oral, meaning spoken and intended to be heard, we sometimes create messages that are unnecessarily complex in ways that impede comprehension. Listenable messages can be contrasted with most written messages, which are meant to be read.

The way we visually process written communication is different from the way we process orally delivered and aurally received language. Aside from processing written and spoken messages differently, we also speak and write differently. This becomes a problem for listening when conventions of written language get transferred into oral messages. You may have witnessed or experienced this difficulty if you have ever tried or watched someone else try to orally deliver a message that was written to be read, not spoken. For example, when students in my classes try to deliver a direct quote from one of their research sources or speak verbatim a dictionary definition of a word, they inevitably have fluency hiccups in the form of unintended pauses or verbal trip-ups that interfere with their ability to deliver the content. These hiccups consequently make the message difficult for the audience to receive and comprehend.

This isn't typically a problem in everyday conversations, because when we speak impromptu, we automatically speak in an oral style. We have a tendency, however, to stray from our natural oral style when delivering messages that we have prepared in advance—like speeches. This is because we receive much more training in creating messages to be read than we do in creating messages to be spoken. We are usually just expected to pick up the oral style of communicating through observation and trial and error. Being able to compose and deliver messages in an oral style, as opposed to a written style, is a crucial skill to develop in order to be a successful public speaker. Since most people lack specific instruction in creating messages in an oral rather than written style, you should be prepared to process messages that aren't as listenable as you would like them to be. The strategies for becoming an active listener discussed earlier in this chapter will also help you mentally repair or restructure a message to make it more listenable. As a speaker, in order to adapt your message to a listening audience and to help facilitate the listening process, you can use the following strategies to create more listenable messages:

- Use shorter, actively worded sentences.
- Use personal pronouns ("I want to show you…").
- Use lists or other organizational constructions like problem-solution, pro-con, or compare-contrast.
- Use transitions and other markers that help a listener navigate your message (time markers like "today"; order indicators like "first, second, third"; previews like "I have two things I'd like to say about that"; and reviews like "So, basically, I feel like we should vacation at the lake instead of the beach because…").
- Use examples relevant to you and your listener's actual experiences.

## Giving Formal Feedback to Others

The ability to give effective feedback benefits oneself and others. Whether in professional or personal contexts, positive verbal and nonverbal feedback can boost others' confidence, and negative feedback, when delivered constructively, can provide important perception checking and lead to improvements. Of course, negative feedback that is not delivered competently can lead to communication difficulties that can affect a person's self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Although we rarely give formal feedback to others in interpersonal contexts, it is important to know how to give this type of feedback, as performance evaluations are common in a variety of professional, academic, and civic contexts.

It is likely that you will be asked at some point to give feedback to another person in an academic, professional, or civic context. As companies and organizations have moved toward more team-based work environments over the past twenty years, peer evaluations are now commonly used to help assess job performance. I, for example, am evaluated every year by two tenured colleagues, my department chair, and my dean. I also evaluate my graduate teaching assistants and peers as requested. It's important for us to know how to give competent and relevant feedback, since the feedback can be useful for self-evaluation.

## When Giving Feedback to Others

Be specific. I often see a lack of specific comments when it comes to feedback on speech delivery. Students write things like "eye contact" on a peer comment sheet, but neither the student nor I know what to do with the comment. While a comment like "good eye contact" or "not enough eye contact" is more specific, it's not descriptive enough to make it useful.

Be descriptive. I'd be hard pressed to think of a descriptive comment that isn't also specific, because the act of adding detail to something usually makes the point clearer as well. The previous "not enough eye contact" comment would be more helpful and descriptive like this: "You looked at your notes more than you looked at the audience during the first thirty seconds of your speech."

Be positive. If you are delivering your feedback in writing, pretend that you are speaking directly to the person and write it the same way. Comments like "stop fidgeting" or "get more sources" wouldn't likely come out during verbal feedback, because we know they sound too harsh. The same tone, however, can be communicated through written feedback. Instead, make comments that are framed in such a way as to avoid defensiveness or hurt feelings.

Be constructive. Although we want to be positive in our feedback, comments like "good job" aren't constructive, because a communicator can't actually take that comment and do something with it. A comment like "You were able to explain our company's new marketing strategy in a way that even I, as an engineer, could make sense of. The part about our new crisis communication plan wasn't as clear. Perhaps you could break it down the same way you did the marketing strategy to make it clearer for people like me who are outside the public relations department." This statement is positively framed, specific, and constructive because the speaker can continue to build on the positively reviewed skill by applying it to another part of the speech that was identified as a place for improvement.

Be realistic. Comments like "don't be nervous" aren't constructive or realistic. Instead, you could say, "I know the first speech is tough, but remember that we're all in the same situation and we're all here to learn.

I tried the breathing exercises discussed in the book and they helped calm my nerves. Maybe they'll work for you too?" I've also had students make comments like "Your accent made it difficult for me to understand you," which could be true but may signal a need for more listening effort, since we all technically have accents, and changing them, if possible at all, would take considerable time and effort.

Be relevant. Feedback should be relevant to the assignment, task, and/or context. I've had students give feedback like "rad nail polish" and "nice smile," which although meant as compliments are not relevant in formal feedback unless you're a fashion consultant or a dentist.

CHAPTER VII

# CHAPTER 7: COMMUNICATION CLIMATES

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- Describe confirming and disconfirming climates
- Discuss the types of conflict
- Describe the strategies for managing conflict

Do you feel organized or confined in a clean workspace? Are you more productive when the sun is shining than when it's gray and cloudy outside? Just as factors like weather and physical space impact us, communication climate influences our interpersonal interactions in a variety of ways.

**Communication climate** is the "overall feeling or emotional mood between people" (Wood, 245). If you dread going to visit your family during the holidays because of tension between you and your sister or you look forward to dinner with a particular set of friends because they make you laugh, you are responding to the communication climate—the overall mood that is created because of the people involved and the type of communication they bring to the interaction. Every communication situation has a unique climate. If you are more open and aware of these climates, you can communicate better while participating in them. Additionally, your awareness and example can help others to communicate better. Let's look at two different types of communication climates: confirming and disconfirming climates.

# 7.1 CONFIRMING AND DISCONFIRMING CLIMATES

Positive and negative climates can be understood along three dimensions—recognition, acknowledgment, and endorsement. We experience confirming climates when we receive messages that demonstrate our value and worth from those with whom we have a relationship. Conversely, we experience disconfirming climates when we receive messages that suggest we are devalued and unimportant. Obviously, most of us like to be in confirming climates because they foster emotional safety as well as personal and relational growth. However, it is likely that your relationships fall somewhere between the two extremes. Let's look at three types of messages that create confirming and disconfirming climates.

Recognition messages: These messages either confirm or deny another person's existence. For example, if a friend enters your home and you smile, hug him, and say, "I'm so glad to see you," you are confirming that friend's existence. If you say "Good morning" to a colleague and they ignore you by walking out of the room without saying anything, they are creating a disconfirming climate by not recognizing you as a unique individual.

Acknowledgment messages go beyond recognizing another's existence by confirming what they say or how they feel. Nodding our head while listening or laughing appropriately at a funny story are nonverbal acknowledgment messages. When a friend tells you about a really bad day at work and you respond with "Yeah, that does sound hard, do you want to go somewhere quiet and talk?" you are acknowledging and responding to that friend's feelings. In contrast, if you were to respond to your friend's frustrations with a comment like "That's nothing. Listen to what happened to me today," you would be ignoring the experience and presenting yours as more important.

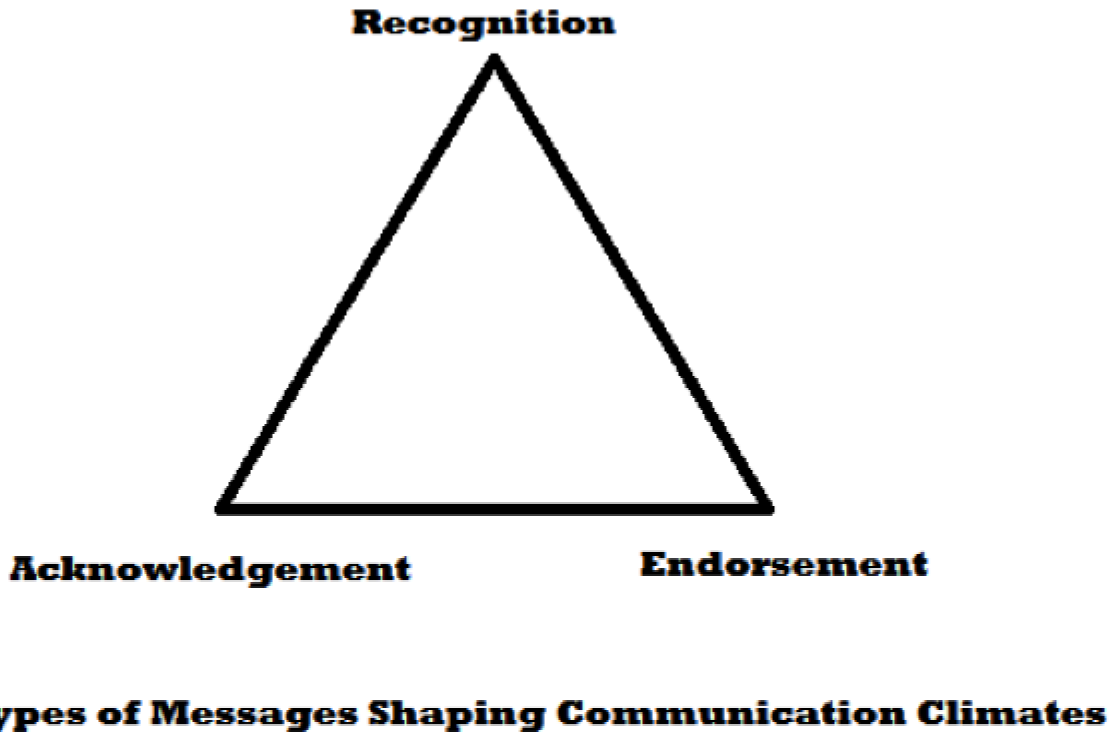



Image by Spaynton is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

Endorsement messages: These messages go one step further by recognizing a person's feelings as valid. Suppose a friend comes to you upset after a fight with their girlfriend. If you respond with "Yeah, I can see why you would be upset," you are endorsing their right to feel upset. However, if you said, "Get over it. At least you have a girlfriend," you would be sending messages that deny their right to feel frustrated in that moment. While it is difficult to see people we care about in emotional pain, people are responsible for their own emotions. When we let people own their emotions and do not tell them how to feel, we are creating supportive climates that provide a safe environment for them to work through their problems.

# 7.2 THINKING ABOUT CONFLICT

When you hear the word conflict, do you have a positive or negative reaction? Are you someone who thinks conflict should be avoided at all costs? While conflict may be uncomfortable and challenging, it doesn't have to be negative. Think about the social and political changes that came about from the conflict of the civil rights movement during the 1960s. There is no doubt that this conflict was painful and even deadly for some civil rights activists, but the conflict resulted in the elimination of many discriminatory practices and helped create a more egalitarian social system in the United States. Let's look at two distinct orientations to conflict as well as options for how to respond to conflict in our interpersonal relationships.

Image by JESHOOTS.COM on Unsplash

## Conflict as Destructive

When we shy away from conflict in our interpersonal relationships, we may do so because we conceptualize it as destructive to our relationships. Many of our beliefs and attitudes are not always well grounded and lead to destructive behaviors. Augsburger outlined four assumptions of viewing conflict as destructive:

- Conflict is a destructive disturbance of peace.
- The social system should not be adjusted to meet the needs of members; rather, members should adapt to the established values.
- Confrontations are destructive and ineffective.
- Disputants should be punished.

When we view conflict this way, we believe that it is a threat to the established order of the relationship. Think about sports as an analogy of how we view conflict as destructive. In the US, we like sports that have winners and losers. Sports and games where a tie is an option often seem confusing to us. How can neither team win or lose? When we apply this to our relationships, it's understandable why we would be resistant to engaging in conflict. I don't want to lose, and I don't want to see my relational partner lose. So an option is to avoid conflict so that neither person has to face that result.

## Conflict as Productive

In contrast to seeing conflict as destructive, also possible, even healthy, is to view conflict as a productive natural outgrowth and component of human relationships. Augsburger described four assumptions of viewing conflict as productive:

- Conflict is a normal, useful process.
- All issues are subject to change through negotiation.
- Direct confrontation and conciliation are valued.
- Conflict is a necessary renegotiation of an implied contract—a redistribution of opportunity, release of tensions, and renewal of relationships.

From this perspective, conflict provides an opportunity for strengthening relationships, not harming them. Conflict is a chance for relational partners to find ways to meet the needs of one another, even when these needs conflict. Think back to our discussion of dialectical tensions. While you may not explicitly argue with your relational partners about these tensions, the fact that you are negotiating them points to your ability to use conflict in productive ways for the relationship as a whole and the needs of the individuals in the relationship.

## Types of Conflict

Understanding the different ways of valuing conflict is a first step toward engaging in productive conflict interactions. Likewise, knowing the various types of conflict that occur in interpersonal relationships also helps us to identify appropriate strategies for managing certain types of conflict. Cole states that there are five types of conflict in interpersonal relationships: affective, conflict of interest, value, cognitive, and goal-oriented.

Affective Conflict: This type of conflict arises when we have incompatible feelings with another person. For example, if a couple has been dating for a while, one of the partners may want to marry as a sign of love, while the other decides they want to see other people. What do they do? The differences in feelings for one another are the source of affective conflict.

Conflict of Interest: This might happen when people disagree about a plan of action or what to do in a given circumstance. For example, Julie, a Christian Scientist, does not believe in seeking medical intervention but believes that prayer can cure illness. Jeff, a Catholic, does believe in seeking conventional medical attention as treatment for illness. What happens when Julie and Jeff decide to have children? Do they honor Jeff's beliefs and take the kids to the doctor when they are ill or respect and practice Julie's religion? This is a conflict of interest.

Value Conflict: A difference in ideologies or values between relational partners is called value conflict. In the example of Julie and Jeff, a conflict of interest about what to do concerning their children's medical needs results from differing religious values. Many people engage in conflict about religion and politics. Remember the old adage "Never talk about religion and politics with your family."

Cognitive Conflict: This happens when there is a difference in thought process, interpretation of events, and perceptions. Marsha and Victoria, a long-term couple, are both invited to a party. Victoria declines because she has a big presentation at work the next morning and wants to be well-rested. At the party, their mutual friends Michael and Lisa notice Marsha spending the entire evening with Karen. Lisa suspects Marsha may be flirting and cheating on Victoria, but Michael disagrees and says Marsha and Karen are just close friends catching up. Michael and Lisa are observing the same interaction but have a disagreement about what it means. This is an example of cognitive conflict.

Goal Conflict: The final category occurs when people disagree about a final outcome. Jesse and Maria are getting ready to buy their first house. Maria wants something that has long-term investment potential, while Jesse wants a house to suit their needs for a few years and then plans to move into a larger house. Maria has long-term goals for the house purchase, and Jesse is thinking in more immediate terms. These two have two different goals in regards to purchasing a home.

## Strategies for Managing Conflict

When we ask our students what they want to do when they experience conflict, most of the time they say, "Resolve it." While this is understandable, also important to understand is that conflict is ongoing in all relationships, and our approach to conflict should be to manage it instead of always trying to resolve it.

One way to understand options for managing conflict is by knowing five major strategies for managing conflict in relationships. While most of us probably favor one strategy over another, we all have multiple options for managing conflict in our relationships. Having a variety of options available gives us flexibility in our interactions with others. Five strategies for managing interpersonal conflict include dominating, integrating, compromising, obliging, and avoiding (Rahim; Rahim and Magner; Thomas and Kilmann). One way to think about these strategies, and your decision to select one over another, is to think about whose needs will be met in the conflict situation. You can conceptualize this idea according to the degree of concern for the self and the degree of concern for others.

When people select the dominating strategy, or win-lose approach, they exhibit high concern for the self and low concern for the other person. The goal here is to win the conflict. This approach is often characterized by loud, forceful, and interrupting communication. Again, this is analogous to sports. Too often, we avoid conflict because we believe the only other alternative is to try to dominate the other person. In relationships where we care about others, it's no wonder this strategy can seem unappealing.

The obliging style shows a moderate degree of concern for self and others and a high degree of concern for the relationship itself. In this approach, the individuals are less important than the relationship as a whole. Here, a person may minimize the differences or a specific issue in order to emphasize the commonalities. The comment "The fact that we disagree about politics isn't a big deal, since we share the same ethical and moral beliefs" exemplifies an obliging style.

The compromising style is evident when both parties are willing to give up something in order to gain something else. When environmental activist Julia Butterfly Hill agreed to end her two-year-long tree sit in Luna as a protest against the logging practices of Pacific Lumber Company (PALCO) and pay them $50,000 in exchange for their promise to protect Luna and not cut within a 20-foot buffer zone, she and PALCO reached a compromise. If one of the parties feels the compromise is unequal, they may be less likely to stick to it long term. When conflict is unavoidable, many times people will opt for compromise. One of the problems with compromise is that neither party fully gets their needs met. If you want Mexican food and your friend wants pizza, you might agree to compromise and go someplace that serves Mexican pizza. While this may seem like a good idea, you may have really been craving a burrito and your friend may have really been craving a pepperoni pizza. In this case, while the compromise brought together two food genres, neither person got their desire met.

When one avoids a conflict, they may suppress feelings of frustration or walk away from a situation. While this is often regarded as expressing a low concern for self and others because problems are not dealt with, the opposite may be true in some contexts. Take, for example, a heated argument between Ginny and Pat. Pat is about to make a hurtful remark out of frustration. Instead, she decides that she needs to avoid this argument right now until she and Ginny can come back and discuss things in a calmer fashion. In this case, temporarily avoiding the conflict can be beneficial. However, conflict avoidance over the long term generally has negative consequences for a relationship because neither person is willing to participate in the conflict management process.

Finally, integrating demonstrates a high level of concern for both self and others. Using this strategy, individuals agree to share information, feelings, and creativity to try to reach a mutually acceptable solution that meets both of their needs. In our food example above, one strategy would be for both people to get the food they want, then take it on a picnic in the park.

This way, both people are getting their needs met fully and in a way that extends beyond original notions of win-lose approaches for managing the conflict. The downside to this strategy is that it is very time-consuming and requires high levels of trust.

CHAPTER VIII

# CHAPTER 8: INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- Define interpersonal communication
- Explain self-disclosure
- Understand the role of communication climate on interpersonal communication
- Be aware of the role of dialectical tensions in interpersonal communication
- Understand the unique dynamics of friendship
- Understand the unique dynamics of romantic relationships
- Understand the unique dynamics of family
- Understand the various ways of interpreting and responding to conflict in interpersonal communication

Think about your relationships in the last few years. You have likely experienced many changes in your home, work, and school life. Imagine the potential changes that may occur over the following years. You and your friends from high school may attend different colleges and will live far apart from each other. If you have recently been separated by distance from friends or family, you have noticed that it is more difficult to stay connected and share all of the little things that go on in your day. As you continue to grow and change in college, it is likely that you will create relationships along the way. Being away from your family, you will probably notice changes in your relationships with them. All of these dynamics, and many more, fall under the scope of interpersonal communication.

Image by NAPPY STUDIO is licensed under CC0

# 8.1 DEFINING INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Before going any further, let us define interpersonal communication. “Inter” means between, among, mutually, or together. The second part of the word, “personal,” refers to a specific individual or particular role that an individual may occupy. Thus, interpersonal communication is communication between individual people. We often engage in interpersonal communication in dyads, which means between two people. It may also occur in small groups such as you and your housemates trying to figure out a system for household chores.

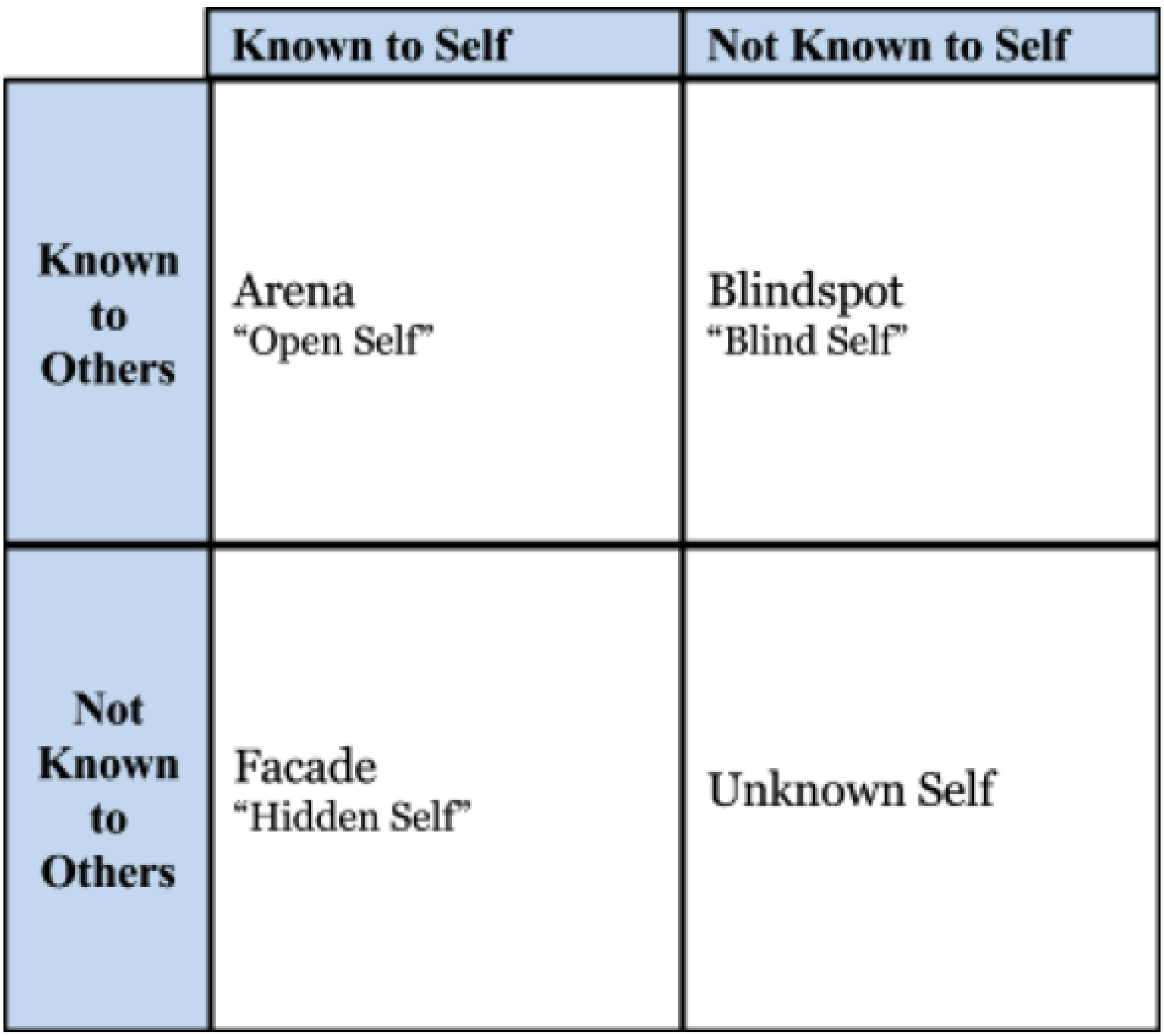
It is important to know that the definition of interpersonal communication is not simply a quantitative one. What this means is that you cannot define it by merely counting the number of people involved. Instead, communication scholars view interpersonal communication qualitatively, meaning that it occurs when people communicate with each other as unique individuals. Thus, interpersonal communication is a process of exchange where there is desire and motivation on the part of those involved to get to know each other as individuals. We will use this definition of interpersonal communication to explore the three primary types of relationships in our lives—friendships, romantic, and family. Given that conflict is a natural part of interpersonal communication, we will also discuss multiple ways of understanding and managing conflict. But before we go into detail about specific interpersonal relationships, let’s examine two important aspects of interpersonal communication: self-disclosure and climate.

## Self-Disclosure

Because interpersonal communication is the primary means by which we get to know others as unique individuals, it is important to understand the role of self-disclosure. Self-disclosure is the process of revealing information about yourself to others that is not readily known by them—you have to disclose it. In face-to-face interactions, telling someone “My eyes are brown” would not be self-disclosure because that person can perceive that about you without being told. However, revealing “I am an avid surfer” or “My favorite kind of music is electronic dance” would be examples of self-disclosure because these are pieces of personal information others do not know unless you tell them. Given that our definition of interpersonal communication requires people to build knowledge of one another to get to know them as unique individuals, the necessity for self-disclosure should be obvious.

There are degrees of self-disclosure, ranging from relatively safe (revealing your hobbies or musical preferences) to more personal topics (illuminating fears, dreams for the future, or fantasies). Typically, as relationships deepen and trust is established, self-disclosure increases in both breadth and depth. We tend to disclose facts about ourselves first (I am a biology major), then move toward opinions (I feel the war is wrong), and finally disclose feelings (I'm sad that you said that). An important aspect of self-disclosure is the rule of reciprocity. This rule states that self-disclosure between two people works best in a back-and-forth fashion. When you tell someone something personal, you probably expect them to do the same. When one person reveals more than another, there can be an imbalance in the relationship because the one who self-discloses more may feel vulnerable as a result of sharing more personal information.

One way to visualize self-disclosure is the Johari window, which comes from combining the first names of the window's creators, Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham. The window is divided into four quadrants: the arena, the blind spot, the facade, and the unknown.



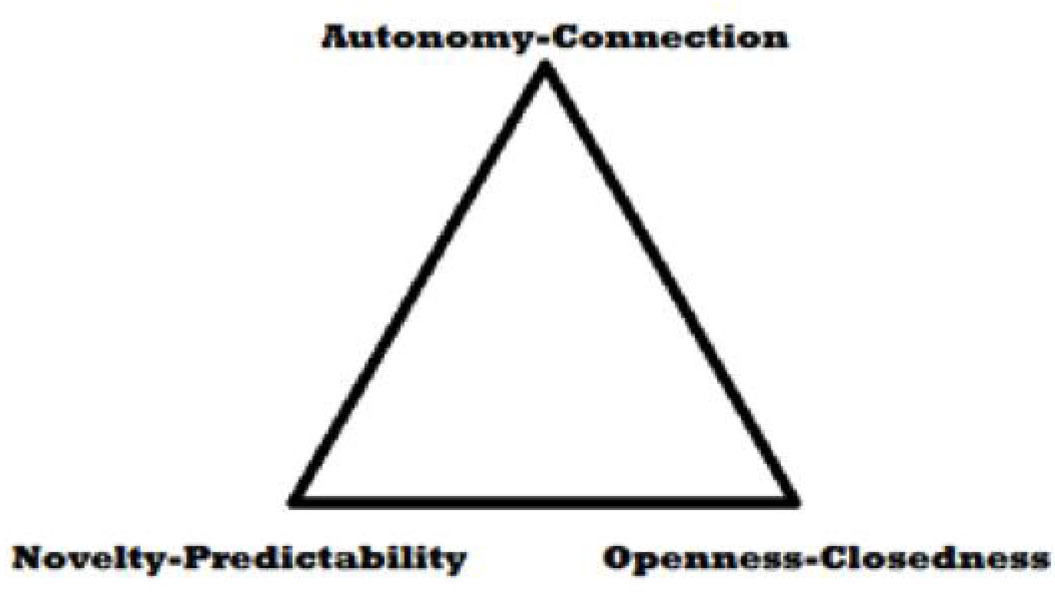



The arena area contains information that is known to us and to others, such as our height, hair color, occupation, or major. In general, we are comfortable discussing or revealing these topics with most people.

Information in the blind spot includes those things that may be apparent to others, yet we are unaware of it in ourselves. The habit of playing with your hair when nervous may be a habit that others have observed but you have not. The third area, the facade, contains information that is hidden from others but is known to you. Previous mistakes or failures, embarrassing moments, or family history are topics we typically hold close and reveal only in the context of safe, long-term relationships. Finally, the unknown area contains information that neither others nor we know about. We cannot know how we will react when a parent dies or just what we will do after graduation until these experiences occur. Knowing about ourselves, especially our blind and unknown areas, enables us to have a healthy, well-rounded self-concept. As we make choices to self-disclose to others, we are engaging in negotiating relational dialectics.

## Relational Dialectics

One way we can better understand our personal relationships is by understanding the notion of relational dialectics. Baxter describes three relational dialectics that are constantly at play in interpersonal relationships. Essentially, they are a continuum of needs for each participant in a relationship that must be negotiated by those involved. Let's take a closer look at the three primary relational dialectics that are at work in all interpersonal relationships.



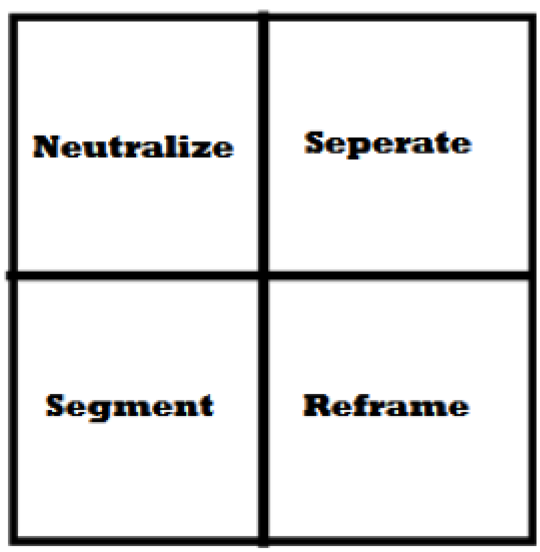

Autonomy-Connection refers to our need to have a close connection with others as well as our need to have our own space and identity. We may miss our romantic partner when they are away but simultaneously enjoy and cherish that alone time. When you first enter a romantic relationship, you probably want to be around the other person as much as possible. As the relationship grows, you likely begin to desire a need for autonomy, or alone time. In every relationship, each person must balance how much time to spend with the other versus how much time to spend alone.

Novelty-Predictability is the idea that we desire predictability as well as spontaneity in our relationships. In every relationship, we take comfort in a certain level of routine as a way of knowing that we can count on the other person in the relationship. Such predictability provides a sense of comfort and security. However, it requires balance with novelty to avoid boredom. An example of balance might be friends who get together every Saturday for brunch but make a commitment to always try new restaurants each week.

Openness-Closedness refers to the desire to be open and honest with others while at the same time not wanting to reveal everything about ourselves to someone else. One's desire for privacy does not mean always shutting out others. It is a normal human need. We tend to disclose the most personal information to those with whom we have the closest relationships. However, even these people do not know everything about us. It is natural and acceptable to maintain your own standards for privacy.

## How We Handle Relational Dialectics

Understanding that these three dialectical tensions are at play in all relationships is a first step in understanding how our relationships work. However, awareness alone is not enough. Couples, friends, or family members have strategies for managing these tensions in an attempt to meet the needs of each person. Baxter identifies four ways we can handle dialectical tensions:




**4 Ways to Handle Dialectical Tension**

The first option is to neutralize the extremes of the dialectical tensions. Here, individuals compromise, creating a solution where neither person's need (such as novelty or predictability) is fully satisfied. Individual needs may be different and never fully realized. For example, if one person seeks a great deal of autonomy and the other person in the relationship seeks a great deal of connection, neutralization would not make it possible for either person to have their desires met. Instead, each person might feel like they are not getting quite enough of their particular need met.

The second option is to separate. This is when someone favors one end of the dialectical continuum and ignores the other or alternates between the extremes. For example, a couple in a commuter relationship in which each person works in a different city may decide to live apart during the week (autonomy) and be together on the weekends (connection). In this sense, they are alternating between the extremes by being completely alone during the week yet completely together on the weekends.

When people decide to divide their lives into spheres, they are practicing segmentation. For example, your extended family may be very close and choose to spend religious holidays together. However, members of your extended family might reserve other special days such as birthdays for celebrating with friends. This approach divides needs according to the different segments of your life.

The final option for dealing with these tensions is a reframe. This strategy requires creativity not only in managing the tensions but in understanding how they work in the relationship. For example, the two ends of the dialectic are not viewed as opposing or contradictory at all. Instead, they are understood as supporting the other need as well as the relationship itself. A couple who does not live together, for example, may agree to spend two nights of the week alone or with friends as a sign of their autonomy. The time spent alone or with others gives each person the opportunity to develop themselves and their own interests so that they are better able to share themselves with their partner and enhance their connection.

In general, there is no one right way to understand and manage dialectical tensions, since every relationship is unique. However, to always satisfy one need and ignore the other may be a sign of trouble in the relationship (Baxter). It is important to remember that relational dialectics are a natural part of our relationships and that we have a lot of choice, freedom, and creativity in how we work them out with our relational partners. It is also important to remember that dialectical tensions are negotiated differently in each relationship. The ways we self-disclose and manage dialectical tensions contribute greatly to what we call the communication climate in relationships.

# 8.2 DEVELOPING AND MAINTAINING FRIENDSHIPS

A common need we have as people is the need to feel connected with others. We experience great joy, adventure, and learning through our connection and interactions with others. The feeling of wanting to be part of a group and liked by others is natural. One way we meet our need for connection is through our friendships. Friendship means different things to different people depending on age, gender, and cultural background. Common among all friendships is the fact that they are interpersonal relationships of choice. Throughout your life, you will engage in an ongoing process of developing friendships. Researcher William Rawlins developed a model of friendship after many years of study. While we may not follow these six steps in exact order in all of our relationships, these steps help us understand how we develop friendships.


Image by Spaynton is licensed CC BY-SA 4.0

The first step in building friendships occurs through Role-Limited Interaction. In this step, we interact with others based on our social roles. For example, when you meet a new person in class, your interaction centers on your role as student. The way that you communicate is characterized by a focus on superficial rather than personal topics. In this step, we engage in limited self-disclosure and rely on scripts and stereotypes. When two first-time freshmen meet in an introductory course, they strike up a conversation and interact according to the roles they play in the context of their initial communication. They begin a conversation because they sit near each other in class and discuss how much they liked or disliked aspects of the course.

The second step in developing friendships is called Friendly Relations. This stage is characterized by communication that moves beyond initial roles as the participants begin to interact with one another to see if there are common interests as well as an interest to continue getting to know one another. As the students spend more time together and have casual conversations, they may realize a wealth of shared interests. They realize that both travel from far distances to go to school and understand each other's struggle with missing their families. Each of them also loves athletics, especially playing basketball. The development of this friendship occurs as they identify with each other as more than classmates. They see each other as women of the same age with similar goals, ambitions, and interests. Moreover, as one of them studies communication and the other psychology, they appreciate the differences as well as similarities in their collegiate pursuits.

The third step in developing friendships is called Moving Toward Friendship. In this stage, participants make moves to foster a more personalized friendship. They may begin meeting outside of the setting in which the relationship started and begin increasing the levels of self-disclosure. Self-disclosure enables the new friends to form bonds of trust. When the students enter this stage, it is right before one joins the basketball club on their college campus. As she starts practices and meetings, she realizes this would be something fun for her and her classmate to do together, so she invites her classmate along.

The fourth step in developing friendships is called Nascent Friendship. In this stage, individuals commit to spending more time together. They also may start using the term "friend" to refer to each other as opposed to "a person in my history class" or "this guy I work with." The interactions extend beyond the initial roles as participants work out their own private communication rules and norms. For example, they may start calling or texting on a regular basis or reserving certain times and activities for each other such as going on evening runs together. As time goes on, the students start texting each other more frequently just to tell each other a funny story that happened during the day, to make plans for going out to eat, or to plan for meeting at the gym to work out.

The fifth step in developing friendships is Stabilized Friendship. In this stage, friends take each other for granted as friends, but not in a negative way. Because the friendship is solid, they assume each other will be in their lives. There is an assumption of continuity. The communication in this stage is also characterized by a sense of trust as levels of self-disclosure increase and each person feels more comfortable revealing parts of him or herself to the other. This stage can continue indefinitely throughout a lifetime. When the women became friends, they were freshmen in college. After finishing school some years later, they moved to separate regions for graduate school. While they were sad to move away from one another, they knew the friendship would continue. To this day they continue to be best friends.

The final step in friendship development is Waning Friendship. As you know, friendships do not always last a lifetime. Many friendships come to an end. Friendships may not simply end abruptly. Many times, there are stages that show a decline of a friendship, but in Rawlin's model, the ending of a friendship is summed up by this step. Perhaps the relationship is too difficult to sustain over large geographic distances. Or sometimes people change and grow in different directions and have little in common with old friends. Sometimes friendship rules are violated to a degree beyond repair. We spoke earlier of trust as a component of friendships. One common rule of trust is that if we tell friends a secret, they are expected to keep it a secret. If that rule is broken, and a friend continually breaks your trust by telling your secrets to others, you are likely to stop thinking of them as your friend.

## Challenges for Friendships

While the above steps are a general pathway toward friendship, they are not always smooth. As with any relationship, challenges exist in friendships that can strain their development. Three of the more common challenges to friendships are gender, cultural diversity, and sexual attraction. Important to remember is that each of these constructs comes with its own conflicts of power and privilege because of the cultural norms and the values we give to certain characteristics. These are challenges to relationships, since studies show that people tend to associate with others who are similar to themselves (Echols and Graham). Factors such as our gender identities and cultural backgrounds always play a role in our interactions with others.

Gender: Research suggests that both women and men value trust and intimacy in their friendships and value their time spent with friends (Mathews et al.; Bell and Coleman; Monsour and Rawlins). However, there are some differences in the interactions that take place within women's and men's friendships (Burleson et al.; Coates; Harriman). Quite common among female friends is to get together simply to talk and catch up with one another. When calling her close friend, Antoinette might say, "Why don't you come over to my place so we can talk?" The need to connect through verbal communication is explicitly stated and forms the basis for the relationship. In contrast, among male friends, a more common approach to interaction is an invitation to engage in an activity as a means of facilitating conversation. For example, John might say to his friend, "Hey, Mike, let's get out surfing this weekend." The explicit request is to engage in an activity (surfing), but John and Mike understand that as they engage in the activity, they will talk, joke around, and reinforce their friendship ties. It is important to note that the research suggests patterns and trends, but there is never a standard way to predict how any gender will communicate.

While we have often looked at gender as male and female, culture is changing in which gender is viewed as a spectrum rather than the male/female binary. Monsour and Rawlins explain the new waves of research into different types of gender communities. More recent research is more inclusive of gender definitions that extend beyond the male/female binary. This research may be cutting-edge in its field, but as society becomes more accepting of difference, new ideas of relationship rules will emerge. We anticipate that all communication research will become increasingly inclusive and sensitive to these issues.

Culture: Cultural values shape how we understand our friendships. In most Western societies that emphasize individualism (as opposed to collectivism), friendships are seen as voluntary in that we get to choose who we want in our friendship circle. If we do not like someone, we do not have to be friends with that person. Contrast this to the workplace or school, where we may be forced to get along with colleagues or classmates even though we may not like them. In many collectivist cultures, such as Japan and China, friendships carry certain obligations that are understood by all parties (Carrier; Kim and Markman). These may include gift giving, employment and economic opportunities, and cutting through so-called bureaucratic red tape. Although these sorts of connections, particularly in business and politics, may be frowned upon in the United States because they contradict our valuing of individualism, they are a natural, normal, and logical result of friendships in collectivist cultures.

Sexual Attraction: The classic film *When Harry Met Sally* highlights how sexual attraction can complicate friendships. In the movie, Harry quotes the line, "Men and women can't be friends because the sex always gets in the way." Levels of sexual attraction or sexual tension may challenge friendships between heterosexual men and women, gay men, and lesbian women. This may arise from an internal desire of one of the friends to explore a sexual relationship or if someone in the relationship indicates that he/she wants to be more than friends. These situations might place strain on the friendship and require the individuals to address the situation if they want the friendship to continue. One approach has been the recent definition of friendships called "friends with benefits." This term implies an understanding that two people will identify their relationship as a friendship but will be open to engaging in sexual activity without committing to the other characteristics common in romantic relationships.

## Friendships Now

Take a moment to reflect on how many friends you have in your everyday life. Is that number equivalent or more than the number you have on social media accounts like Instagram? Chances are, those numbers are very different. Social media is changing the ways we develop and maintain friendships. When you make a friend in physical life, the other person has to be in close enough proximity to communicate with on a regular basis to have a face-to-face interaction. That concept is almost nonexistent in the world of social media. Rawlin's first step in developing friendships, Role-Limited Interaction, can be bypassed and moved right into Friendly Relations with the click of a button.

# 8.3 DEVELOPING AND MAINTAINING ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Like other relationships in our lives, romantic relationships play an important role in fulfilling our needs for intimacy, social connection, and sexual relations. Like friendships, romantic relationships also follow general stages of creation and deterioration. Before we explore these stages, let's look at our definition of romantic relationships.

In many Western cultures, romantic relationships are voluntary. We are free to decide whom to date and form life-long romantic relationships. In some Eastern cultures, these decisions may be made by parents or elders in the community based on what is good for the family or social group. Even in Western societies, not everyone holds the same amount of freedom and power to determine their relational partners. Parents or society may discourage interracial, interfaith, or interclass relationships. While it is now legal for same-sex couples to marry, many same-sex couples still suffer political and social restrictions when making choices about marrying and having children. Much of the research on how romantic relationships develop is based on relationships in the West. In this context, romantic relationships can be viewed as voluntary relationships between individuals who have intentions that each person will be a significant part of their ongoing lives.

Think about your own romantic relationships for a moment. To whom are you attracted? Chances are they are people with whom you share common interests and encounter in your everyday routines such as going to school or work or participating in hobbies or sports. In other words, self-identity, similarity, and proximity are three powerful influences when it comes to whom we select as romantic partners. We often select others who we deem appropriate for us, as they fit our self-identity: heterosexuals tend to pair up with other heterosexuals, lesbian women with other lesbian women, and so forth. Social class, religious preference, and ethnic or racial identity are also great influences, as people are more likely to pair up with others of similar backgrounds. Logically speaking, it is difficult (although not impossible with the prevalence of social media and online dating services) to meet people outside of our immediate geographic area. In other words, if we do not have the opportunity to meet and interact with someone at least a little, how do we know if they are a person with whom we would like to explore a relationship? We cannot meet someone or maintain a long-term relationship without sharing some sense of proximity.

We are certainly not suggesting that we only have romantic relationships with carbon copies of ourselves. Over the last few decades, there have been some dramatic shifts when it comes to numbers and perceptions of marriage. It is more and more common to see a wide variety of people that make up married couples.

Just like the steps we examined for developing friendships, there are general stages we follow in the development and maintenance of romantic relationships. Let's look at these six stages of the development of romantic relationships.

The first stage in the development of romantic relationships is no interaction. As the name suggests, the initial stage of a romantic relationship occurs when two people have not interacted. For example, you may see someone you are attracted to on the first day of class and think to yourself, *I really want to meet her*. Our attraction for someone may motivate us to move beyond the no interaction stage to see if there is a possibility of developing a romantic relationship.

The second stage for developing romantic relationships is invitational communication. When we are attracted to someone, we may signal or invite them to interact with us. For example, you can do this by asking them to dinner or to dance at a club or even by saying, "I really liked that movie. What did you think?" The significance here is in the relational level (how the people feel about each other) rather than the content level (the topic) of the message. As the poet Maya Angelou explains, "Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with shades of deeper meaning." The shades of deeper meaning are the relational level messages that invite others to continue exploring a possible romantic relationship. Quite often, we strategize how we might go about inviting people into communication with us so we can explore potential romantic development.

The third stage of developing romantic relationships is explorational communication. When individuals respond favorably to our invitational communication, we then engage in explorational communication. In this stage, we share information about ourselves while looking for mutual interests, shared political or religious views, and similarities in family background. Self-disclosure increases so we can give and receive personal information in a way that fosters trust and intimacy. Common dating activities in this stage include going to parties or other publicly structured events, such as movies or a concert, that foster interaction and self-disclosure.

The fourth stage of romantic relationships is intensifying communication. If we continue to be attracted (mentally, emotionally, and physically) to one another, we begin engaging in intensifying communication. This is the happy stage (the relationship high) when we cannot bear to be away from the other person. It is here that you might plan all of your free time together and begin to create a private relational culture. Going out to parties and socializing with friends takes a back seat to more private activities such as cooking dinner together at home or taking long walks on the beach. Self-disclosure continues to increase as each person has a strong desire to know and understand the other. In this stage, we tend to idealize one another in that we downplay faults (or don't see them at all), seeing only the positive qualities of the other person.

The fifth stage of romantic relationship development is revising communication. When the relational high begins to wear off, couples begin to have a more realistic perspective of one another and the relationship as a whole. Here, people may recognize the faults of the other person that they so idealized in the previous stage. Also, couples must again make decisions about where to go with the relationship—do they stay together and work toward long-term goals or define it as a short-term relationship? A couple may be deeply in love and also make the decision to break off the relationship for a multitude of reasons. Perhaps one person wants to join the Peace Corps after graduation and plans to travel the world, while the other wants to settle down in their hometown. Their individual needs and goals may not be compatible to sustain a long-term commitment.

Commitment is the sixth stage in developing romantic relationships. Committed romantic relationships occur when a couple makes the decision to make the relationship a permanent part of their lives. In this stage, the participants assume they will be in each other's lives forever and make joint decisions about the future. While marriage is an obvious sign of commitment, it is not the only signifier of this stage. Some may mark their intention of staying together in a commitment ceremony or by registering as domestic partners. Likewise, not all couples planning a future together legally marry. Some may lose economic benefits if they marry, such as the loss of Social Security for seniors, or others may oppose the institution (and its inequality) of marriage.

Obviously, simply committing is not enough to maintain a relationship through tough times that occur as couples grow and change. Like a ship set on a destination, a couple must learn to steer through rough waves as well as calm waters. A couple can accomplish this by learning to communicate through the good and the bad. Navigating is when a couple continues to revise their communication and ways of interacting to reflect the changing needs of each person. Done well, life's changes are more easily enjoyed when viewed as a natural part of the life cycle. The original patterns for managing dialectical tensions when a couple began dating may not work when they are managing two careers, children, and a mortgage payment. Outside pressures such as children, professional duties, and financial responsibilities put added pressure on relationships that require attention and negotiation. If a couple neglects to practice effective communication with one another, coping with change becomes increasingly stressful and puts the relationship in jeopardy.

Not only do romantic couples progress through a series of stages of growth; they also experience stages of deterioration. Deterioration does not necessarily mean that a couple's relationship will end. Instead, couples may move back and forth from deterioration stages to growth stages throughout the course of their relationship.

The first stage of deterioration, dyadic breakdown, occurs when romantic partners begin to neglect the small details that have always bound them together. For example, they may stop cuddling on the couch when they rent a movie and sit in opposite chairs. Taken in isolation, this example does not mean a relationship is in trouble. However, when intimacy continues to decrease and the partners feel dissatisfied, this dissatisfaction can lead to worrying about the relationship.

The second stage of deterioration, the intrapsychic phase, occurs when partners worry that they do not connect with one another in ways they used to or that they no longer do fun things together. When this happens, they may begin to imagine their life without the relationship. Rather than seeing the relationship as a given, the couple may begin to wonder what life would be like not being in the partnership.

The third stage of deterioration, the dyadic phase, occurs when partners make the choice to talk about their problems. In this stage, they discuss how to resolve the issues and may seek outside help such as a therapist to help them work through the reasons they are growing apart. This could also be the stage where couples begin initial discussions about how to divide up shared resources such as property, money, or children.

The fourth stage of deterioration, social support, occurs when termination is inevitable and the partners begin to look outside the relationship for social support. In this stage, couples will make the news public by telling friends, family, or children that the relationship is ending. As family members listen to problems or friends offer invitations to go out and keep busy, they provide social support. The couple needs social support from outside individuals in the process of letting go of the relationship and coming to terms with its termination.

The fifth stage of deterioration, grave dressing, occurs when couples reach closure in a relationship and move on with life. Like a literal death, a relationship that has ended should be mourned. People need time to go through this process in order to fully understand the meaning of the relationship, why it ended, and what they can learn from the experience. Going through this stage in a healthy way helps us learn to navigate future relationships more successfully.

You can probably recognize many of these stages from your own relationships or from relationships you've observed. Experience will tell you that we do not always follow these stages in a linear way. A couple, for example, may enter counseling during the dyadic phase, work out their problems, and enter a second term of intensifying communication, revising, and so forth. Other couples may skip some stages all together. Whatever the case, these models are valuable because they provide us with a way to recognize general communicative patterns and options we have at each stage of our relationships. Knowing what our choices are and their potential consequences gives us greater tools to build the kind of relationships we desire in our personal lives.

# 8.4 FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Family Image by geralt on Pixabay

The third primary type of interpersonal relationship we engage in is that of family. What is family? Is family created by legal ties or the bond of sharing common blood? Or can a family be considered people who share commitment to one another? In an effort to recognize the diversity of families, we define family as an arranged group, usually related by blood or some binding factor of commonality, where individual roles and relationships modify over time. Family relations are typically long term and generally have a period in which common space is shared.

Pearson suggests that families share similar characteristics, as they tend to be organized, a relational transactional group, involve a shared living space for prolonged periods of time, and reflect a mixture of interpersonal images that evolve through the exchange of meaning over time. Let's take a few moments to unpack this definition.

Families Are Organized. All of us occupy and play fairly predictable roles (parent, child, older sibling) in our family relationships. Similarly, communication in these relationships can be fairly predictable. For example, your younger brother may act as the family peacemaker, while your older sister always initiates fights with her siblings.

Families Are a Relational Transactional Group. Not only is a family made up of the individual members; it is largely defined by the relationships between the members. Think back to our discussion of systems theory in the chapter about communication theory. A family that consists of two opposite-sex parents, an older sister, her husband and three kids, a younger brother, his new wife, and two kids from a first marriage is largely defined by the relationships among the family members. All of these people have a role in the family and interact with others in fairly consistent ways according to their roles.

Families Usually Occupy a Common Living Space Over an Extended Period of Time. One consistent theme when defining family is recognizing that family members typically live under the same roof for an extended period of time. We certainly include extended family within our definition, but for the most part, our notions of family include those people with whom we share, or have shared, common space over a period of time. Even though you may have moved away to college, a large part of your definition of your family is the fact that you spent a great deal of your life sharing a home with those you call your family.

Families Possess a Mixture of Interpersonal Images That Evolve through the Exchange of Meaning Over Time. From our families, we learn important values concerning intimacy, spirituality, communication, and respect. Parents and other family members model behaviors that shape how we interact with others. As a result, we continually form images of what it means to be a family and try to maintain that image of family in our lives. You may define family as your immediate family, consisting of your parents and a sibling. However, your romantic partner may see family as consisting of parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. Each of you perform different communication behaviors to maintain your image of family.

Many families have children as part of their makeup. Olson and McCubbin discuss seven stages of the family life cycle that families with children go through as they progress through life. Families without children will not follow all of these stages, and blended families, where one parent does not have primary custody of children, may experience fewer extreme shifts between stages.

The first stage of family development is Establishing a Family. In this stage, couples settle into committed or married life and make necessary changes in acknowledgment of their new legal, relational, and social status. If they did not live together prior to marriage, they may need to work out details of shared space, money, and time. Often, this stage involves establishing a first home together as a couple.

The second stage of family development is Enlarging a Family. In this stage, a couple decides to expand their family with the addition of children. While a time of joy and celebration, this is also a period of great stress and change for parents as they figure out new roles as parents.

Time for friends, work, and one another is often decreased as the demands of a new child become the primary concern and focus of the couple's attention and resources. In this stage, the relationship is no longer defined in terms of two people but includes the children that are now part of the family.

The third stage of family development is Developing a Family. As children grow, their needs change from primarily physical (feeding, changing diapers, and sleep) to more cognitive and emotional ones. Parents become the primary source of instilling cultural and spiritual values as well as fostering a child's individual personality. This period takes a tremendous amount of time and commitment from parents as the children remain the focus of daily interactions. Think of the family that runs around taking children to soccer, baseball, piano lessons, church, and guiding their educational development. In this stage, the personal development of children is of high importance to the family.

The fourth stage of family development is Encouraging Independence. Around the teen years, children begin the process of naturally pulling away from their parents as a means of establishing and securing an independent identity. You might recall that this period contained periods of stress and frustration for your parents as well as you. Children may feel their parents are being overly protective or nosy about their friends and activities, while parents may feel abandoned and concerned for their child's safety as they spend more time away from home. These are often referred to as the rebellious years in which children engage in behaviors for the purpose of establishing independence from their parents.

The fifth stage of family development is Launching Children. Over the course of raising children, couples experience a relationship with one another where children are often the central focus rather than each other. In the Launching Children stage, each member of the couple must now relearn their role as the grown children eventually leave home for college, a career, or their own marriage and family. If one of the parents gave up a career to raise children, she may wonder what to do with the free time. While the empty nest syndrome can be stressful, it is also a chance for new possibilities as parents have more time, money, freedom, and energy to spend on each other, hobbies, travel, and friends. Many experience excitement about being able to focus on each other as a couple after years of raising children in the home.

The sixth stage of family development is Post-launching of Children. Depending on how a couple handles stage five, the post-launching of children can be filled with renewed love or can produce great strain on the marriage as a couple learns that they do not know how to relate with one another outside the context of raising children. Some couples fall in love all over again and may renew their wedding vows as a signal of this new phase in their relationship. Some parents who may have decided to stay in a marriage for the sake of the children may decide to terminate the relationship after the children have left the family home. For some couples, with no birds left in the nest, the family dog becomes the new center of attention and inadvertently takes on the role of one of the offspring and continues to regulate and restrict the couple's actions as the dog demands rearing. Some parents pick up new hobbies, travel around the world, and maintain multiple date nights each week.

The seventh stage of family development is Retirement. Similar to the launching of children, freedom from work can be an opportunity for growth and exploration of new relationships and activities. Simply having more time in the day can facilitate travel, volunteer work, or continuing education. Conversely, people in this stage might experience a reduction in income and the loss of identity that came with membership in a profession. The family may also experience new growth during this stage, as grown children bring their own relational partners and grandchildren in as new members of the family.

Communication patterns within the family and between a couple are continually changed and revised as a family progresses through the above stages. The fact that a couple generally spends less time together during stages two and three and more time together in stages five through eight requires that they continually manage dialectical tensions such as autonomy and connection. Management of these tensions may manifest itself as conflict. All relationships have conflict. Conflict is natural. How we think about and manage conflict is what is important.

## Interpersonal Communication Summary

Interpersonal communication is communication between individuals that view one another as unique. Quite often, interpersonal communication occurs in dyads. In order for interpersonal communication to occur, participants must engage in self-disclosure, which is the revealing of information about oneself to others that is not known by them. As we self-disclose, we manage our relationships by negotiating dialectical tensions, which are opposing needs in interpersonal relationships. We use a variety of strategies for navigating these tensions, including neutralization, separation, segmentation, and reframing.

As we navigate our interpersonal relationships, we create communication climates, which are the overall feelings and moods people have for one another and the relationship. When we engage in disconfirming messages, we produce a negative relational climate, while confirming messages can help build a positive relational climate by recognizing the uniqueness and importance of another person.

The three primary types of interpersonal relationships we engage in are friendships, romantic relationships, and family relationships. Each of these relationships develops through a series of stages of growth and deterioration. Friendships and romantic relationships differ from family relationships in that they are relationships of choice. Each of these relationships requires commitment from participants to continuously navigate relational dynamics in order to maintain and grow the relationship.

Finally, all relationships experience conflict. Conflict is often perceived as an indicator that there is a problem in a relationship. However, conflict is a natural and ongoing part of all relationships. The goal of conflict is not to eliminate it but to manage it. There are five primary approaches to managing conflict, which include dominating, obliging, compromising, avoiding, and integrating.

CHAPTER IX

# CHAPTER 9: CULTURE AND IDENTITY

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- Define culture
- Define personal, social, and cultural identities
- Summarize nondominant and dominant identity development
- Explain why difference matters in the study of culture and identity
- Define the social constructionist view of culture and identity
- Trace the historical development and construction of the four cultural identities discussed
- Discuss how each of the four cultural identities affects and/or relates to 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 email, phone call, tweet, or status update. Additionally, our workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods have become more integrated regarding 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.

# 9.1 FOUNDATIONS OF CULTURE AND IDENTITY

Culture is a complicated word to define, as there are at least six common ways that culture is used in the United States. For the purposes of exploring the communicative aspects of culture, we will define **culture** as the ongoing negotiation of learned and patterned beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors. Unpacking the definition, we can see that culture shouldn't be conceptualized as stable and unchanging. Culture is negotiated, and as we will learn later in this chapter, culture is dynamic, and cultural changes can be tracked and analyzed to better understand why our society is the way it is. The definition also points out that culture is learned, which accounts for the importance of socializing institutions like family, school, peers, and the media. Culture is patterned in that there are recognizable, widespread similarities among people within a cultural group. There is also a deviation from and resistance to those patterns by individuals and subgroups within a culture, which is why cultural patterns change over time. Last, the definition acknowledges that culture influences our beliefs about what is true and false, our attitudes including our likes and dislikes, our values regarding what is right and wrong, and our behaviors. It is from these cultural influences that our identities are formed.

## Personal, Social, and Cultural Identities

Ask yourself the question "Who am I?" We develop a sense of who we are based on what is reflected back on us by other people. Our parents, friends, teachers, and the media help shape our identities. While this happens from birth, most people in Western societies reach a stage in adolescence where maturing cognitive abilities and increased social awareness lead them to begin to reflect on who they are. This begins a lifelong process of thinking about who we are now, who we were before, and who we will become (Tatum). Our identities make up an important part of our self-concept and can be broken down into three main categories: personal, social, and cultural identities (Table 1.1).

**Table 1.1 Personal, Social, and Cultural Identities**

| Personal | Social | Cultural |
|---|---|---|
| Antique collector | Member of historical society | Irish American |
| Dog lover | Member of Humane Society | Male/female |
| Cyclist | Fraternity/sorority member | Greek American |
| Singer | High school music teacher | Multiracial |
| Shy | Book club member | Heterosexual |
| Athletic | | Gay/lesbian |

We must avoid the temptation to think of our identities as constant. Instead, our identities are formed through processes that started before we were born and will continue after we are gone; therefore, our identities aren't something we achieve or complete. Two related but distinct components of our identities are our personal and social identities (Spreckels and Kotthoff). **Personal identities** include the components of self that are primarily intrapersonal and connected to our life experiences. For example, I consider myself a puzzle lover, and you may identify as a fan of hip-hop music. Our **social identities** are the components of self that are derived from involvement in social groups with which we are interpersonally committed.

For example, we may derive aspects of our social identity from our family or from a community of fans for a sports team. Social identities differ from personal identities because they are externally organized through membership. Our membership may be voluntary (Greek organization on campus) or involuntary (family) and explicit (we pay dues to our labor union) or implicit (we purchase and listen to hip-hop music). There are innumerable options for personal and social identities. While our personal identity choices express who we are, our social identities align us with particular groups. Through our social identities, we make statements about who we are and who we are not.

Personal identities may change often as people have new experiences and develop new interests and hobbies. Current interest in online video games may give way to an interest in graphic design. Social identities do not change as often because they take more time to develop, as you must become interpersonally invested. For example, if an interest in online video games leads someone to become a member of an MMORPG, or a massively multiplayer online role-playing game community, that personal identity has led to a social identity that is now interpersonal and more entrenched. **Cultural identities** are based on socially constructed categories that teach us a way of being and include expectations for social behavior or ways of acting (Yep). Since we are often a part of them since birth, cultural identities are the least changeable of the three. The ways of being and the social expectations for behavior within cultural identities do change over time, but what separates them from most social identities is their historical roots (Collier). For example, think of how ways of being and acting have changed for African Americans since the civil rights movement. Additionally, common ways of being and acting within a cultural identity group are expressed through communication. In order to be accepted as a member of a cultural group, members must be acculturated, essentially learning and using a code that other group members will be able to recognize. We are acculturated into our various cultural identities in obvious and less obvious ways. We may literally have a parent or friend tell us what it means to be a man or a woman. We may also unconsciously consume messages from popular culture that offer representations of gender.


Pledging a fraternity or sorority is an example of a social identity. Adaenn – CC BY-NC 2.0.

Any of these identity types can be ascribed or avowed. **Ascribed identities** are personal, social, or cultural identities that are placed on us by others, while **avowed identities** are those that we claim for ourselves (Martin and Nakayama). Sometimes people ascribe an identity to someone else based on stereotypes. You may see a person who likes to read science-fiction books, watches documentaries, has glasses, and collects Star Trek memorabilia and label that person as a nerd. If the person doesn't avow that identity, it can create friction, and that label may even hurt the other person's feelings. But ascribed and avowed identities can match up. To extend the previous example, there has been a movement in recent years to reclaim the label nerd and turn it into a positive, and a nerd subculture has been growing in popularity. For example, MC Frontalot, a leader in the nerdcore hip-hop movement, says that being branded a nerd in school was terrible, but now he raps about nerdy things like blogs to sold-out crowds (Shipman). We can see from this example that our ascribed and avowed identities change over the course of our lives, and sometimes they match up and sometimes they do not.

Although some identities are essentially permanent, the degree to which we are aware of them, also known as salience, changes. The intensity with which we avow an identity also changes based on context. For example, an African American may not have difficulty deciding which box to check in the demographic section of a survey. But if an African American becomes president of her college's Black Student Union, she may more intensely avow her African American identity, which has now become more salient. If she studies abroad in Africa during her junior year, she may be ascribed an identity of American by her new African friends rather than African American. For the Africans, their visitor's identity as American is likely more salient than her identity as someone of African descent. If someone is biracial or multiracial, they may change their racial identification as they engage in an identity search. One intercultural communication scholar writes of his experiences as an "Asianlatinoamerican" (Yep). He notes repressing his Chinese identity as an adolescent living in Peru and then later embracing his Chinese identity and learning about his family history while in college in the US. This example shows how even national identity fluctuates. Obviously, one can change nationality by becoming a citizen of another country, although most people do not. My identity as a US American became very salient for me for the first time in my life when I studied abroad in Sweden.

Throughout modern history, cultural and social influences have established dominant and nondominant groups (Allen). **Dominant identities** historically had and currently have more resources and influence, while **nondominant identities** historically had and currently have fewer resources and influence. It's important to remember that these distinctions are being made at the societal level, not the individual level. There are obviously exceptions, with people in groups considered nondominant obtaining more resources and power than a person in a dominant group. However, the overall trend is that difference based on cultural groups has been institutionalized, and exceptions do not change this fact. Because of this uneven distribution of resources and power, members of dominant groups are granted privileges, while nondominant groups are at a disadvantage. The main nondominant groups must face various forms of institutionalized discrimination, including racism, sexism, heterosexism, and ableism. As we will discuss later, privilege and disadvantage, like similarity and difference, are not all or nothing. No two people are completely different or completely similar, and no one person is completely privileged or completely disadvantaged.

## Identity Development

There are multiple models for examining identity development. Given our focus on how difference matters, we will examine similarities and differences in nondominant and dominant identity formation. While the stages in this model help us understand how many people experience their identities, identity development is complex, and there may be variations. We must also remember that people have multiple identities that intersect with each other. So as you read, think about how circumstances may be different for an individual with multiple nondominant and/or dominant identities.

## Nondominant Identity Development

There are four stages of nondominant identity development (Martin and Nakayama). The first stage is unexamined identity, which is characterized by a lack of awareness of or lack of interest in one's identity. For example, a young woman who will later identify as a lesbian may not yet realize that a nondominant sexual orientation is part of her identity. Also, a young African American man may question his teachers or parents about the value of what he's learning during Black History Month. When a person's lack of interest in their own identity is replaced by an investment in a dominant group's identity, they may move to the next stage, which is conformity.

In the conformity stage, an individual internalizes or adopts the values and norms of the dominant group, often in an effort not to be perceived as different. Individuals may attempt to assimilate into the dominant culture by changing their appearance, their mannerisms, the way they talk, or even their name. Moises, a Chicano man interviewed in a research project about identities, narrated how he changed his "Mexican-sounding" name to Moses, which was easier for his middle school classmates and teachers to say (Jones). He also identified as white instead of Mexican American or Chicano because he saw how his teachers treated the other kids with brown skin. Additionally, some gay or lesbian people in this stage of identity development may try to act straight. In either case, some people move to the next stage, resistance and separation, when they realize that despite their efforts, they are still perceived as different by and not included in the dominant group.

In the resistance and separation stage, an individual with a nondominant identity may shift away from the conformity of the previous stage to engage in actions that challenge the dominant identity group. Individuals in this stage may also actively try to separate themselves from the dominant group, interacting only with those who share their nondominant identity. For example, there has been a deaf culture movement in the United States for decades. This movement includes people who are hearing impaired and believe that their use of a specific language, American Sign Language (ASL), and other cultural practices constitutes a unique culture, which they symbolize by capitalizing the D in Deaf (Allen).

ASL interpreter by Quinn Dombrowski used under CC BY-SA 2.0.

Many hearing-impaired people in the United States use American Sign Language (ASL), which is recognized as an official language. While this is not a separatist movement, a person who is hearing impaired may find refuge in such a group after experiencing discrimination from hearing people. Staying in this stage may indicate a lack of critical thinking if a person endorses the values of the nondominant group without question.

The integration stage marks a period where individuals with a nondominant identity have achieved a balance between embracing their own identities and valuing other dominant and nondominant identities. Although there may still be residual anger from the discrimination and prejudice they have faced, they may direct this energy into positive outlets such as working to end discrimination against their own or other groups. Moises, the Chicano man I mentioned earlier, now works to support the Chicano community in his city and also has actively supported gay rights and women's rights.

## Dominant Identity Development

Dominant identity development consists of five stages (Martin and Nakayama). The unexamined stage of dominant identity formation is similar to nondominant in that individuals in this stage do not think about their or others' identities. Although they may be aware of differences—for example, between races and genders—they either don't realize there is a hierarchy that treats some people differently than others or they don't think the hierarchy applies to them. For example, a white person may take notice that a person of color was elected to a prominent office. However, he or she may not see the underlying reason that it is noticeable—namely, that the overwhelming majority of our country's leaders are white. Unlike people with a nondominant identity who usually have to acknowledge the positioning of their identity due to discrimination and prejudice they encounter, people with dominant identities may stay in the unexamined stage for a long time.

In the acceptance stage, a person with a dominant identity passively or actively accepts that some people are treated differently from others but doesn't do anything internally or externally to address it. In the passive acceptance stage, we must be cautious not to blame individuals with dominant identities for internalizing racist, sexist, or heterosexist norms. The socializing institutions we discussed earlier (family, peers, media, religion, and education) often make oppression seem normal and natural. For example, I have had students who struggle to see that they are in this stage say things like "I know that racism exists, but my parents taught me to be a good person and see everyone as equal." While this is admirable, seeing everyone as equal doesn't make it so. And people who insist that we are all equal may claim that minorities are exaggerating their circumstances or whining and just need to work harder or get over it. The person making these statements acknowledges difference but doesn't see their privilege or the institutional perpetuation of various "-isms." Although I've encountered many more people in the passive state of acceptance than the active state, some may progress to an active state where they acknowledge inequality and are proud to be in the superior group. In either case, many people never progress from this stage. If they do, it's usually because of repeated encounters with individuals or situations that challenge their acceptance of the status quo, such as befriending someone from a nondominant group or taking a course related to culture.

The resistance stage of dominant identity formation is a major change from the previous in that an individual acknowledges the unearned advantages they are given and feels guilt or shame about it. Having taught about various types of privilege for years, I've encountered many students who want to return their privilege or disown it. These individuals may begin to disassociate with their own dominant group because they feel like a curtain has been opened, and their awareness of the inequality makes it difficult for them to interact with others in their dominant group. But it's important to acknowledge that becoming aware of your white privilege, for instance, doesn't mean that every person of color is going to want to accept you as an ally, so retreating to them may not be the most productive move. While moving to this step is a marked improvement in regard to becoming a more aware and socially just person, getting stuck in the resistance stage isn't productive, because people are often retreating rather than trying to address injustice. For some, deciding to share what they've learned with others who share their dominant identity moves them to the next stage.

People in the redefinition stage revise negative views of their identity held in the previous stage and begin to acknowledge their privilege and try to use the power they are granted to work for social justice. They realize that they can claim their dominant identity as heterosexual, able-bodied, male, white, and so on and perform their identity in ways that counter norms. A male participant in a research project on identity said the following about redefining his male identity (Jones):

*An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:*
*https://louis.pressbooks.pub/fundamentalsofcomm/?p=458#h5p-26*


Atlanta Pride Festival parade by Jason Riedy used under CC BY 2.0.

Heterosexual people with gay family members or friends may join the group PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) as a part of the redefinition and/or integration stage of their dominant identity development.

The final stage of dominant identity formation is integration. This stage is reached when redefinition is complete and people can integrate their dominant identity into all aspects of their lives, finding opportunities to educate others about privilege while also being a responsive ally to people in nondominant identities. As an example, some heterosexual people who find out a friend or family member is gay or lesbian may have to confront their dominant heterosexual identity for the first time, which may lead them through these various stages. As a sign of integration, some may join an organization like PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), where they can be around others who share their dominant identity as heterosexuals but also empathize with their loved ones.

Knowing more about various types of identities and some common experiences of how dominant and nondominant identities are formed prepares us to delve into more specifics about why difference matters.

## Difference Matters

Whenever we encounter someone, we notice similarities and differences. While both are important, it is often the differences that are highlighted and contribute to communication troubles. We don't only see similarities and differences on an individual level. In fact, we also place people into in-groups and out-groups based on the similarities and differences we perceive. This is important because we then tend to react to someone we perceive as a member of an out-group based on the characteristics we attach to the group rather than the individual (Allen). In these situations, it is more likely that stereotypes and prejudice will influence our communication. Learning about difference and why it matters will help us be more competent communicators. The flip side of emphasizing difference is to claim that no differences exist and that you see everyone as a human being. Rather than trying to ignore difference and see each person as a unique individual, we should know the history of how differences came to be so socially and culturally significant and how they continue to affect us today.

Culture and identity are complex. You may be wondering how some groups came to be dominant and others nondominant. These differences are not natural, which can be seen as we unpack how various identities have changed over time in the next section. There is, however, an **ideology of domination** that makes it seem natural and normal to many that some people or groups will always have power over others (Allen). In fact, hierarchy and domination, although prevalent throughout modern human history, were likely not the norm among early humans. So one of the first reasons difference matters is that people and groups are treated unequally, and a better understanding of how those differences came to be can help us create a more just society. Difference also matters because demographics and patterns of interaction are changing.

In the US, the population of people of color is increasing and diversifying, and visibility for people who are gay or lesbian and people with disabilities has also increased. The 2020 census shows that the Hispanic and Latino/a populations in the United States are now the second largest group in the country, having grown 23% since the last census in 2000 (census.gov). By 2030, racial and ethnic minorities will account for one-third of the population (Allen). Additionally, legal and social changes have created a more open environment for sexual minorities and people with disabilities. These changes directly affect our interpersonal relationships. The workplace is one context where changing demographics have become increasingly important. Many organizations are striving to comply with changing laws by implementing policies aimed at creating equal access and opportunity. Some organizations are going further than legal compliance to try to create inclusive climates where diversity is valued because of the interpersonal and economic benefits it has the potential to produce.

*An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:*
*https://louis.pressbooks.pub/fundamentalsofcomm/?p=458#h5p-2*

We can now see that difference matters due to the inequalities that exist among cultural groups and due to changing demographics that affect our personal and social relationships. Unfortunately, there are many obstacles that may impede our valuing of difference (Allen). Individuals with dominant identities may not validate the experiences of those in nondominant groups because they do not experience the oppression directed at those with nondominant identities. Further, they may find it difficult to acknowledge that not being aware of this oppression is due to the privilege associated with their dominant identities. Because of this lack of recognition of oppression, members of dominant groups may minimize, dismiss, or question the experiences of nondominant groups and view them as complainers or whiners. Recall from our earlier discussion of identity formation that people with dominant identities may stay in the unexamined or acceptance stages for a long time. Being stuck in these stages makes it much more difficult to value difference.

Members of nondominant groups may have difficulty valuing difference due to negative experiences with the dominant group, such as not having their experiences validated. Both groups may be restrained from communicating about difference due to norms of political correctness, which may make people feel afraid to speak up because they may be perceived as insensitive or racist. All these obstacles are common, and they are valid. However, as we will learn later, developing intercultural communication competence can help us gain new perspectives, become more mindful of our communication, and intervene in some of these negative cycles.


Summary. Image by Ann H. Free to use from www.pexels.com

*An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:*
*https://louis.pressbooks.pub/fundamentalsofcomm/?p=458#h5p-27*

## License



### Media Attributions

- pexels-ann-h-6980523

# 9.2 EXPLORING SPECIFIC CULTURAL IDENTITIES

We can get a better understanding of current cultural identities by unpacking how they came to be. By looking at history, we can see how cultural identities that seem to have existed forever actually came to be constructed for various political and social reasons and how they have changed over time. Communication plays a central role in this construction. As we have already discussed, our identities are relational and communicative; they are also constructed. **Social constructionism** is a view that argues the self is formed through our interactions with others and in social, cultural, and political contexts (Allen). In this section, we'll explore how the cultural identities of race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability have been constructed in the United States and how communication relates to those identities. Other important identities could be discussed, like religion, age, nationality, and class. Although they are not given their own section, consider how those identities may intersect with the identities discussed next.

## Race

Would it surprise you to know that human beings, regardless of how they are racially classified, share 99.9% of their DNA? This finding by the Human Genome Project asserts that race is a social construct, not a biological one. The American Anthropological Association agrees, stating that race is the product of "historical and contemporary social, economic, educational, and political circumstances" (Allen). Therefore, we'll define race as a socially constructed category based on differences in appearance that have been used to create hierarchies that privilege some and disadvantage others.

Friends by evilgurl used under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

There is actually no biological basis for racial classification among humans, as we share 99.9% of our DNA.

Race didn't become a socially and culturally recognized marker until European colonial expansion in the 1500s. As Western Europeans traveled to parts of the world previously unknown to them and encountered people who were different from them, a hierarchy of races began to develop that placed lighter-skinned Europeans above darker-skinned people. At the time, newly developing fields in natural and biological sciences took interest in examining the new locales, including plant and animal life, natural resources, and native populations. Over the next three hundred years, science that we would now undoubtedly recognize as flawed, biased, and racist legitimated notions that native populations were less evolved than white Europeans, often calling them savages. In fact, there were scientific debates as to whether some of the native populations should be considered human or animal. Racial distinctions have been based largely on phenotypes, or physiological features such as skin color, hair texture, and body/facial features. Unsophisticated Western scientists used these differences as unsubstantiated proof that native populations were less evolved than the Europeans, which helped justify colonial expansion, enslavement, genocide, and exploitation on massive scales (Allen). Even though there is a consensus among experts that race is social rather than biological, we can't deny that race still has meaning in our society and affects people as if it were real.

Given that race is one of the first things we notice about someone, it's important to know how race and communication relate (Allen). Discussing race in the United States is difficult for many reasons. One is due to uncertainty about language use. People may be frustrated by their perception that labels change too often or be afraid of using an improper term and being viewed as racially insensitive. It is important, however, that we not let political correctness get in the way of meaningful dialogues and learning opportunities related to difference.

Learning some of the communicative histories of race can make us more competent communicators and open us up to more learning experiences.

Racial classifications used by the government and our regular communication about race in the US have changed frequently, which further points to the social construction of race. Currently, the primary racial groups in the United States are African American, Asian American, European American, Latino/a, and Native American, but a brief look at changes in how the US Census Bureau has defined race clearly shows that this hasn't always been the case (see Table 1.2). In the 1900s alone, there were twenty-six different ways that race was categorized on census forms (Allen). The way we communicate about race in our regular interactions has also changed, and many people are still hesitant to discuss race for fear of using the wrong vocabulary.

The five primary racial groups noted previously can still be broken down further to specify a particular region, country, or nation. For example, Asian Americans are diverse in terms of country and language of origin and cultural practices. While the category of Asian Americans can be useful when discussing broad trends, it can also generalize among groups, which can lead to stereotypes. You may find that someone identifies as Chinese American or Korean American instead of Asian American. In this case, the label further highlights a person's cultural lineage. We should not assume, however, that someone identifies with his or her cultural lineage, as many people have more in common with their US American peers than a culture that may be one or more generations removed.

History and personal preference also influence how we communicate about race. Culture and communication scholar Brenda Allen notes that when she was born in 1950, her birth certificate included an N for negro. Later she referred to herself as colored because that's what people in her community referred to themselves as. During and before this time, the term black had negative connotations and would likely have offended someone. There was a movement in the 1960s to reclaim the word black, and the slogan "black is beautiful" was commonly used. Brenda Allen acknowledges the newer label of African American but notes that she still prefers black. The terms colored and negro are no longer considered appropriate because they were commonly used during a time when black people were blatantly discriminated against. Even though that history may seem far removed to some, it is not to others. Currently, the terms African American and black are frequently used, and both are considered acceptable. The phrase people of color is acceptable for most and is used to be inclusive of other racial minorities. If you are unsure what to use, you could always observe how a person refers to himself or herself, or you could ask for his or her preference. In any case, a competent communicator defers to and respects the preference of the individual.

The label Latin American generally refers to people who live in Central American countries. Although Spain colonized much of what is now South and Central America and parts of the Caribbean, the inhabitants of these areas are now much more diverse. Depending on the region or country, some people primarily trace their lineage to the indigenous people who lived in these areas before colonization, to a Spanish and indigenous lineage, or to other combinations that may include European, African, and/or indigenous heritage. Latina and Latino are labels that are preferable to Hispanic for many who live in the United States and trace their lineage to South and/or Central America and/or parts of the Caribbean. Scholars who study Latina/o identity often use the label Latina/o in their writing to acknowledge women who avow that identity label (Calafell). In verbal communication, you might say "Latina" when referring to a particular female or "Latino" when referring to a particular male of Latin American heritage. When referring to the group as a whole, you could say "Latinas and Latinos" or "Latinx" instead of just "Latinos," which would be more gender inclusive. While Hispanic is used by the US Census, it refers primarily to people of Spanish origin, which doesn't account for the diversity of background of many Latinos/as. The term Hispanic also highlights the colonizer's influence over the indigenous, which erases a history that is important to many. Additionally, some people claim Spanish origins and identify culturally as Hispanic but racially as white. Labels such as Puerto Rican or Mexican American, which further specify region or country of origin, may also be used. Just as with other cultural groups, if you are unsure of how to refer to someone, you can always ask for and honor someone's preference.

**TABLE 1.2 Racial Classifications in the US Census**

| Year(s) | Development |
|---|---|
| 1790 | No category for race |
| 1800 | Race is defined by the percentage of African blood. Mulatto was one black and one white parent, quadroon was one-quarter African blood, and octoroon was one-eighth. |
| 1830–1940 | The term color was used instead of race. |
| 1900 | Racial categories included white, black, Chinese, Japanese, and Indian. Census takers were required to check one of these boxes based on visual cues. Individuals did not get to select a racial classification on their own until 1970. |
| 1950 | The term color was dropped and replaced by race. |
| 1960–70 | Both race and color were used on census forms. |
| 1980–2010 | Race again became the only term. |
| 2000 | Individuals were allowed to choose more than one racial category for the first time in census history. |
| 2010 | The census included fifteen racial categories and an option to write in races not listed on the form. |
| 2020 | Individuals who identified as white, black / African American, and/or American Indian or Alaska Native were asked to specifically identify their racial origins. |

*An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:*
*https://louis.pressbooks.pub/fundamentalsofcomm/?p=521#h5p-3*

The history of immigration in the US is also tied to the way that race has been constructed. The metaphor of the melting pot has been used to describe the immigration history of the US but doesn't capture the experiences of many immigrant groups (Allen). Generally, immigrant groups who were white, or light skinned, and spoke English were better able to assimilate or melt into the melting pot. But immigrant groups that we might think of as white today were not always considered so. Irish immigrants were discriminated against and even portrayed as black in cartoons that appeared in newspapers. In some southern states, Italian immigrants were forced to go to black schools, and it wasn't until 1952 that Asian immigrants were allowed to become citizens of the US. All this history is important because it continues to influence communication among races today.

*An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:*
*https://louis.pressbooks.pub/fundamentalsofcomm/?p=521#h5p-5*

## Interracial Communication

Race and communication are related in various ways. Racism influences our communication about race and is not an easy topic for most people to discuss. Today, people tend to view racism as overt acts such as calling someone a derogatory name or discriminating against someone in thought or action. However, there is a difference between racist acts, which we can attach to an individual, and institutional racism, which is not as easily identifiable. It is much easier for people to recognize and decry racist actions than it is to realize that racist patterns and practices go through societal institutions, which means that racism exists and doesn't have to be committed by any one person. As competent communicators and critical thinkers, we must challenge ourselves to be aware of how racism influences our communication at individual and societal levels.

We tend to make assumptions about people's race based on how they talk, and often these assumptions are based on stereotypes. Dominant groups tend to define what is correct or incorrect usage of a language, and since language is so closely tied to identity, labeling a group's use of a language as incorrect or deviant challenges or negates part of their identity (Yancy). We know there isn't only one way to speak English, but there have been movements to identify a standard. This becomes problematic when we realize that standard English refers to a way of speaking English that is based on white, middle-class ideals that do not match up with the experiences of many. When we create a standard for English, we can label anything that deviates from that as nonstandard English. Differences between standard English and what has been called "Black English" or "African American English" have gotten national attention through debates about whether or not instruction in classrooms should accommodate students who do not speak standard English. Education plays an important role in language acquisition, and class relates to access to education. In general, whether someone speaks standard English themselves or not, they tend to negatively judge people whose speech deviates from the standard.

*An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:*
*https://louis.pressbooks.pub/fundamentalsofcomm/?p=521#h5p-6*

The "English only" movement of recent years is largely a backlash targeted at immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries. Another national controversy has revolved around the inclusion of Spanish in common language use, such as Spanish as an option at ATMs or other automated services, and Spanish-language instruction in school for students who don't speak or are learning to speak English. As was noted earlier, the Latino/a population in the United States is growing fast, which has necessitated the inclusion of Spanish in many areas of public life. This has also created a backlash, which some scholars argue is tied more to the race of the immigrants than the language they speak and fear that white America could be engulfed by other languages and cultures (Speicher). This backlash has led to a revived movement to make English the official language of the US.


Welcome to America, indeed by CGP Grey is used under CC BY 2.0.

The US Constitution does not stipulate a national language, and Congress has not designated one either. While nearly thirty states have passed English-language legislation, it has mostly been symbolic, and court rulings have limited any enforceability (Zuckerman). The Linguistic Society of America points out that immigrants are very aware of the social and economic advantages of learning English and do not need to be forced. They also point out that the US has always had many languages represented, that national unity hasn't rested on a single language, and that there are benefits to having a multilingual population. Interracial communication presents some additional verbal challenges.

**Code-switching** involves changing from one way of speaking to another between or within interactions. Some people of color may engage in code-switching when communicating with dominant group members because they fear they will be negatively judged. Adopting the language practices of the dominant group may minimize perceived differences. This code-switching creates a linguistic dual consciousness in which people can maintain their linguistic identities with their in-group peers but can still acquire tools and gain access needed to function in a dominant society (Yancy). White people may also feel anxious about communicating with people of color out of fear of being perceived as racist. In other situations, people in dominant groups may spotlight nondominant members by asking them to comment on or educate others about their race (Allen). For example, I once taught at a private university that was predominantly white. Students of color talked to me about being asked by professors to weigh in on an issue when discussions of race came up in the classroom. While a professor may have been well intentioned, spotlighting can make a student feel conspicuous, frustrated, or defensive. Additionally, I bet the professors wouldn't think about asking a white, male, or heterosexual student to give the perspective of their whole group.

*An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:*
*https://louis.pressbooks.pub/fundamentalsofcomm/?p=521#h5p-7*

## Gender

When we first meet a newborn baby, we ask whether it's a boy or a girl. This question illustrates the importance of gender in organizing our social lives and our interpersonal relationships. A Canadian family became aware of the deep emotions people feel about gender and the great discomfort people feel when they can't determine gender when they announced to the world that they were not going to tell anyone the gender of their baby, aside from the baby's siblings. Their desire for their child, named Storm, to be able to experience early life without the boundaries and categories of gender brought criticism from many (Davis and James). Conversely, many parents consciously or unconsciously code their newborns in gendered ways based on our society's associations of pink clothing and accessories with girls and blue with boys. While it's obvious to most people that colors aren't gendered, they take on new meaning when we assign gendered characteristics of masculinity and femininity to them. Just like race, gender is a socially constructed category. While it is true that there are biological differences between who we label male and female, the meaning our society places on those differences is what actually matters in our day-to-day lives. And the biological differences are interpreted differently around the world, which further shows that although we think gender is a natural, normal, stable way of classifying things, it is actually not. There is a long history of appreciation for people who cross gender lines in Native American and South Central Asian cultures, to name just two.

You may have noticed I use the word gender instead of sex. That's because **gender** is an identity based on internalized cultural notions of masculinity and femininity that are constructed through communication and interaction. There are two important parts of this definition to unpack. First, we internalize notions of gender based on socializing institutions, which helps us form our gender identity. Then we attempt to construct that gendered identity through our interactions with others, which is our gender expression. **Sex** is based on biological characteristics, including external genitalia, internal sex organs, chromosomes, and hormones (Wood). While the biological characteristics between men and women are obviously different, it's the meaning that we create and attach to those characteristics that makes them significant. The cultural differences in how that significance is ascribed are proof that our way of doing things is arbitrary. For example, cross-cultural research has found that boys and girls in most cultures show both aggressive and nurturing tendencies, but cultures vary in terms of how they encourage these characteristics between genders. In a group in Africa, young boys are responsible for taking care of babies and are encouraged to be nurturing (Wood).

Gender has been constructed over the past few centuries in political and deliberate ways that have tended to favor men in terms of power. And various academic fields joined in the quest to prove there are natural differences between men and women. While the proof they presented was credible to many at the time, it seems blatantly sexist and inaccurate today. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, scientists who measure skulls, also known as craniometrists, claimed that men were more intelligent than women because they had larger brains. Leaders in the fast-growing fields of sociology and psychology argued that women were less evolved than men and had more in common with "children and savages" than adult (white) males (Allen). Doctors and other decision-makers like politicians also used women's menstrual cycles as evidence that they were irrational or hysterical and therefore couldn't be trusted to vote, pursue higher education, or be in a leadership position. These are just a few of the many instances of how knowledge was created by seemingly legitimate scientific disciplines that we can now clearly see served to empower men and disempower women. This system is based on the ideology of **patriarchy**, which is a system of social structures and practices that maintains the values, priorities, and interests of men as a group (Wood). One of the ways patriarchy is maintained is by its relative invisibility. While women have been the focus of much research on gender differences, males have been largely unexamined. Men have been treated as the generic human being to which others are compared. But that ignores the fact that men have a gender too. Masculinities studies have challenged that notion by examining how masculinities are performed.

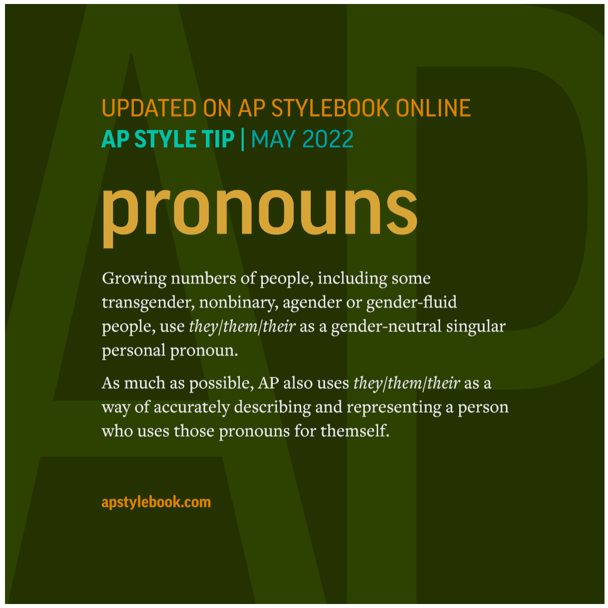
There have been challenges to the construction of gender in recent decades. Since the 1960s, scholars and activists have challenged established notions of what it means to be a man or a woman. The women's rights movement in the US dates back to the 1800s, when the first women's rights convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848 (Wood). Although most women's rights movements have been led by white, middle-class women, there was overlap between those involved in the abolitionist movement to end slavery and the beginnings of the women's rights movement. Although some of the leaders of the early women's rights movement had class and education privileges, they were still taking a risk by organizing and protesting. Black women were even more at risk, and Sojourner Truth, an emancipated slave, faced those risks often and gave a much-noted extemporaneous speech at a women's rights gathering in Akron, Ohio, in 1851, which came to be called "Ain't I a Woman?" (Wood). Her speech highlighted the multiple layers of oppression faced by Black women. Historians have noted that the original transcript of the speech was edited to overemphasize a Southern slave dialect instead of Truth's New York accent, which exemplifies how language can be used to reinforce constructions of race.

Feminism as an intellectual and social movement advanced women's rights and our overall understanding of gender. Feminism has gotten a bad reputation based on how it has been portrayed in the media and by some politicians. When I teach courses about gender, I often ask my students to raise their hands if they consider themselves feminists. I usually only have a few, if any, who do. I've found that students I teach are hesitant to identify as a feminist because of the connotations of the word. However, when I ask students to raise their hand if they believe women have been treated unfairly and that there should be more equity, most students raise their hands. Gender and communication scholar Julia Wood has found the same trend and explains that a desire to make a more equitable society for everyone is at the root of feminism. She shares comments from a student that capture this disconnect (Wood):

*An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:*
*https://louis.pressbooks.pub/fundamentalsofcomm/?p=521#h5p-9*

It's important to remember that there are many ways to be a feminist and to realize that some of the stereotypes about feminism are rooted in sexism and homophobia, in that feminists are reduced to "men haters" and often presumed to be lesbians. The feminist movement also gave some momentum to the transgender rights movement. **Transgender** is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression do not match the gender they were assigned by birth. Transgender people may or may not seek medical intervention like surgery or hormone treatments to help match their physiology with their gender identity. The term transgender includes other labels such as transsexual, transvestite, cross-dresser, and intersex, among others. Terms like hermaphrodite and she-male are not considered appropriate. As with other groups, it is best to allow someone to self-identify first and then honor their preferred label. If you are unsure of which pronouns to use when addressing someone, you can use gender-neutral language, the pronoun that matches with how they are presenting, or the pronouns they or them. If someone has long hair, makeup, and a dress on, but you think their biological sex is male due to other cues, it would be polite to address them with female pronouns, since that is the gender identity they are expressing.

In 2017, the Associated Press and the Chicago Manual of Style updated their guidelines to include the singular "they." In 2022, the AP Stylebook added inclusive content focusing on race, gender, and sexual orientation.




AP Style Tip May 2022 Posted on AP Style Public Facebook Page

*An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:*
*https://louis.pressbooks.pub/fundamentalsofcomm/?p=521#h5p-10*

Gender as a cultural identity has implications for many aspects of our lives, including real-world contexts like education and work. Schools are primary grounds for socialization, and the educational experience for males and females is different in many ways from preschool through college. Although not always intentional, schools tend to re-create the hierarchies and inequalities that exist in society. Given that we live in a patriarchal society, there are communicative elements present in school that support this (Allen). For example, teachers are more likely to call on and pay attention to boys in a classroom, giving them more feedback in the form of criticism, praise, and help. This sends an implicit message that boys are more worthy of attention and valuable than girls. Teachers are also more likely to lead girls to focus on feelings and appearance and boys to focus on competition and achievement. The focus on appearance for girls can lead to anxieties about body image. Gender inequalities are also evident in the administrative structure of schools, which puts males in positions of authority more than females. While females make up 75% of the educational workforce, only 22% of superintendents and 8% of high school principals are women. Similar trends exist in colleges and universities, with women only accounting for 26% of full professors. These inequalities in schools correspond to larger inequalities in the general workforce. While there are more women in the workforce now than ever before, they still face a glass ceiling, which is a barrier to promotion to upper management. Many of my students have been surprised at the continuing pay gap that exists between men and women. According to the National Committee on Pay Equity, in 2018, the median salaries for all full-time, year-round workers showed women earning 81.6 cents for every dollar men earned, statistically the same gap as in 2017. To put this into perspective, the National Committee on Pay Equity started an event called Equal Pay Day. In 2020, Equal Pay Day was on March 31. This signifies that for a woman to earn the same amount of money a man earned in a year, she would have to work three full months extra, until March 31, to make up for the difference.

## Sexuality

While race and gender are two of the first things we notice about others, sexuality is often something we view as personal and private. Although many people hold the view that a person's sexuality should be kept private, this isn't a reality for our society. One only needs to observe popular culture and media for a short time to see that sexuality permeates much of our public discourse.

Sexuality relates to culture and identity in important ways that extend beyond sexual orientation, just as race is more than the color of one's skin and gender is more than one's biological and physiological manifestations of masculinity and femininity. Sexuality isn't just physical; it is social in that we communicate with others about sexuality (Allen). Sexuality is also biological in that it connects to physiological functions that carry significant social and political meaning like puberty, menstruation, and pregnancy. Sexuality connects to public health issues like sexually transmitted infections (STIs), sexual assault, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and teen pregnancy. Sexuality is at the center of political issues like abortion, sex education, and gay and lesbian rights. While all these contribute to sexuality as a cultural identity, the focus in this section is on sexual orientation.

The most obvious way sexuality relates to identity is through sexual orientation. **Sexual orientation** refers to a person's primary physical and emotional sexual attraction and activity. The terms we most often use to categorize sexual orientation are heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and asexual. Gays, lesbians, and bisexuals are sometimes referred to as sexual minorities. While the term sexual preference has been used previously, sexual orientation is more appropriate, since preference implies a simple choice. Although someone's preference for a restaurant or actor may change frequently, sexuality is not as simple. The term homosexual can be appropriate in some instances, but it carries with it a clinical and medicalized tone. As you will see in the timeline that follows, the medical community has a recent history of "treating" homosexuality with means that most would view as inhumane today. So many people prefer a term like gay, which was chosen and embraced by gay people, rather than homosexual, which was imposed by a then discriminatory medical system.

The gay and lesbian rights movement became widely recognizable in the US in the 1950s and continues on today, as evidenced by prominent issues regarding sexual orientation in national news and politics. National and international groups like the Human Rights Campaign advocate for rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) communities. While these communities are often grouped within one acronym (LGBTQ+), they are different. Gays and lesbians constitute the most visible of the groups and receive the most attention and funding. Bisexuals are rarely visible or included in popular cultural discourses or social and political movements. Transgender issues have received much more attention in recent years, but transgender identity connects to gender more than it does to sexuality. Last, queer is a term used to describe a group that is diverse in terms of identities but usually takes a more activist and at times radical stance that critiques sexual categories. While queer was long considered a derogatory label and still is by some, the queer activist movement that emerged in the 1980s and early 1990s reclaimed the word and embraced it as a positive. As you can see, there is a diversity of identities among sexual minorities, just as there is variation within races and genders.

As with other cultural identities, notions of sexuality have been socially constructed in different ways throughout human history. Sexual orientation didn't come into being as an identity category until the late 1800s. Before that, sexuality was viewed in more physical or spiritual senses that were largely separate from a person's identity. Table 1.3 traces some of the developments relevant to sexuality, identity, and communication that show how this cultural identity has been constructed over the past 3,000 years.

*An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:*
*https://louis.pressbooks.pub/fundamentalsofcomm/?p=521#h5p-11*

**Table 1.3 Developments Related to Sexuality, Identity, and Communication**

| Year(s) | Development |
|---|---|
| 1400 BCE–565 BCE | During the Greek and Roman era, there was no conception of sexual orientation as an identity. However, sexual relationships between men were accepted by some members of society. Also at this time, Greek poet Sappho wrote about love between women. |
| 533 BCE | Byzantine emperor Justinian makes adultery and same-sex sexual acts punishable by death. |
| 1533 | Civil law in England indicates the death penalty can be given for same-sex sexual acts between men. |
| 1810 | Napoleonic Code in France removes all penalties for any sexual activity between consenting adults. |
| 1861 | England removes the death penalty for same-sex sexual acts. |
| 1892 | The term heterosexuality is coined to refer to a form of "sexual perversion" in which people engage in sexual acts for reasons other than reproduction. |
| 1897 | Dr. Magnus Hirschfield founds the Scientific Humanitarian Committee in Berlin. It is the first gay rights organization. |
| 1900–1930 | Doctors "treat" homosexuality with castration, electroshock therapy, and incarceration in mental hospitals. |
| 1924 | The first gay rights organization in the US, the Chicago Society for Human Rights, is founded. |
| 1933–44 | Tens of thousands of gay men are sent to concentration camps under Nazi rule. The prisoners are forced to wear pink triangles on their uniforms. The pink triangle was later reclaimed as a symbol of gay rights. |
| 1934 | The terms heterosexuality and homosexuality appear in Webster's dictionary with generally the same meaning the terms hold today. |
| 1948 | American sexologist Alfred Kinsey's research reveals that more people than thought have engaged in same-sex sexual activity. His research highlights the existence of bisexuality. |
| 1969 | On June 27, patrons at the Stonewall Inn in New York City fight back as police raided the bar (a common practice used by police at the time to harass gay people). "The Stonewall Riot," as it came to be called, was led by gay, lesbian, and transgender patrons of the bar, many of whom were working class and/or people of color. |

| | |
|---|---|
| 1974 | The American Psychiatric Association removes its reference to homosexuality as a mental illness. |
| 1999 | The Vermont Supreme Court rules that the state must provide legal rights to same-sex couples. In 2000, Vermont becomes the first state to offer same-sex couples civil unions. |
| 2003 | The US Supreme Court rules that Texas's sodomy law is unconstitutional, which effectively decriminalizes consensual same-sex relations. |
| 2011 | The US military policy "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" is repealed, allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly. |

*An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:*
*https://louis.pressbooks.pub/fundamentalsofcomm/?p=521#h5p-12*

## Ability

There is resistance to classifying ability as a cultural identity because we follow a **medical model of disability** that places disability as an individual and medical rather than a social and cultural issue. While much of what distinguishes able-bodied and cognitively able from disabled is rooted in science, biology, and physiology, there are important sociocultural dimensions. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines an individual with a disability as "a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment" (Allen). An impairment is defined as "any temporary or permanent loss or abnormality of a body structure or function, whether physiological or psychological" (Allen). This definition is important because it notes the social aspect of disability in that people's life activities are limited and the relational aspect of disability in that the perception of a disability by others can lead someone to be classified as such. Ascribing an identity of disabled to a person can be problematic. If there is a mental or physical impairment, it should be diagnosed by a credentialed expert. If there isn't an impairment, then the label of disabled can have negative impacts, as this label carries social and cultural significance. People are tracked into various educational programs based on their physical and cognitive abilities, and there are many cases of people being mistakenly labeled disabled who were treated differently despite their protest of the ascribed label. Students who did not speak English as a first language, for example, were—and perhaps still are—sometimes put into special education classes.

Wounded Warrior Regiment – CC BY-NC 2.0.

As recently disabled veterans integrate back into civilian life, they will be offered assistance and accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Ability, just as the other cultural identities discussed, has institutionalized privileges and disadvantages associated with it. **Ableism** is the system of beliefs and practices that produces a physical and mental standard that is projected as normal for a human being and labels deviations from it abnormal, resulting in unequal treatment and access to resources. Ability privilege refers to the unearned advantages that are provided for people who fit the cognitive and physical norms (Allen). I once attended a workshop about ability privilege led by a man who was visually impaired. He talked about how, unlike other cultural identities that are typically stable over a lifetime, ability fluctuates for most people. We have all experienced times when we are more or less able.

Perhaps you broke your leg and had to use crutches or a wheelchair for a while. Getting sick for a prolonged period also lessens our abilities, but we may fully recover from any of these examples and regain our ability privilege. Whether you've experienced a short-term disability or not, the majority of us will become less physically and cognitively able as we get older.

Statistically, people with disabilities make up the largest minority group in the United States, with an estimated 20% of people five years or older living with some form of disability (Allen). Medical advances have allowed some people with disabilities to live longer and more active lives than before, which has led to an increase in the number of people with disabilities. This number could continue to increase, as we have thousands of veterans returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with physical disabilities or psychological impairments such as posttraumatic stress disorder.

As disability has been constructed in US history, it has intersected with other cultural identities. For example, people opposed to "political and social equality for women cited their supposed physical, intellectual, and psychological flaws, deficits, and deviations from the male norm." They framed women as emotional, irrational, and unstable, which was used to put them into the "scientific" category of "feeblemindedness," which led them to be institutionalized (Carlson). Arguments supporting racial inequality and tighter immigration restrictions also drew on notions of disability, framing certain racial groups as prone to mental retardation, mental illness, or uncontrollable emotions and actions. See Table 1.4 for a timeline of developments related to ability, identity, and communication. These thoughts led to a dark time in US history, as the eugenics movement sought to limit the reproduction of people deemed as deficient.

**Table 1.4 Developments Related to Ability, Identity, and Communication**

| Year(s) | Development |
|---|---|
| 400 BCE | The Greeks make connections between biology, physiology, and actions. For example, they make a connection between epilepsy and a disorder of the mind but still consider the source to be supernatural or divine. |
| 30–480 BCE | People with disabilities are viewed with pity by early Christians and thought to be so conditioned because of an impurity that could possibly be addressed through prayer. |
| 500–1500 | As beliefs in the supernatural increased during the Middle Ages, people with disabilities are seen as manifestations of evil and are ridiculed and persecuted. |
| 1650–1789 | During the Enlightenment, the first large-scale movements toward the medical model are made, as science and medicine advanced and society turns to a view of human rationality. |
| 1900s | The eugenics movement in the US begins. Laws are passed to sterilize the "socially inadequate," and during this time, more than sixty thousand people were forcibly sterilized in thirty-three states. |
| 1930s | People with disabilities become the first targets of experimentation and mass execution by the Nazis. |
| 1970s | The independent living movement becomes a prominent part of the disability rights movement. |
| 1990 | The Americans with Disabilities Act is passed through Congress and signed into law. |

*An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:*
*https://louis.pressbooks.pub/fundamentalsofcomm/?p=521#h5p-13*

During the early part of the 1900s, the eugenics movement was the epitome of the move to rehabilitate or reject people with disabilities (Allen). This was a brand of social engineering that was indicative of strong public support for the rationality of science to cure society's problems (Allen). A sterilization law written in 1914 "proposed to authorize sterilization of the socially inadequate," which included the "feebleminded, insane, criminalistic, epileptic, inebriate, diseased, blind, deaf, deformed, and dependent" (Lombardo). During the eugenics movement in the US, more than sixty thousand people in thirty-three states were involuntarily sterilized (Allen). Although the eugenics movement as it was envisioned and enacted then is unthinkable today, some who have studied the eugenics movement of the early 1900s have issued warnings that a newly packaged version of eugenics could be upon us. As human genome mapping and DNA manipulation become more accessible, advanced genetic testing could enable parents to eliminate undesirable aspects or enhance desirable characteristics of their children before they are born, creating "designer children" (Spice).

Much has changed for people with disabilities in the United States in the past fifty years. The independent living movement (ILM) was a part of the disability rights movement that took shape along with other social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The ILM calls for more individual and collective action toward social change by people with disabilities. Some of the goals of the ILM include reframing disability as a social and political rather than just a medical issue, a shift toward changing society rather than just rehabilitating people with disabilities, a view of accommodations as civil rights rather than charity, and more involvement by people with disabilities in the formulation and execution of policies relating to them (Longmore). As society better adapts to people with disabilities, there will be more instances of interability communication taking place.

Interability communication is communication between people with differing ability levels—for example, a hearing person communicating with someone who is hearing impaired or a person who doesn't use a wheelchair communicating with someone who uses a wheelchair. Since many people are unsure of how to communicate with a person with disabilities, the CDC has provided tips for communicating with and about people with disabilities.


Summary. Image by Ann H. Free to use from www.pexels.com

*An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it*

*online here:*
*https://louis.pressbooks.pub/fundamentalsofcomm/?p=521#h5p-28*

## License



### Media Attributions

- AP Style Pronouns
- pexels-ann-h-6980523

CHAPTER X

# CHAPTER 10: INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- Define intercultural communication
- List and summarize the six dialectics of intercultural communication
- Discuss how intercultural communication affects interpersonal relationships
- Define intercultural communication competence
- Explain how motivation, self- and other-knowledge, and tolerance for uncertainty relate to intercultural communication competence
- Summarize the three ways to cultivate intercultural communication competence that are discussed
- Apply the concept of "thinking under the influence" as a reflective skill for building intercultural communication competence

It is through intercultural communication that we come to create, understand, and transform culture and identity. **Intercultural communication** is communication between people with differing cultural identities. One reason we should study intercultural communication is to foster greater self-awareness (Martin and Nakayama). 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. Intercultural communication can allow us to step outside of our comfortable, usual frame of reference and see our culture through a different lens. Additionally, as we become more self-aware, we may also become more ethical communicators as we challenge our ethnocentrism, or our tendency to view our own culture as superior to other cultures.

As was noted earlier, difference matters, and studying intercultural communication can help us better negotiate our changing world. Changing economies and technologies intersect with culture in meaningful ways (Martin and Nakayama). Technology has created for some a global village where vast distances are now much shorter due to new technology that makes travel and communication more accessible and convenient (McLuhan). However, there is also a digital divide, which refers to the unequal access to technology and related skills that exist in much of the world. The digital divide was a term that initially referred to gaps in access to computers. The term expanded to include access to the internet, since it exploded onto the technology scene and is now connected to virtually all computing (van Deursen and van Dijk). Approximately five billion people around the world now access the internet regularly, and those who don't face several disadvantages (Smith).

*An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:*
*https://louis.pressbooks.pub/fundamentalsofcomm/?p=279#h5p-14*

People in most fields will be more successful if they are prepared to work in a globalized world. Obviously, the global market sets up the need to have intercultural competence for employees who travel between locations of a multinational corporation. Perhaps less obvious may be the need for teachers to work with students who do not speak English as their first language and for police officers, lawyers, managers, and medical personnel to be able to work with people who have various cultural identities.

# 10.1 DEFINING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

**Intercultural communication** is complicated, messy, and at times, contradictory. Therefore, it is not always easy to conceptualize or study. Taking a dialectical approach allows us to capture the dynamism of intercultural communication. A dialectic is a relationship between two opposing concepts that constantly push and pull one another (Martin and Nakayama). To put it another way, thinking dialectically helps us realize that our experiences often occur in between two different phenomena. This perspective is beneficial for interpersonal and intercultural communication because when we think dialectically, we think relationally. This means we look at the relationship between aspects of intercultural communication rather than viewing them in isolation. Intercultural communication occurs as a dynamic in-betweenness that, while connected to the individuals in an encounter, goes beyond the individuals, creating something unique. Holding a dialectical perspective may be challenging for some Westerners, as it asks us to hold two contradictory ideas simultaneously, which goes against much of what we are taught in our formal education. Thinking dialectically helps us see the complexity of culture and identity because it doesn't allow for dichotomies. **Dichotomies** are dualistic ways of thinking that highlight opposites, reducing the ability to see gradations that exist in between concepts. Dichotomies such as good/evil, wrong/right, objective/subjective, male/female, in-group/out-group, black/white, and so on form the basis of much of our thoughts on ethics, culture, and general philosophy, but this isn't the only way of thinking (Martin and Nakayama). Many Eastern cultures acknowledge that the world isn't dualistic. Rather, they accept as part of their reality that things that seem opposite are actually interdependent and complement each other. I argue that a dialectical approach is useful in studying intercultural communication because it gets us out of our comfortable and familiar ways of thinking. Since so much of understanding culture and identity is understanding ourselves, having an unfamiliar lens through which to view culture can offer us insights that our familiar lenses will not. Specifically, we can better understand intercultural communication by examining six dialectics (see Figure 1.1) (Martin and Nakayama).

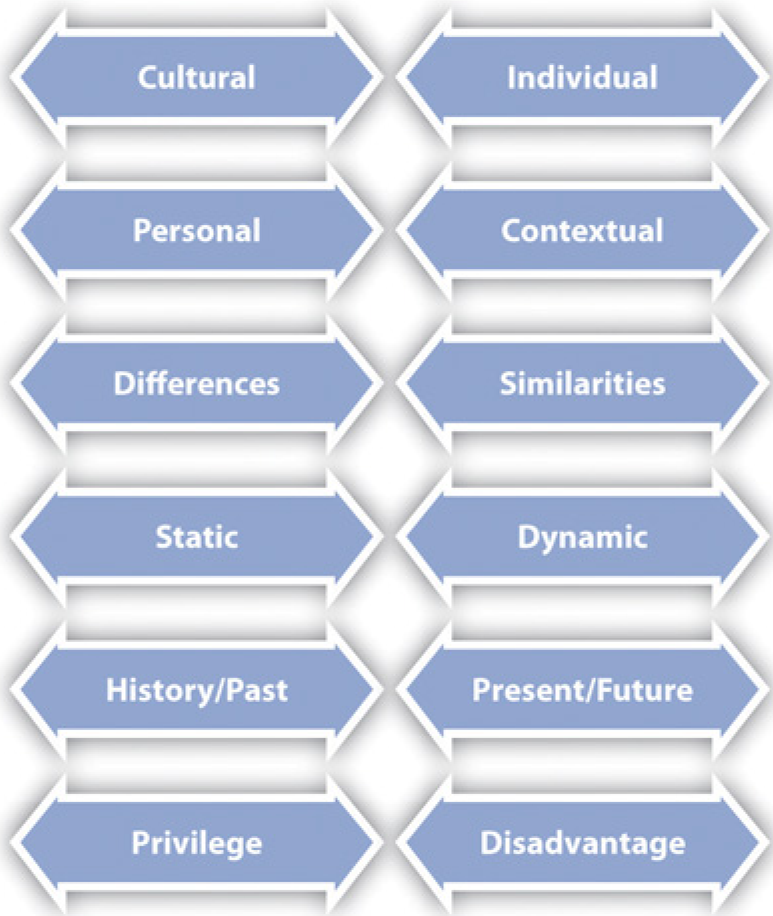



Figure 1.1. Dialectics of Intercultural Communication. Image by Martin and Nakayama.

The **cultural-individual dialectic** captures the interplay between patterned behaviors learned from a cultural group and individual behaviors that may be variations on or counter to those of the larger culture. This dialectic is useful because it helps us account for exceptions to cultural norms. For example, earlier we learned that the US is said to be a low-context culture, which means that we value verbal communication as our primary form of communication. Conversely, Japan is said to be a high-context culture, which means they often look for nonverbal clues like tone, silence, or what is not said for meaning. However, you can find people in the US who intentionally put much meaning into how they say things, perhaps because they are not as comfortable speaking directly about what's on their minds. We often do this in situations when we may hurt someone's feelings or damage a relationship. Does that mean we come from a high-context culture? Does the Japanese man who speaks more than is socially acceptable come from a low-context culture? The answer to both questions is no. Neither the behaviors of a small percentage of individuals nor occasional situational choices constitute a cultural pattern.

The **personal-contextual dialectic** highlights the connection between our personal patterns of and preferences for communicating and how various contexts influence the personal. In some cases, our communication patterns and preferences will stay the same across many contexts. In other cases, a context shift may lead us to alter our communication and adapt. For example, an American businesswoman may prefer to communicate with her employees in an informal and laid-back manner. When she is promoted to manage a department in her company's office in Malaysia, she may again prefer to communicate with her new Malaysian employees the same way she did with those in the US. In the US, we know that there are some accepted norms that communication in work contexts is more formal than in personal contexts. However, we also know that individual managers often adapt these expectations to suit their own personal tastes. This type of managerial discretion would likely not go over as well in Malaysia, where there is a greater emphasis put on power distance (Hofstede). So while the American manager may not know to adapt to the new context unless she has a high degree of intercultural communication competence, Malaysian managers would realize that this is an instance when the context likely influences communication more than personal preferences.

The **differences-similarities dialectic** allows us to examine how we are simultaneously similar to and different from others. As was noted earlier, it's easy to fall into a view of intercultural communication as other-oriented and set up dichotomies between us and them. When we overly focus on differences, we can end up polarizing groups that actually have things in common. When we overly focus on similarities, we **essentialize** or reduce and overlook important variations within a group. This tendency is evident in most of the popular, and some academic, conversations regarding gender differences. The book *Men Are from Mars and Women Are from Venus* makes it seem like men and women aren't even species that hail from the same planet. The media is quick to include a blurb from a research study indicating again how men and women are wired to communicate differently. However, the overwhelming majority of current research on gender and communication finds that while there are differences between how men and women communicate, there are far more similarities (Allen). Even the language we use to describe the genders sets up dichotomies. That's why I suggest that my students use the term "other gender" instead of the commonly used "opposite sex." I have a mom, a sister, and plenty of female friends, and I don't feel like any of them are the opposite of me. Perhaps a better title for a book would be *Women and Men Are Both from Earth*.

The **static-dynamic dialectic** suggests that culture and communication change over time yet often appear to be and are experienced as stable. Although our cultural beliefs and practices are indeed rooted in the past, we have already discussed how cultural categories that most of us assume to be stable, like race and gender, have changed dramatically in just the past fifty years. Some cultural values remain relatively consistent over time, which allows us to make some generalizations about a culture. For example, cultures have different orientations to time. The Chinese have a longer-term orientation to time than do Europeans (Lustig and Koester). This is evidenced in something that dates back as far as astrology. The Chinese zodiac is done annually (the Year of the Monkey, etc.), while European astrology was organized by month (Taurus, etc.). While this cultural orientation to time has been around for generations, as China becomes more westernized in terms of technology, business, and commerce, it could also adopt some views on time that are more short term.

The **history/past-present/future dialectic** reminds us to understand that while current cultural conditions are important and that our actions now will inevitably affect our future, those conditions are not without a history. We always view history through the lens of the present. Perhaps no example is more entrenched in our past and avoided in our present than the history of slavery in the United States. Where I grew up in the southern US, race was something that came up frequently. The high school I attended was 30% minorities (mostly African American) and also had a noticeable number of white teens (mostly male) who proudly displayed Confederate flags on their clothing or vehicles.

*An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:*
*https://louis.pressbooks.pub/fundamentalsofcomm/?p=465#h5p-15*

I remember an instance in a history class when we were discussing slavery and the subject of repatriation, or compensation for descendants of slaves, came up. A white male student in the class proclaimed, "I've never owned slaves. Why should I have to care about this now?" While his statement about not owning slaves is valid, it doesn't acknowledge that the effects of slavery still linger today and that the repercussions of such a long and unjust period of our history don't disappear throughout a few generations.

The **privileges-disadvantages dialectic** captures the complex interrelation of unearned, systemic advantages and disadvantages that operate among our various identities. As was discussed earlier, our society consists of dominant and nondominant groups. Our cultures and identities have certain privileges and/or disadvantages. To understand this dialectic, we must view culture and identity through a lens of **intersectionality**, which asks us to acknowledge that we each have multiple cultures and identities that intersect with each other. Because our identities are complex, no one is completely privileged, and no one is completely disadvantaged. For example, while we may think of a white, heterosexual male as being very privileged, he may also have a disability that leaves him without the able-bodied privilege that a Latina woman has. This is often a difficult dialectic for my students to understand because they are quick to point out exceptions that they think challenge this notion. For example, many people like to point out Oprah Winfrey as a powerful African American woman. While she is definitely now quite privileged despite her disadvantaged identities, her trajectory isn't the norm. When we view privilege and disadvantage at the cultural level, we cannot let individual exceptions distract from the systemic and institutionalized ways in which some people in our society are disadvantaged while others are privileged.

*An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it*

*online here:*
*https://louis.pressbooks.pub/fundamentalsofcomm/?p=465#h5p-16*

As these dialectics reiterate, culture and communication are complex systems that intersect with and diverge from many contexts. A better understanding of all these dialectics helps us be more critical thinkers and competent communicators in a changing world.

*An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:*
*https://louis.pressbooks.pub/fundamentalsofcomm/?p=465#h5p-17*

# 10.2 INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND RELATIONSHIPS

**Intercultural relationships** are formed between people with different cultural identities and include friends, romantic partners, family, and coworkers. Intercultural relationships have benefits and drawbacks. Some of the benefits include increasing cultural knowledge, challenging previously held stereotypes, and learning new skills (Martin and Nakayama). For example, I learned about the Vietnamese New Year celebration Tet from a friend I made in graduate school. This same friend also taught me how to make some delicious Vietnamese foods that I continue to cook today. I likely would not have gained this cultural knowledge or skill without the benefits of my intercultural friendship. Intercultural relationships also present challenges, however.

The dialectics discussed earlier affect our intercultural relationships. The similarities-differences dialectic in particular may present challenges to relationship formation (Martin and Nakayama). While differences between people's cultural identities may be obvious, it takes some effort to uncover commonalities that can form the basis of a relationship. Perceived differences in general also create anxiety and uncertainty that are not as present in intracultural relationships. Once some similarities are found, the tension within the dialectic begins to balance out and uncertainty and anxiety lessen. Negative stereotypes may also hinder progress toward relational development, especially if the individuals are not open to adjusting their preexisting beliefs. Intercultural relationships may also take more work to nurture and maintain. The benefit of increased cultural awareness is often achieved because the relational partners explain their cultures to each other. This type of explaining requires time, effort, and patience and may be an extra burden that some are not willing to carry. Last, engaging in intercultural relationships can lead to questioning or even backlash from one's own group. I experienced this type of backlash from my white classmates in middle school who teased me for hanging out with the African American kids on my bus. While these challenges range from mild inconveniences to more serious repercussions, they are important to be aware of. As noted earlier, intercultural relationships can take many forms. The focus of this section is on friendships and romantic relationships, but much of the following discussion can be extended to other relationship types.

*An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:*
*https://louis.pressbooks.pub/fundamentalsofcomm/?p=527#h5p-18*

## Intercultural Friendships

Even within the United States, views of friendship vary based on cultural identities. Research on friendship has shown that Latinos/as value relational support and positive feedback, Asian Americans emphasize exchanges of ideas like offering feedback or asking for guidance, African Americans value respect and mutual acceptance, and European Americans value recognition of each other as individuals (Collier). Despite the differences in emphasis, research also shows that the overall definition of a close friend is similar across cultures. A close friend is thought of as someone who is helpful and nonjudgmental, who you enjoy spending time with but can also be independent, and who shares similar interests and personality traits (Lee).

Intercultural friendship formation may face challenges that other friendships do not. Prior intercultural experience and overcoming language barriers increase the likelihood of intercultural friendship formation (Sias et al.). In some cases, previous intercultural experience, like studying abroad in college or living in a diverse place, may motivate someone to pursue intercultural friendships once they are no longer in that context. When friendships cross nationality, it may be necessary to invest more time in common understanding due to language barriers. With sufficient motivation and language skills, communication exchanges through self-disclosure can then further relational formation. Research has shown that individuals from different countries in intercultural friendships differ in terms of the topics and depth of self-disclosure, but as the friendship progresses, self-disclosure increases in depth and breadth (Chen and Nakazawa). Further, as people overcome initial challenges to initiating an intercultural friendship and move toward mutual self-disclosure, the relationship becomes more intimate, which helps friends work through and move beyond their cultural differences to focus on maintaining their relationship. In this sense, intercultural friendships can be just as strong and enduring as other friendships (Lee).

*An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:*
*https://louis.pressbooks.pub/fundamentalsofcomm/?p=527#h5p-19*

The potential for broadening one's perspective and learning more about cultural identities is not always balanced, however. In some instances, members of a dominant culture may be more interested in sharing their culture with their intercultural friend than they are in learning about their friend's culture, which illustrates how context and power influence friendships (Lee). A research study found a similar power dynamic, as European Americans in intercultural friendships stated they were open to exploring everyone's culture but also communicated that culture wasn't a big part of their intercultural friendships, as they just saw their friends as people. As the researcher states, "These types of responses may demonstrate that it is easiest for the group with the most socioeconomic and sociocultural power to ignore the rules, assume they have the power as individuals to change the rules or assume that no rules exist since others are adapting to them rather than vice versa" (Collier). Again, intercultural friendships illustrate the complexity of culture and the importance of remaining mindful of your communication and the contexts in which it occurs.

## Culture and 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 by most heterosexual people (Peplau and Spalding).

*An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:*
*https://louis.pressbooks.pub/fundamentalsofcomm/?p=527#h5p-20*

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. In June 2020, in Bostock v. Clayton County, the Supreme Court ruled in accordance with Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that employees shall be protected against discrimination because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. 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. According to Wikipedia, as of July 2022, 32 countries have legally recognized same-sex marriage.

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 (Peplau and Spalding). 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 (Peplau and Spalding). 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.

*An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:*
*https://louis.pressbooks.pub/fundamentalsofcomm/?p=527#h5p-21*

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 v. Virginia, declaring these laws to be unconstitutional (Pratt). It wasn't until 1998 and 2000, however, that South Carolina and Alabama removed such language from their state constitutions (Loving Day). The organization and website lovingday.org commemorates the landmark case and works to end racial prejudice through education.

*An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:*
*https://louis.pressbooks.pub/fundamentalsofcomm/?p=527#h5p-22*

Even after these changes, there were more Asian-white and Latinx-white relationships than there were African American–white relationships (Gaines and Brennan). 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.

*An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:*
*https://louis.pressbooks.pub/fundamentalsofcomm/?p=527#h5p-23*

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 (Gaines and Brennan). 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 (Gaines and Liu).

Interracial family. Image by Bahai.us – CC BY-NC 2.0.


Summary. Image by Ann H. Free to use from www.pexels.com

*An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:*
*https://louis.pressbooks.pub/fundamentalsofcomm/?p=527#h5p-29*

## License



## Media Attributions

- pexels-ann-h-6980523

# 10.3 INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

Throughout this book, we have been putting various tools in our communication toolbox to improve our communication competence. Many of these tools can be translated into intercultural contexts. While building any form of competence requires effort, building intercultural communication competence often requires us to take more risks. Some of these risks require us to leave our comfort zones and adapt to new and uncertain situations. In this section, we will learn some of the skills needed to be an interculturally competent communicator.

## Components of Intercultural Communication Competence

**Intercultural communication competence (ICC)** (ICC) is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in various cultural contexts. There are numerous components of ICC. Some key components include motivation, self- and other-knowledge, and tolerance for uncertainty.

Initially, a person's motivation for communicating with people from other cultures must be considered. Motivation refers to the root of a person's desire to foster intercultural relationships and can be intrinsic or extrinsic (Martin and Nakayama). Put simply, if a person isn't motivated to communicate with people from different cultures, then the components of ICC discussed next don't really matter. If a person has a healthy curiosity that drives him or her toward intercultural encounters to learn more about self and others, then there is a foundation from which to build additional competence-relevant attitudes and skills. This intrinsic motivation makes intercultural communication a voluntary, rewarding, and lifelong learning process. Motivation can also be extrinsic, meaning that the desire for intercultural communication is driven by an outside reward like money, power, or recognition. While both types of motivation can contribute to ICC, context may further enhance or impede a person's motivation to communicate across cultures.

Image by Gustavo Fring. Free to use from www.pexels.com

Members of dominant groups are often less motivated, intrinsically and extrinsically, toward intercultural communication than members of nondominant groups, because they don't see the incentives for doing so. Having more power in communication encounters can create an unbalanced situation where the individual from the nondominant group is expected to exhibit competence or the ability to adapt to the communication behaviors and attitudes of the other. Even in situations where extrinsic rewards like securing an overseas business investment are at stake, it is likely that the foreign investor is much more accustomed to adapting to US business customs and communication than vice versa. This expectation that others will adapt to our communication can be unconscious, but later ICC skills we will learn will help bring it to awareness.

The unbalanced situation I just described is a daily reality for many individuals with nondominant identities. Their motivation toward intercultural communication may be driven by survival in terms of functioning effectively in dominant contexts. Recall the phenomenon known as code-switching discussed earlier, in which individuals from nondominant groups adapt their communication to fit in with the dominant group. In such instances, African Americans may talk white by conforming to what is called standard English, women in corporate environments may adopt masculine communication patterns, people who are LBGTQ+ may self-censor and avoid discussing their same- or nondominant-gendered partners with coworkers, and people with nonvisible disabilities may not disclose them to avoid judgment.

While intrinsic motivation captures an idealistic view of intercultural communication as rewarding in its own right, many contexts create extrinsic motivation. In either case, there is a risk that an individual's motivation can still lead to incompetent communication. For example, it would be exploitative for an extrinsically motivated person to pursue intercultural communication solely for an external reward and then abandon the intercultural relationship once the reward is attained. These situations highlight the relational aspect of ICC, meaning that the motivation of all parties should be considered. Motivation alone cannot create ICC.

Knowledge supplements motivation and is an important part of building ICC. Knowledge includes self- and other-awareness, mindfulness, and cognitive flexibility. Building knowledge of our own cultures, identities, and communication patterns takes more than passive experience (Martin and Nakayama). We learn who we are through our interactions with others. 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 we may realize that people think of our identities differently than we thought. For example, when I lived in Sweden, my Swedish roommates often discussed how they were wary of befriending students from the US. They perceived US Americans to be shallow because they were friendly and exciting while they were in Sweden but didn't remain friends once they left. Although I was initially upset by their assessment, I came to see the truth in it. Swedes are generally more reserved than US Americans and take longer to form close friendships. The comparatively extroverted nature of the Americans led some of the Swedes to overestimate the depth of their relationship, which ultimately hurt them when the Americans didn't stay in touch. This made me more aware of how my communication was perceived, enhancing my self-knowledge. I also learned more about communication behaviors of the Swedes, which contributed to my knowledge of others.

The most effective way to develop other-knowledge is by direct and thoughtful encounters with other cultures. However, people may not readily have these opportunities for a variety of reasons. Despite the overall diversity in the US, many people still only interact with people who are similar to them. Even in a racially diverse educational setting, for example, people often group with people of their own race. While a heterosexual person may have a gay or lesbian friend or relative, they likely spend most of their time with other heterosexuals. Unless you interact with people with disabilities as part of your job or have a person with a disability in your friend or family group, you likely spend most of your time interacting with able-bodied people. Living in a rural area may limit your ability to interact with a range of cultures, and most people do not travel internationally regularly. Because of this, we may have to make a determined effort to interact with other cultures or rely on educational sources like college classes, books, or documentaries. Learning another language is also a good way to learn about a culture because you can then read the news or watch movies in the native language, which can offer insights that are lost in translation. It is important to note, though, that we must evaluate the credibility of the source of our knowledge, whether it is a book, person, or another source. Also, knowledge of another language does not automatically equate to ICC.

Developing self- and other-knowledge is an ongoing process that will continue to adapt and grow as we encounter new experiences. Mindfulness and cognitive complexity will help as we continue to build our ICC (Pusch). **Mindfulness** is a state of self- and other-monitoring that informs later reflection on communication interactions. As mindful communicators, we should ask questions that focus on the interactive process like "How is our communication going? What are my reactions? What are their reactions?" Being able to adapt our communication at the moment based on our answers to these questions is a skill that comes with a high level of ICC. Reflecting on the communication encounter later to see what can be learned is also a way to build ICC. We should then be able to incorporate what we learned into our communication frameworks, which requires cognitive flexibility. Cognitive flexibility refers to the ability to continually supplement and revise existing knowledge to create new categories rather than forcing new knowledge into old categories.

**Cognitive flexibility** helps prevent our knowledge from becoming stale and also prevents the formation of stereotypes and can help us avoid prejudging an encounter or jumping to conclusions. In summary, to be better intercultural communicators, we should know much about others and ourselves and be able to reflect on and adapt our knowledge as we gain new experiences.

Motivation and knowledge can inform us as we gain new experiences, but how we feel in the moment of intercultural encounters is also important. **Tolerance for uncertainty** refers to an individual's attitude about and level of comfort in uncertain situations (Martin and Nakayama). Some people perform better in uncertain situations than others, and intercultural encounters often bring up uncertainty. Whether communicating with someone of a different gender, race, or nationality, we are often wondering what we should or shouldn't do or say. Situations of uncertainty most often become clearer as they progress, but the anxiety that an individual with a low tolerance for uncertainty feels may lead them to leave the situation or otherwise communicate less competently. Individuals with a high tolerance for uncertainty may exhibit more patience, waiting on new information to become available or seeking out information, which may then increase the understanding of the situation and lead to a more successful outcome (Pusch). Individuals who are intrinsically motivated toward intercultural communication may have a higher tolerance for uncertainty in that their curiosity leads them to engage with others who are different because they find the self- and other-knowledge gained rewarding.

*An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:*
*https://louis.pressbooks.pub/fundamentalsofcomm/?p=529#h5p-24*

## Cultivating Intercultural Communication Competence

How can ICC be built and achieved? This is a key question we will address in this section. Two main ways to build ICC are through experiential learning and reflective practices (Bednarz). We must first realize that competence isn't any one thing. Part of being competent means that you can assess new situations and adapt your existing knowledge to new contexts. What it means to be competent will vary depending on your physical location, your role (personal, professional, etc.), and your life stage, among other things. Sometimes we will know or be able to figure out what is expected of us in a given situation, but sometimes we may need to act in unexpected ways to meet the needs of a situation. Competence enables us to better cope with the unexpected, adapt to the nonroutine, and connect to uncommon frameworks. I have always told my students that ICC is less about a list of rules and more about a box of tools.

Three ways to cultivate ICC are to foster attitudes that motivate us, discover knowledge that informs us, and develop skills that enable us (Bennett). To foster attitudes that motivate us, we must develop a sense of wonder about culture. This sense of wonder can lead to feeling overwhelmed, humbled, or awed (Opdal). This sense of wonder may correlate to a high tolerance for uncertainty, which can help us turn potentially frustrating experiences we have into teachable moments. I've had many such moments in my intercultural encounters at home and abroad. One such moment came the first time I tried to cook a frozen pizza in the oven in the shared kitchen of my apartment in Sweden. The information on the packaging was written in Swedish, but like many college students, I had a wealth of experience cooking frozen pizzas to draw from. As I went to set the oven dial to preheat, I noticed it was strange that the oven didn't go up to my usual 425–450 degrees. Not to be deterred, I cranked the dial up as far as it would go, waited a few minutes, put my pizza in, and walked down the hall to my room to wait for about fifteen minutes until the pizza was done. The smell of smoke drew me from my room before the fifteen minutes were up, and I walked into a corridor filled with smoke and the smell of burnt pizza. I pulled the pizza out and was puzzled for a few minutes while I tried to figure out why the pizza burned so quickly when one of my corridor-mates gently pointed out that the oven temperatures in Sweden are listed in Celsius, not Fahrenheit! Despite almost burning the kitchen down, I learned a valuable lesson about assuming that my map for temperatures and frozen pizzas was the same as everyone else's.

Discovering knowledge that informs us is another step that can build on our motivation. One tool involves learning more about our cognitive style, or how we learn. Our **cognitive style** consists of our preferred patterns for "gathering information, constructing meaning, and organizing and applying knowledge" (Bennett). As we explore cognitive styles, we discover that there are differences in how people attend to and perceive the world, explain events, organize the world, and use rules of logic (Nisbett). Some cultures have a cognitive style that focuses more on tasks, analytic and objective thinking, details and precision, inner direction, and independence, while others focus on relationships and people over tasks and things, concrete and metaphorical thinking, and group consciousness and harmony.

Developing ICC is a complex learning process. At the basic level of learning, we accumulate knowledge and assimilate it into our existing frameworks. But accumulated knowledge doesn't necessarily help us in situations when we have to apply that knowledge. **Transformative learning** takes place at the highest levels and occurs when we encounter situations that challenge our accumulated knowledge and our ability to accommodate that knowledge to manage a real-world situation. The cognitive dissonance that results in these situations is often uncomfortable and can lead to a hesitance to repeat such an engagement. One tip for cultivating ICC that can help manage these challenges is to find a community of like-minded people who are also motivated to develop ICC. In my graduate program, I lived in the international dormitory to experience the cultural diversity that I had enjoyed so much studying abroad a few years earlier. I was surrounded by international students and US American students who were more or less interested in cultural diversity. This ended up being a tremendous learning experience, and I worked on research about identity and communication between international and American students.

Developing skills that enable us is another part of ICC. Some of the skills important to ICC are the ability to empathize, accumulate cultural information, listen, resolve conflict, and manage anxiety (Bennett). Again, you are already developing a foundation for these skills by reading this book, but you can expand those skills to intercultural settings with the motivation and knowledge already described. Contact alone does not increase intercultural skills; there must be more deliberate measures taken to fully capitalize on those encounters. While research now shows that intercultural contact does decrease prejudices, this is not enough to become interculturally competent. The ability to empathize and manage anxiety enhances prejudice reduction, and these two skills have been shown to enhance the overall impact of intercultural contact even more than acquiring cultural knowledge. There is intercultural training available for interested people. If you can't access training, you may choose to research intercultural training on your own, as there are many books, articles, and manuals written on the subject.

Reflective practices can also help us process through rewards and challenges associated with developing ICC. As we open ourselves to new experiences, we are likely to have both positive and negative reactions. It can be very useful to take note of negative or defensive reactions you have. This can help you identify certain triggers that may create barriers to effective intercultural interaction. Noting positive experiences can also help you identify triggers for learning that you could seek out or re-create to enhance the positive (Bednarz). A more complex method of reflection is called **intersectional reflexivity**. Intersectional reflexivity is a reflective practice by which we acknowledge intersecting identities, both privileged and disadvantaged, and implicate ourselves in social hierarchies and inequalities (Jones). This method brings in the concepts of dominant and nondominant groups and the privileges/disadvantages dialectic we discussed earlier.

While formal intercultural experiences like studying abroad or volunteering for the Special Olympics or a shelter for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) youth can result in learning, informal experiences are also important. We may be less likely to include informal experiences in our reflection if we don't see them as legitimate. Reflection should also include critical incidents, or what I call a-ha! moments. Think of reflection as a tool for metacompetence that can be useful in bringing the formal and informal together (Bednarz).

*An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:*
*https://louis.pressbooks.pub/fundamentalsofcomm/?p=529#h5p-25*


Summary. Image by Ann H. Free to use from www.pexels.com

*An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:*
*https://louis.pressbooks.pub/fundamentalsofcomm/?p=529#h5p-30*

## License



### Media Attributions

- Intercultural Friendships
- pexels-ann-h-6980523

# CHAPTER XI
# CHAPTER 11: MASS COMMUNICATION

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- Define mass communication
- Identify key functions of mass communication
- Understand prominent theories of mass communication
- Understand the role that media plays in your life
- Describe pop culture
- Identify several key elements of media literacy
- Recognize your role in the global community

You're sitting in a classroom checking Instagram while listening to your favorite music when the clock hits the top of the hour. You take out your headphones and put the phone down when you hear the instructor begin talking. She is referring to a web page projected on the screen in front of the class. She welcomes everyone to the start of the school year but stops to wait for the guy next to you to put down his phone that he's reading. She explains that she will only provide an electronic version of the syllabus, pointing to the course web page. Everyone in the class is to go online and read the syllabus before the next class meeting. She explains that besides lecture and discussion, you will need to watch CNN, read the *Wall Street Journal*, and watch several clips she's listed on YouTube to demonstrate and learn key concepts. Suddenly, from the back of the class, a cell phone begins ringing. The instructor stops midsentence and explains the class policy about turning off cell phones during class. Your classmate never answers the phone but reaches into his pocket and looks at the phone screen. The instructor explains that you will need to read chapter 1 of the textbook by next week. Included with your textbook is a passcode that allows you to connect to an online database so you can access articles for your semester project. After she answers student questions, class is over.

As you head out the door, you hear music coming from the building sound system playing the student-run

FM radio station. You walk to the student union to grab lunch and watch whatever they're playing on the large-screen television. On your drive home, you turn on the radio to listen to the broadcast of your favorite baseball team. While driving, you notice the new billboard advertising Ford trucks. When you get home, you sit down in front of your computer. You check a class web page to see if you have homework, check the day's current events and sporting scores, then check your email. You read several messages, delete the spam, and get irritated at the pop-up advertisements that keep jumping on your screen. After shutting down your computer, you sit on the couch to watch a movie streaming through Netflix. As you lean back on the couch, you clear away a stack of magazines to set down your drink.

The above example is representative of the amount of mass communication we are exposed to daily. In the US, we witness and understand a great deal of our world through mass communication. Remember that in the early part of the 20th century, communication scholars began to ask questions about the impact of media as more and more mass communication outlets were developed. Questions then and now include: To what degree does mass communication affect us? How do we use or access mass communication? How does each medium influence how we interpret messages? Do we play an active or passive role when we interact with media? This chapter explores these questions by examining the concept of mass communication, its evolution, its functions, its theories, and its place in society.

# 11.1 DEFINING MASS COMMUNICATION

Littlejohn and Foss define mass communication as "the process whereby media organizations produce and transmit messages to large publics and the process by which those messages are sought, used, understood, and influenced by audience." McQuail states that mass communication is "only one of the processes of communication operating at the society-wide level, readily identified by its institutional characteristics." Simply put, **mass communication** is the public transfer of messages through media or technology-driven channels to a large number of recipients from an entity, usually involving some type of cost or fee (advertising) for the user. "The sender often is a person in some large media organization, the messages are public, and the audience tends to be large and varied." However, with the advent of outlets like YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and text messaging, these definitions do not account for the increased opportunities individuals now have to send messages to large audiences through mediated channels.


Image by Spaynton is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

Nevertheless, most mass communication comes from large organizations that influence culture on a large scale. Schramm refers to this as a "working group organizer." Today the working groups that control most mass communication are large conglomerates such as Viacom, News Corp, Disney, Comcast, Time Warner, and CBS. In 2012, these conglomerates controlled 90% of American media, and mergers continue to consolidate ownership even more. An example of an attempt at such a takeover of power occurred throughout 2014, with Comcast and Time Warner pursuing a merger for $45 billion. Though it ultimately failed, this would have been one of the biggest mergers in history.

Remember our definition of communication study: "Who says what, through what channels (media) of communication, to whom, [and] what will be the results?" (Smith et al.). When examining mass communication, we are interested in who has control over what content, for what audience, using what medium, and what the results are. Media critic Robert McChesney said we should be worried about the increasingly concentrated control of mass communication that results when just a handful of large organizations control most mass communication: "The implications for political democracy, by any standard, are troubling." When interviewed, Ben Bagdikian, media critic and former dean of the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism, cautiously pointed out that over the past two decades, major media outlets went from being owned by 50 corporations to just 5. Both McChesney and Bagdikian warn about the implications of having so few organizations controlling the majority of our information and communication. Perhaps this is the reason new media outlets like Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook have consistently grown in popularity, as they offer alternative voices to the large corporations that control most mass communication.

**Mass Communication Now**

This table shows the six most prosperous media conglomerates of 2014. Included is a list of just SOME of the networks they own.

| COMCAST | News Corporation | Disney | viacom | TIMEWARNER | CBS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| -NBC<br>-MSNBC<br>-AT&T | -FOX<br>-Wall Street Journal<br>-New York Post | -ABC<br>-ESPN<br>-Pixar<br>-Miramax<br>-Marvel Studios | -MTV<br>-Nick JR.<br>-CMT<br>-Paramount pictures | -CNN<br>-HBO<br>-Time<br>-Warner Bros. | -Showtime<br>-Smithsonian Channel<br>-NFL.com<br>-Jeopardy<br>-60 Minutes |

Image produced with information from businessinsider.com

To understand mass communication, one must first be aware of some of the key factors that distinguish it from other forms of communication. First is the dependence on a media channel to convey a message to a large audience. Second, the audience tends to be distant, diverse, and varies in size depending on the medium and message. Third, mass communication is most often profit driven, and feedback is limited. Fourth, because of the impersonal nature of mass communication, participants are not equally present during the process.

Mass communication continues to become more integrated into our lives at an increasingly rapid pace. This metamorphosis is representative by the convergence occurring (Fidler) between ourselves and technology, where we are not as distanced from mass communication as in the past. Increasingly, we have more opportunities to use mediated communication to fulfill interpersonal and social needs. O'Sullivan refers to this new use of mass communication to foster our personal lives as "mass-personal communication," where *(a) traditional mass communication channels are used for interpersonal communication, (b)* *traditionally interpersonal communication channels are used for mass communication, and (c) traditional mass communication and traditional interpersonal communication occur simultaneously.*

Over time, more and more overlap occurs. "Innovations in communication technologies have begun to make the barriers between mass and interpersonal communication theory more permeable than ever" (O'Sullivan). Sites such as Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram are great examples of new mass communication platforms we use to develop and maintain interpersonal relationships.

As more mass communication mediums develop, Marshall McLuhan states that we can understand media as either hot or cold depending on the amount of information available to the user as well as the degree of participation. A hot medium "extends one single sense in high definition" (McLuhan). Examples of hot media include photographs or radio because the message is mostly interpreted using one sense and requires little participation by participants. An audience is more passive with hot media because there is less to filter. Television is considered a cold medium because it *contains a large amount of multisensory information.*

Berg Nellis states, "Virtual reality, the simulation of actual environment complete with tactile sensory input, might be the extreme in cold media…This and other cutting-edge technologies seem to point to increasingly cold media as we move into the digital communication future." Think about online video games, such as the interactive sci-fi game *Fortnite*. Games like this can be played in teams, but the players do not necessarily have to be in close proximity. Simply by logging onto the server, gamers can connect, interact, communicate through microphones, and play as a team. These games have become so involved and realistic that they represent cold mediums because of the vast amount of sensory input and participation they require.

Perhaps we are turning into a global village through our interdependence with mass communication. Suddenly, *across the ocean* has become *around the corner*. McLuhan predicted this would happen because of *mass communication's ability to unify people around the globe.* Are you a player in what Habermas calls the "public sphere" that mass communication creates by posting information about yourself on public sites? If so, be careful about what you post about yourself or allow others to tag you in, as many employers are Googling potential employees to look into their personal lives before making decisions about hiring them. As we continue our discussion of mass communication, we want to note that mass communication does not include every communication technology. As our definition states, mass communication is communication that potentially reaches large audiences.

## Evolution of Mass Communication

Societies have long had a desire to find effective ways to report environmental dangers and opportunities; circulate opinions, facts, and ideas; pass along knowledge, heritage, and lore; communicate expectations to new members; entertain in an expansive manner; and broaden commerce and trade (Schramm). The primary challenge has been to find ways to communicate messages to as many people as possible. Our desire to know prompted innovative ways to get messages to the masses.

Before writing, humans relied on oral traditions to pass on information. "It was only in the 1920s—according to the Oxford English Dictionary—that people began to speak of 'the media' and a generation later, in the 1950s, of a 'communication revolution,' but a concern with the means of communication is very much older than that" (Briggs and Burke). Oral and written communication played a major role in ancient cultures. These cultures used stories to document the past and impart cultural standards, traditions, and knowledge. With the development of alphabets around the world over 5,000 years ago, written language with ideogrammatic (picture-based) alphabets like hieroglyphics started to change how cultures communicated.

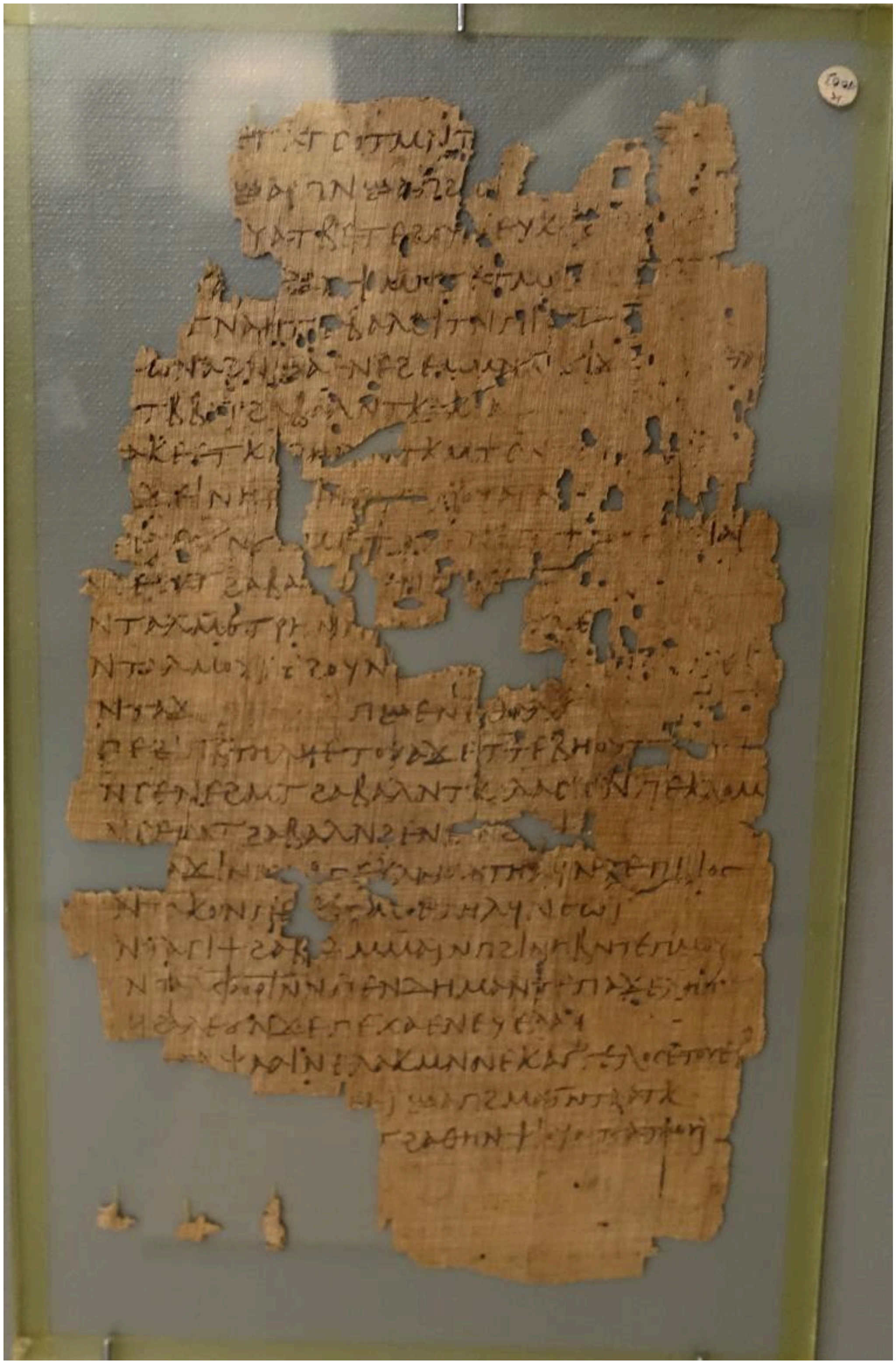


*Figure 13.4 Image is in the public domain*

Still, written communication remained ambiguous and did not reach the masses until the Greeks and Romans resolved this by establishing a syllable alphabet representing sounds. But without something to write on, written language was inefficient. Eventually, paper-making processes were perfected in China, which spread throughout Europe via trade routes (Baran). Mass communication was not quick, but it was far-reaching (Briggs and Burke). This forever altered how cultures saved and transmitted cultural knowledge and values. Any political or social movement throughout the ages can be traced to the development and impact of the printing press and movable metal type (Steinberg). With his technique, Gutenberg could print more than a single page of specific text. By making written communication more available to larger numbers of people, mass printing became responsible for giving voice to the masses and making information available to common folks (McLuhan and Fiore). McLuhan argued that Gutenberg's evolution of the printing press as a form of mass communication had profound and lasting effects on culture, perhaps the most significant invention in human history.

In 1949, Carl I. Hovland, Arthur A. Lumsdaine, and Fred D. Sheffield wrote the book *Experiments on Mass Communication*. They looked at two kinds of films the army used to train soldiers. First, they examined orientation and training films such as *Why We Fight* that were intended to teach facts to the soldiers as well as generate a positive response from them for going to war. The studies determined that significant learning did take place by the soldiers from the films, but primarily with factual items. The army was disappointed with the results that showed that the orientation films did not do an effective job in generating the kind of positive responses they desired from the soldiers. Imagine—people were not excited about going to war.

With the transition to the Industrial Age in the 18th century, large populations headed to urban areas, creating mass audiences of all economic classes seeking information and entertainment. Printing technology was at the heart of modernization, which led to magazines, newspapers, the telegraph, and the telephone. At the turn of the century (1900), pioneers like Thomas Edison, Theodore Puskas, and Nikola Tesla literally electrified the world and mass communication. With the addition of motion pictures and radio in the early 1900s, and television in the '40s and '50s, the world increasingly embraced the foundations of today's mass communication. In the '70s, cable started challenging over-the-air broadcasting and traditional program distribution, making the United States a wired nation. In 2014, there was an estimated 116.3 million homes in America that owned a TV, according to Nielson, 2014 Advance National TV Household Universe Estimate. While traditionally, these televisions would display only the programs that were chosen to be broadcast by cable providers, more and more households have chosen to become more conscious media consumers and actively choose what they watch through alternative viewing options like streaming video.

Today, smart TVs and streaming devices have taken over the market, and it is estimated that over 80% of households have at least one streaming device. These new forms of broadcasting have created a digital revolution. Thanks to Netflix and other streaming services, we are less frequently subjected to advertisements during our shows. Similarly, streaming services like Hulu provide the most recent episodes as they appear on cable that viewers can watch any time. These services provide instant access to entire seasons of shows (which can result in binge-watching).

The Information Age eventually began to replace the ideals of the Industrial Age. In 1983, *Time Magazine* named the PC the first "Machine of the Year." Just over a decade later, PCs outsold televisions. Then, in 2006, *Time Magazine* named "you" as the person of the year to remind their audience of their use of technology to broaden communication. Chances are that you, your friends, and your family spend hours engaged in data-mediated communication such as emailing, texting, or participating in various forms of social media. Romero points out that "the net has transformed the way we work, the way we get in contact with others, our access to information, our levels of privacy and indeed notions as basic and deeply rooted in our culture as those of time and space." Social media has also had a large impact on social movements across the globe in recent years by providing the average person with the tools to reach wide audiences around the world for the first time in history.

If you're reading this for a college class, you may belong to the Millennial or Gen Z age groups. Free Wi-Fi, apps, alternative news sources, Instagram, TikTok, and Clubhouse have become a way of life. Can you imagine a world without communication technology? How would you find out the name of that song stuck in your head? If you wanted to spontaneously meet up with a friend for lunch, how would you let them know? Mass communication has become such an integral part of our daily lives, most people probably could not function through the day without it.

What started as email quickly progressed to chat rooms and basic blogs, such as LiveJournal. From there, we saw the rise and fall of the first widely used social media platform, Myspace. Though now just a shadow of the social media powerhouse it once was, Myspace paved the way for social media to enter the mainstream in forms of websites such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Snapchat, and Instagram. Facebook has evolved into a global social media site. It's available in 37 languages and has over 500 million users. Mark Zuckerberg created Facebook in 2005 while studying at Harvard University, and it has universally changed the way we communicate, interact, and share our lives with friends, family, and acquaintances. Many people argue about the good and bad qualities of having a Facebook profile; it can be looked at as your digital footprint in social media. Profiles log status updates, timeline photos and videos, and archive messages between members.

Another example of mainstream social media is Twitter. Twitter allows for quick, 140-character-or-less status updates (called tweets) for registered users. Tweets can be sent from any device with access to internet in a fast, simple way and connect with a number of people, whether they be family, friends, or followers. Twitter's microblogging format allows people to share their daily thoughts and experiences on a broad and sometimes public stage. The simplicity of Twitter allows it to be used as a tool for entertainment and blogging but also as a way of organizing social movements and sharing breaking news.

Snapchat allows the user to send a photo (with the option of text) that expires after a few seconds. It can be looked at like a digital self-destructing note. Contrary to Facebook, there is no pressure to pose or display your life. Rather, it is more spontaneous.

Clubhouse is one of the most recent additions to the social media sphere. This app allows users to join specialized rooms that are audio-only. Clubhouse is like a live podcast with audience participation.

The new service debuted during the Covid-19 pandemic, as many of the earliest members, vocal artists and comedians, sought a place to create live content and gain fans.

With new forms of communication emerging rapidly, it is important to note the corresponding changes to formal language and slang terms. UrbanDictionary.com is a famous site that can introduce any newbie to the slang world by presenting them various definitions for a term they don't recognize, describe its background, and provide examples of how it's used in context. For example, one of the most popular definitions claims that the word *hella* is said to originate from the streets of San Francisco in the Hunters Point neighborhood. "It is commonly used in place of 'really' or 'very' when describing something."

In this age of information overload, multiple news sources, high-speed connections, and social networking, life seems unimaginable without mass communication. Can you relate to your parents' stories about writing letters to friends, family, or their significant others? Today, when trying to connect with someone, we have a variety of ways of contacting them; we can call, text, email, Facebook message, tweet, or SMS. The options are almost endless and ever changing.

Society today is in the midst of a technological revolution. Only a few years ago, families were arguing over landline internet cable use and the constant disruptions from incoming phone calls. Now, we have the ability to browse the web anytime on smartphones. Since the printing press, mass communication has literally changed the ways we think and interact as humans.

We take so much for granted as "new technologies are assimilated so rapidly in U.S. culture that historic perspectives are often lost in the process" (Fidler). With all of this talk and research about mass communication, what functions does it serve for us?

## Functions of Mass Communication

Mass communication doesn't exist for a single purpose. With its evolution, more and more uses have developed, and the role it plays in our lives has increased greatly. Wright characterizes seven functions of mass communication that offer insight into its role in our lives.

### Surveillance

The first function of mass communication is to serve as *the eyes and ears for those seeking information about the world*. The internet, television, and newspapers are the main sources for finding out what's going on around you. Society relies on mass communication for news and information about our daily lives; it reports the weather, current issues, and the latest celebrity gossip and even start times for games. Do you remember the Boston Marathon bombing that happened in 2013? How did you hear about it? Thanks to the internet and smartphones, instant access to information is at the user's fingertips.

News apps have made mass communication surveillance instantly accessible by sending notifications to smartphones with the latest news.

## Correlation

Correlation *addresses how the media presents facts that we use to move through the world*. The information received through mass communication is not objective and without bias. People ironically state, "It must be true if it's on the internet." However, we don't think that in generations past, people must have without a doubt stated, "It has to be true because it was on the radio." This statement begs the question, How credible are the media? Can we consume media without questioning motive and agenda? Someone selects, arranges, interprets, edits, and critiques the information used in the media. If you ask anyone who works for a major reality TV show if what we see is a fair representation of what really happens, the person would probably tell you no.

## Sensationalization

There is an old saying in the news industry, "If it bleeds, it leads," which highlights the idea of sensationalization, which is *when the media puts forward the most sensational messages to titillate consumers*. Elliot observes, "Media managers think in terms of consumers rather than citizens. Good journalism sells, but unfortunately, bad journalism sells as well. And, bad journalism—stories that simply repeat government claims or that reinforce what the public wants to hear instead of offering independent reporting—is cheaper and easier to produce."

## Entertainment

Media outlets such as *People* magazine, TMZ, and entertainment blogs such as Perez Hilton keep us up to date on the daily comings and goings of our favorite celebrities. We use technology to watch sports, go to the movies, play video games, watch YouTube videos, and stream music on a daily basis. Most mass communication simultaneously entertains and informs. We often turn to media during our leisure time to provide *an escape from boredom and relief from the predictability of our everyday lives*. We rely on media to take us places we could not afford to go or imagine, acquaint us with bits of culture, and make us laugh, think, or cry. Entertainment can have *the secondary effect of providing companionship and/or catharsis through the media we consume*.

## Transmission

Mass media is *a vehicle to transmit cultural norms, values, rules, and habits*. Consider how you learned about what's fashionable in clothes or music. Mass media plays a significant role in the socialization process. We look for role models to display appropriate cultural norms, but all too often, not recognizing their inappropriate or stereotypical behavior. Mainstream society starts shopping, dressing, smelling, walking, and talking like the person in the music video, commercial, or movies. Why would soft drink companies pay Kim Kardashian or Taylor Swift millions of dollars to sell their products? Have you ever bought a pair of shoes or changed your hairstyle because of something you encountered in the media? Obviously, culture, age, type of media, and other cultural variables factor into how mass communication influences how we learn and perceive our culture.

## Mobilization

Mass communication functions to mobilize people during times of crisis (McQuail). Think back to the Boston Marathon bombing. Regardless of your association to the incident, Americans felt the attack as a nation, and people followed the news until they found the perpetrators. With instant access to media and information, we can collectively witness the same events taking *place in real time somewhere else, thus mobilizing a large population of people around a particular event*. The online community Reddit.com is a key example of the internet's proactivity. While the FBI was investigating the bombing, the Reddit community was posting witness photos and trying to help identify the culprits. People felt they were making a difference.

## Validation

Mass communication functions to validate the status and norms of particular individuals, movements, organizations, or products. The validation of particular people or groups serves *to enforce social norms* (Lazarsfeld and Merton). If you think about most television dramas and sitcoms, who are the primary characters? What gender and ethnicity are the majority of the stars? What gender and ethnicity are those that play criminals or those considered abnormal? The media validates particular cultural norms while diminishing differences and variations from those norms. A great deal of criticism focuses on how certain groups are promoted and others marginalized by how they are portrayed in mass media.

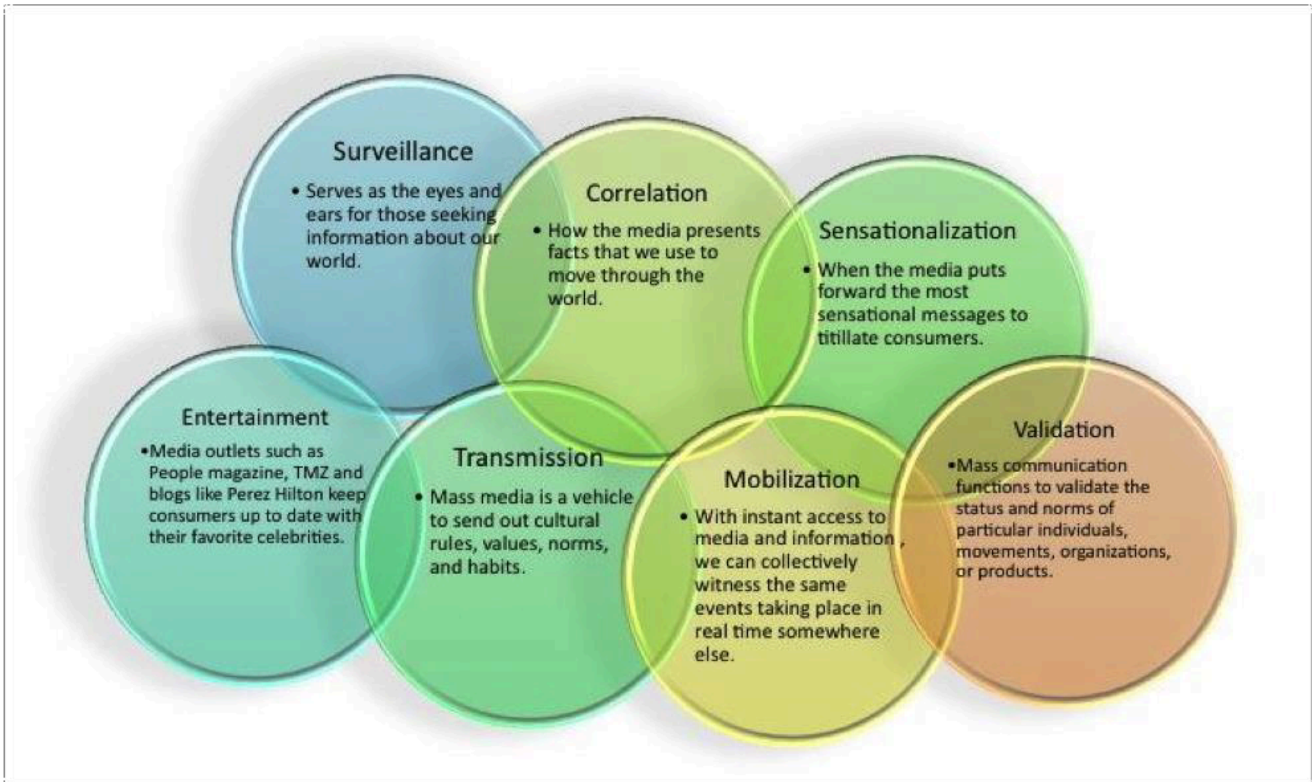



*Figure 13.5: Functions of media Image Spaynton is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0*

Given the power of the various functions of mass communication, we need to be reflective about its presence in our lives (McLuhan and Fiore). We will now turn our attention to the study of mass communication by looking at what mass communication scholars study and how they study it.

# 11.2 GROUNDING THEORIES OF MASS COMMUNICATION

## Grounding Theories of Mass Communication

Almost forty years ago, Osmo Wiio argued that mass communication does not accurately portray reality. Interesting that all this time later, we now have a large number of reality TV shows that continue to blur the lines of reality and fiction. Are you always able to tell the difference between fiction and reality in mass communication? Most people tend to rationalize that others are more affected by mass communication than they are (Paul et al.). However, we are all susceptible to the influence of mass communication.

Theories are our best representations of the world around us. “Mass communication theories are explanations and predictions of social phenomena that attempt to relate mass communication to various aspects of our personal and cultural lives or social systems” (Baran). We need to be discerning as we examine mass communication (Baran). “The beginning of the television age in the 1950s brought in visual communication as well as stimulated the rise of an interdisciplinary theory of the media. Contributions were made from economics, history, literature, art, political science, psychology, sociology and anthropology, and led to the emergence of academic departments of communication and cultural studies” (Briggs and Burke). Mass communication theories explore explanations for how we interact with mass communication, its role in our lives, and the effects it has on us.

Let’s look at five fundamental theories of mass communication: (1) magic bullet theory, (2) two-step flow theory, (3) multistep flow theory, (4) uses and gratification theory, and (5) cultivation theory.

### Magic Bullet Theory

The magic bullet theory (also called the hypodermic needle theory) suggests that mass communication is like a gun firing bullets of information at a passive audience. “Communication was seen as a magic bullet that transferred ideas or feelings or knowledge or motivations almost automatically from one mind to another” (Schramm). This theory has been largely discredited by academics because of its suggestion that all members of an audience interpret messages in the same way and are largely passive receptors of messages. This theory does not take into account intervening cultural and demographic variables such as age, ethnicity, gender, personality, or education that cause us to react differently to the media messages we encounter. However, many people hold the assumption that media, like television news outlets, simply release information that doesn’t encourage audience engagement and critical thinking. Rather than give a story with an unbiased message, which would allow a consumer to create an opinion for themselves, media news outlets present stories to audiences that are attractive to them. Those who believe reality television shows actually portray reality hold some assumptions of the magic bullet theory.

## Two-Step Flow Theory

After World War II, researchers began noticing that not all audiences react in the same ways to mass communication. Media had less power and relatively less affect than previously assumed (Klapper). The two-step flow theory suggests that mass communication messages do not move directly from a sender to the receiver (Katz and Lazarsfeld). Instead, a small group of people—gatekeepers—screen media messages, reshape these messages, and control their transmission to the masses. Opinion leaders initially consume "media content on topics of particular interest to them" and make sense of it based upon their own values and beliefs (Baran). In the second step, the opinion leaders filter and interpret the messages before they pass them along to individuals with shared ideologies who have less contact with the media—opinion followers. An example of this theory occurs during political campaigns. Research has shown that during an election, media influence your voting preferences through the information they choose to show about a candidate (Lazarsfeld et al.). This research can still be applied to current political campaigns.

Pope Francis has over four million followers on Twitter and is one of the most re-tweeted social leaders. He uses social media to engage and influence his followers about what's going on in the world. Also, President Obama's use of social media is highly credited as a key factor in the 2008 election. President Trump's Twitter usage became famous as detractors noted inconsistencies and followers were often invigorated by his invectives. Conservatives often argue that they are marginalized by the "liberal media," while liberals argue that they are marginalized because wealthy conservatives own and control the media. Either way, research reveals that media dependency becomes increasingly important for the public, especially during political campaigns (Jeffries).

## Multistep Flow Theory

The multistep flow theory suggests that there is a reciprocal nature of sharing information and influencing beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Troldahl; Troldahl and Van Dam). The idea is that opinion leaders might create media messages, but opinion followers might be able to sway opinion leaders. Thus, the relationship to media becomes much more complex. Some believe that the role of the opinion leader in our changing culture is diminishing (Baran; Kang), particularly with the ability for average people to reach potentially millions of people through social media. You've likely heard the term "going viral," which is something that could not have happened twenty years ago. This mediated diffusion debunks the notion of an all-powerful media but still recognizes that media have some effect on the audience.

## Uses and Gratification Theory

The uses and gratification theory suggests that audience members actively pursue particular media to satisfy their own needs. "Researchers focus their attention, then, on how audiences use the media rather than how the media affect audiences" (Berger). The reciprocal nature of the mass communication process no longer sees the media user as an inactive, unknowing participant but as an active, sense-making participant who chooses content and makes informed media choices. We tend to avoid media that do not agree with our values, attitudes, beliefs, or pocketbooks. Schramm argued that we make media choices by determining how gratified we will be from consuming a particular media. Is it easier for you to read a newspaper or would you rather watch television or listen to the radio? Even with all the information on the internet, there are still some people who consider it too time consuming and complex. On the other hand, streaming shows online helps us avoid commercials and media content in which we choose not to participate. These newer ways of watching television have allowed the consumer to make active choices about what media they use and consume.

## Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory questions how active we actually are when we consume mass communication. For example, the average American views between 3 and 5 hours of television a day for an average of 21 hours per week (Hinckly). According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, by age 18, the average American child will have watched 200,000 acts of violence on television. This statistic does not even take into account the violence a child has access to through social media, music videos, other media distribution, or real life. When violence is shown on television, rarely are the negative consequences of it acknowledged—47% of victims show no evidence of harm, and 73% of perpetrators were not held accountable for their violent actions (Huston et al.).

What kind of impact does all of this have? Is it possible to tell when the average viewer becomes desensitized to violent content, or does it serve as an outlet for normal aggression? Why doesn't all violent content affect every viewer in the same manner? Does too much consumption of violent media cause violent behavior from viewers? People who consume a lot of media see the world as a more violent and scary place because of the high levels of violence they see (Gerbner).

The theory has been extended to address the more general influences of media on human social life and personal beliefs (Lowery; DeFleur). Media present cultural realities such as fear of victimization (Sparks and Ogles), body image, promiscuity, religion, families, attitudes toward racism (Allen and Hatchett), sex roles, and drug use. Kilbourne states, "Advertising doesn't cause eating problems, of course, any more than it causes alcoholism. [However,] advertising does promote abusive and abnormal attitudes about eating, drinking, and thinness" (261). Gerbner developed the three B's, which state that media blurs people's traditional distinctions of reality, blends people's realities into one common cultural mainstream, and bends the mainstream to fit its institutional interests and the interests of its sponsors.

Mass communication theories are outlined into three categories: (1) theories about culture and society, (2) theories of influence and persuasion, and (3) media use theories (Littlejohn and Foss). Understanding a few of the theories on mass communication, let's look at some skills that will help you become a better and more critical consumer of mass communication.

# 11.3 MEDIA LITERACY

Mass communication theories are outlined into three categories: (1) theories about culture and society, (2) theories of influence and persuasion, and (3) media use theories (Littlejohn and Foss). Understanding a few of the theories on mass communication, let's look at some skills that will help you become a better and more critical consumer of mass communication.

Studying how we use and consume mass communication allows us to scrutinize the conflicts, contradictions, problems, or even positive outcomes in our use of mass communication. With so much to learn about mass communication, how informed are you? Our consciousness of our media consumption is vital to understanding its effects on us as members of society. Media literacy is our awareness regarding our mediated environment or consumption of mass communication. It is our ability to responsibly comprehend, access, and use mass communication in our personal and professional lives. Potter states that we should maintain cognitive, emotional, aesthetic, and moral awareness as we interact with media. Baran suggests a number of skills we can develop in order to be media literate.

Figure 13.6 Image by danieltoro is licensed under CC BY 2.0

Understand and respect the power of mass communication messages. An important skill for media literacy is to acknowledge just how dominant mass communication is in our lives and around the globe. Through mass communication, media shape, entertain, inform, represent, reflect, create, move, educate, and affect our behaviors, attitudes, values, and habits in direct and indirect ways. Virtually everyone in the world has been touched in some way by mass communication and has made personal and professional decisions largely based on representations of reality portrayed through mass communication. We must understand and respect the power media have in our lives and understand how we make sense of certain meanings.

Understand content by paying attention and filtering out noise. As we learned in Chapter 1, anything that hinders communication is noise. Much of the noise in mass communication originates with our consumption behaviors. How often do you do something other than pay complete attention to the media that you're accessing? Do you listen to the radio while you drive, watch television while you eat, or text message a friend while you're in class? When it comes to mass communication, we tend to multitask, an act that acts as noise and impacts the quality of the messages and our understanding of their meanings. We often turn ourselves into passive consumers, not really paying attention to the messages we receive as we perform other tasks while consuming media.

Understand emotional versus reasoned reactions to mass communication content in order to act accordingly. A great deal of mass communication content is intended to touch us on an emotional level. Therefore, it's important to understand our emotional reactions to mass communication. Advertising often appeals to our emotions in order to sell products (Jhally). "Sex sells" is an old advertising adage but one that highlights how often we make decisions based on emotional reactions versus reasoned actions. Glance through magazines like *Maxim* or *Glamour*, and you'll quickly realize how the emotions associated with sex are used to sell products of all kinds. Reasoned actions require us to think critically about the mass communication we consume before we come to conclusions simply based on our emotional responses.

Develop heightened expectations of mass communication content. Would you consider yourself an informed consumer of mass communication? Do you expect a lot from mass communication? You may like a mystery novel because it's fun, or a movie might take your mind off of reality for a few hours. However, Baran challenges us to require more from the media we consume. "When we expect little from the content before us, we tend to give meaning-making little effort and attention." It depends on what you're willing to accept as quality. Some people may watch fewer and fewer mainstream movies because they think the current movies in theaters are low culture or are aimed at less-educated audiences. They may begin to look for more foreign films, independent films, and documentaries rather than go to see the popular movies released by Hollywood. We've even seen a backlash against television programming in general. With the rise of services like Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime Video, many media consumers have chosen to become what's known as cord cutters and cancel their cable subscriptions. These new services often offer popular TV shows and even the most current episodes available to watch at your own leisure.

Understand genre conventions and recognize when they are being mixed. All media have their own unique characteristics or "certain distinctive, standardized style elements" that mark them as a category or genre (Baran, 57). We expect certain things from different forms of mass communication. Most of us believe, for example, that we are able to tell the difference between news and entertainment. But are we? Television news shows often re-create parts of a story to fill in missing video of an event. Do you always catch the reenactment disclaimer?

Shows such as *The Daily Show* or *Last Week Tonight* effectively blurred the lines between comedy and news, and both became recognized as credible sources for news information. Even ninety years ago, Walter Lippmann recognized that media are so invasive in our lives that we might have difficulty distinguishing between what is real and what is manipulated by the media. The reality TV genre is now blurring these lines even more. We may be familiar with President Donald Trump's many appearances on television and subsequent role as the boss on *The Apprentice*. Even earlier examples include the election of two other actors as governor of California: Arnold Schwarzenegger, referred to as the "governator," a blurring of his fictional role as the Terminator and his real role as California's governor; and eventual president Ronald Reagan, sometimes referred to as "Bonzo" in reference to one of his most famous roles in a 1950s film series centered on human friendships with a chimpanzee.

Think critically about mass communication messages, no matter how credible their source. It is essential that we critically consider the source of all mass communication messages. No matter how credible a media source, we can't always believe everything we see or hear because all mass communication is motivated by political, profit, or personal factors. Publicists, editors, and publishers present the information from their perspective—informed by their experiences and agendas. Even if the motive is pure or the spin is minimal, we tend to selectively interpret meanings based on our own lived experiences. Audiences do not always hold similar perceptions regarding mediated messages.

Understand the internal language of mass communication to understand its effects, no matter how complex. This skill requires us to develop sensitivity to what is going on in the media. This doesn't just refer to whether you can program a Roku or surf the internet. This means being familiar with the intent or motivation behind the action or message. "Each medium has its own specific internal language. This language is expressed in production values—the choice of lighting, editing, special effects, music, camera angle, location on the page, and size and placement of the headline. To be able to read a media text, you must understand its language" (Baran, 58). What effect do these have on your interpretive or sense-making abilities? Most news coverage of the Iraq War included background symbols of American flags and eagles as well as words like "freedom" and "liberation." What is the impact of using these symbols in supposedly objective coverage of something like war? Shows like *Scandal* make editorial choices to glamorize and demoralize politics while making it appear provocatively thrilling. On the surface, we might not realize the amount of effort that goes into dealing with political scandals, but shows like *Scandal* shed a light on these unspoken issues.

## Mass Communication Summary

Societies have always needed effective and efficient means to transmit information. Mass communication is the outgrowth of this need. If you remember our definition of mass communication as the public transfer of messages through media or technology-driven channels to a large number of recipients, you can easily identify the multiple forms of mass communication you rely on in your personal, academic, and professional lives. These encompass print, auditory, visual, interactive media, and social media forms. A relatively recent mass communication phenomenon known as mass personal communication combines mass communication channels with interpersonal communication and relationships, where individuals are now gaining access to technology that allows them to reach large audiences.

While mass communication is vital to the success of social movements and political participation, it has seven basic functions, the first of which is surveillance, or the watchdog role. Correlation occurs when an audience receives facts and usable information from mass media sources. When the most outrageous or fantastic stories are presented, we are witnessing the sensationalization function of media. Needing an escape from routines or stress, we turn to media for its entertainment value. As a cultural institution, mass communication transmits cultural values, norms, and behaviors, mobilizes audiences, and validates dominant cultural values.

As media technology has evolved, so have the scholarly theories for understanding them. The five theories we discussed are different primarily in the degree of passivity versus activity they grant the audience. The magic bullet theory assumes a passive audience, while the two-step-flow and multistep-flow theories suggest that there is a reciprocal relationship between the audience and the message. The theory of uses and gratification suggests that audiences pick and choose media to satisfy their individual needs. Gerbner's cultivation theory takes a long-term perspective by suggesting that media is one of many cultural institutions responsible for shaping or cultivating attitudes.

Because of mass communication's unquestionable role in our lives, media literacy skills are vital for any responsible consumer and citizen. Specifically, we can become media literate by understanding and respecting the power of mass communication messages, understanding media content by paying attention, understanding emotional versus reasoned responses to mass communication, developing heightened expectations of mass communication content, understanding genre conventions and recognizing when they're mixed, understanding the internal language of mass communication, and above all, thinking critically!

# APPENDIX A: CHECKLIST FOR ACCESSIBILITY

## Organizing Content

- Content is organized under headings and subheadings.
- Headings and subheadings are used sequentially (e.g., Heading 1, Heading 2).

## Images

- Images that convey information include alternative text (alt text) descriptions of the image's content or function.
- Graphs, charts, and maps also include contextual or supporting details in the text surrounding the image.
- Images do not rely on color to convey information.
- Images that are purely decorative do not have alt text descriptions. (Descriptive text is unnecessary if the image doesn't convey contextual content information.)

## Links

- The link text describes the destination of the link and does not use generic text such as "click here" or "read more."
- If a link will open or download a file (like a PDF or Excel file), a textual reference is included in the link information (e.g., [PDF]).
- Links do not open in new windows or tabs.
- If a link must open in a new window or tab, a textual reference is included in the link information (e.g., [NewTab]).
- For citations and references, the title of the resource is hyperlinked, and the full URL is not hyperlinked.

## Tables

- Tables are used to structure information and not for layout.

- Tables include row and column headers.
- Row and column headers have the correct scope assigned.
- Tables include a caption.
- Tables avoid merged or split cells.
- Tables have adequate cell padding.

## Multimedia

- All audio content includes a transcript. The transcript includes all speech content and relevant descriptions of nonspeech audio and speaker names / headings where necessary.
- Videos have captions of all speech content and relevant nonspeech content that has been edited by a human for accuracy.
- All videos with contextual visuals (graphs, charts, etc.) are described audibly in the video.

## Formulas

- Equations written in plain text use proper symbols (i.e., −, ×, ÷). For example, a hyphen (-) may look like a minus sign (−), but it will not be read out correctly by text-to-speech tools.
- For complex equations, one of the following is true:
  - They were written using LaTeX and are rendered with MathJax (Pressbooks).
  - They were written using Microsoft Word's equation editor.
  - They are presented as images with alternative text descriptions.
- Written equations are properly interpreted by text-to-speech tools. Written equations should prioritize semantic markup over visual markup so text-to-speech tools will read out an equation in a way that makes sense to auditory learners. This applies to both equations written in LaTeX and equations written in Microsoft Word's equation editor.

## Font Size

- Font size is 12 point or higher for body text in Word and PDF documents.
- Font size is 9 point for footnotes or endnotes in Word and PDF documents.
- Font size can be enlarged by 200 percent in webbook or ebook formats without needing to scroll side to side.

Learn more about Pressbooks' commitment to Accessibility.

# GLOSSARY

## Ableism

The system of beliefs and practices that produces a physical and mental standard that is projected as normal for a human being and labels deviations from it abnormal, resulting in unequal treatment and access to resources.

## actual self

The attributes that you or someone else believes you actually possess.

## Antimiscegenation laws

Made it illegal for people of different racial/ethnic groups to marry.

## Ascribed identities

Personal, social, or cultural identities that are placed on us by others.

## attribution

An explanation for what is happening.

## avowed identities

Those that we claim for ourselves.

## Causation

A "cause and effect" relationship for all actions.

## channel

The method a sender uses to send a message to a receiver such as verbal and nonverbal forms of communication.

### Code-switching

Changing from one way of speaking to another between or within interactions.

### Cognitive flexibility

The ability to continually supplement and revise existing knowledge to create new categories rather than forcing new knowledge into old categories.

### cognitive style

Gathering information, constructing meaning, and organizing and applying knowledge.

### communication

The process of using symbols to exchange meaning.

### Communication climate

The overall feeling or emotional mood between people.

### communication studies

An academic field whose primary focus is who says what, through what channels of communication, to whom, and what will be the results.

### Cultural identities

Socially constructed categories that teach us a way of being and include expectations for social behavior or ways of acting.

### cultural-individual dialectic

Captures the interplay between patterned behaviors learned from a cultural group and individual behaviors that may be variations on or counter to those of the larger culture.

### culture

The ongoing negotiation of learned and patterned beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors.

### Dichotomies

Dualistic ways of thinking that highlight opposites, reducing the ability to see gradations that exist in between concepts.

### differences-similarities dialectic

How we are simultaneously similar to and different from others.

### Dominant identities

Historically had and currently have more resources and influence.

### empirical laws paradigm

Approach communication from the perspective that there are universal or natural laws that govern how we communicate.

### essentialize

Reduce and overlook important variations within a group.

### External attributions

Connect the cause of behaviors to situational factors.

### extrinsic motivation

Do something to receive a reward or avoid punishment.

### fundamental attribution error

Tendency to explain others' behaviors using internal rather than external attributions.

### gender

An identity based on internalized cultural notions of masculinity and femininity that is constructed through communication and interaction.

### Generalization

If a prediction shows that a behavior produces a certain outcome, we can broaden our predictions to include a wide variety of people, situations, and contexts.

### halo effect

Initial positive perceptions lead us to view later interactions as positive.

### history/past-present/future dialectic

While current cultural conditions are important and our actions now will inevitably affect our future, those conditions are not without a history.

### horn effect

Initial negative perceptions lead us to view later interactions as negative.

### ideal self

The attributes that you or someone else would like you to possess.

### ideology of domination

Makes it seem natural and normal to many that some people or groups will always have power over others.

### Intercultural communication

Communication between people with differing cultural identities

### Intercultural communication competence (ICC)

The ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in various cultural contexts.

### Intercultural relationships

Formed between people with different cultural identities and include friends, romantic partners, family, and coworkers.

### Internal attributions

Connect the cause of behaviors to personal aspects such as personality traits.

### Interpretation

The process of assigning meaning to our experiences using schemata.

### intersectional reflexivity

A reflective practice by which we acknowledge intersecting identities, both privileged and disadvantaged, and implicate ourselves in social hierarchies and inequalities.

### intersectionality

Acknowledges that we each have multiple cultures and identities that intersect with each other.

### intrinsic motivation

Do something for the love of doing it or for the resulting internal satisfaction.

### Linear Model of Communication

The transmission of a message from the sender to the receiver.

### looking glass self

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.

### mass communication

The public transfer of messages through media or technology-driven channels to a large number of recipients from an entity, usually involving some type of cost or fee (advertising) for the user.

### medical model of disability

Places disability as an individual and medical rather than social and cultural issue.

### message

The particular meaning or content the sender wishes the receiver to understand. It can be intentional or unintentional, written or spoken, verbal or nonverbal, or any combination of these.

### Mindfulness

A state of self- and other-monitoring that informs later reflection on communication interactions.

### Motivation

The underlying force that drives us to do things.

### Noise

Anything external or internal that interferes with the sending or receiving of a message.

### nondominant identities

Historically had and currently have less resources and influence.

### Organizing

Sort and categorize information that we perceive based on innate and learned cognitive patterns called schemata.

### ought self

The attributes you or someone else believes you should possess.

### paradigms

A way for us to organize a great number of ideas into categories.

### patriarchy

A system of social structures and practices that maintains the values, priorities, and interests of men as a group.

### Perception

The process of selecting, organizing, and interpreting information.

### personal construct

Measure people and situations by generalizing people into their category or stereotype.

### Personal identities

The components of self that are primarily intrapersonal and connected to our life experiences.

### personal-contextual dialectic

The connection between our personal patterns of and preferences for communicating and how various contexts influence the personal.

### Prediction

Once someone determines a particular law is at work, they can use it to predict outcomes of future similar communication situations.

### privileges-disadvantages dialectic

The complex interrelation of unearned, systemic advantages and disadvantages that operate among our various identities.

### prototype

An ideal or best example of a particular category.

### receiver

Someone who receives a message that they must decode (interpret) in a way that is meaningful for them.

### Reference groups

The groups we use for social comparison, and they typically change based on what we are evaluating.

### Salience

The degree to which something attracts our attention in a particular context.

### schema

Singular form of schemata.

### schemata

Innate and learned cognitive patterns such as prototypes, personal construct, stereotypes, and scripts.

### script

A sequence of activities that spells out how we and others are expected to act in a specific situation.

### Selecting

Focus attention on certain incoming sensory information.

## Self-concept

The overall idea of who a person thinks they are.

## Self-discrepancy theory

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-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-serving bias

Attributing the cause of our successes to internal personal factors while attributing our failures to external factors beyond our control.

## sender

Someone who initiates communication by encoding and sending a message to a receiver through a particular channel.

## Sex

Biological characteristics, including external genitalia, internal sex organs, chromosomes, and hormones.

## Sexual orientation

A person's primary physical and emotional sexual attraction and activity.

### Social comparison theory

We describe and evaluate ourselves in terms of how we compare to other people based on two dimensions: superiority/inferiority and similarity/difference.

### Social constructionism

A view that argues the self is formed through our interactions with others and in relationship to social, cultural, and political contexts.

### social identities

The components of self that are derived from involvement in social groups with which we are interpersonally committed.

### static-dynamic dialectic

Culture and communication change over time yet often appear to be and are experienced as stable.

### stereotyping

The process of predicting generalizations of people and situations.

### Theory

A way of looking at events, organizing them, and representing them.

### Tolerance for uncertainty

An individual's attitude about and level of comfort in uncertain situations.

### Transactional Model

Communication participants act as senders and receivers simultaneously, creating reality through their interactions.

### Transformative learning

Occurs when we encounter situations that challenge our accumulated knowledge and our ability to accommodate that knowledge to manage a real-world situation.

## Transgender

An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression do not match the gender they were assigned by birth.